Buoyancy on the Bayou: Economic Globalization and Occupational Outcomes for Louisiana Shrimp Fishers

Dissertation

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By

Jill Ann Harrison

Graduate Program in Sociology

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Steven H. Lopez, Adviser

Professor Vincent Roscigno

Professor Linda Lobao
ABSTRACT

In this ethnographic study of present and former shrimp fishers in southeast Louisiana, I examine how local actors respond when traditional ways of life are disrupted by globalization and occupational decline. Most theories of neoliberal globalization and restructuring focus primarily on the global forces that disrupt, dislocate, and destroy local worlds, neglecting or downplaying the agency of local actors. As a result, local actors and cultures are often viewed as passive victims of globalization’s tide. However, my research, based on two extended periods of fieldwork in a Gulf Coast community facing occupational decline, uncovers not victimization but agency at every turn. Local actors’ choices, I show, highlight the importance of understanding globalization as a process of complex interactions between global forces and local actors rather than as a monolithic force that destroys everything in its path. I further show how local actors arrive at important decisions based upon calculations of both economic and non-economic considerations.

I use Hirschman’s influential model of exit, voice, and loyalty as my theoretical point of departure because his framework is actor-centered and thus places agency at the core of analysis: people can respond to organizational decline by choosing exit in search of better conditions elsewhere; they can exercise voice, appealing to authorities for improvements that might make exit unnecessary; or they can remain loyal, patiently
waiting for circumstances to improve. My analysis, however, reformulates Hirschman by re-interpreting the meaning of his categories in three important ways.

First, Hirschman views exit as a solution to decline, a form of agency firmly rooted in interest calculation. Though he does recognize that exit may carry non-economic costs, these costs have not been adequately explored or understood. Through in-depth interviews with those who left shrimping for more lucrative employment opportunities, I analyze these non-economic costs. I reveal exactly what is lost when deeply-meaningful, traditional occupational identities are abandoned. And while former shrimpers may be better off financially, they experience exit as a personal tragedy. In many ways, therefore, exit is less agential and more passive than persisting: those who exit avoid a tragically doomed fight against market logic, but they do so by allowing the winds of the market to blow them wherever it leads.

Next, Hirschman views actors in declining organizational contexts who choose neither exit nor voice as passively loyal: they do nothing because they are hopeful that things will improve in the future. But a large number of shrimpers (“persisters”) who refuse to leave behind their deteriorating way of life do not fit Hirschman’s description. Persisters understand that they can exit; they understand that they would be better off financially if they did exit; and they do not believe that things will improve in the future. Yet, they choose to stay put, to go down with the ship, as it were. Why? The answer, I argue, is that they judge the complex web of meaning associated with their occupational identity and way of life to be worth the suffering. They are indeed loyal to this way of life, but their loyalty is not passive, resigned, or hopeful. Instead it is fiercely, even
tragically, agential as they struggle to swim upstream against the logic of the market. Thus, I show how they are not victims of globalization but martyrs on its altar.

Finally, for Hirschman, voice – an individual or collective appeal to higher authorities – is the only other possible form of agency. However, my analysis of a small group of shrimpers I call “adaptive innovators,” shows that Hirschman’s conception of agency is too narrow. This group has successfully adapted to the logic of the market in ways that allow them to remain viable producers while simultaneously preserving the meaningful occupational and cultural activities associated with their way of life. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of shipping and transportation technologies, these local actors are not only fighting against global forces, they are using globalization in judo-like fashion to advance their own agenda. While this option may not always be available, I argue that adaptive innovation in place is an important form of agency in many organizational settings.
Dedicated to:

Ryan Light

Tom and Marilyn Harrison
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the first words I learned during my initial few days living on the bayou was “lagniappe”, pronounced lan-yap. Lagniappe is used to describe that little something extra given out of kindness and for good measure. Metaphorically, it is the thirteenth roll in a baker’s dozen. It is also a word that keeps crossing my mind as I think about this dissertation’s research and writing processes. There are numerous individuals who generously provided lagniappe when it comes to the guidance, love, and support that has enabled me to complete this dissertation.

First and foremost I thank my adviser, Steve Lopez. I had the good fortune of beginning my graduate studies the same year that Steve arrived at Ohio State in 2002. My research and methodological interests greatly overlapped with his, and so during the first few weeks I frequently buzzed around his office. My persistence paid off, because even though he was in his very first year as an assistant professor, he agreed to chair my master’s thesis committee. He has been my advisor and mentor ever since. At each and every step of the graduate program, he has magnanimously provided lagniappe. Lagniappe is taking me to get coffee every week leading up to the comprehensive exams to grill me on what I had read since our last chat the previous week. It is taking each and every one of my sometimes frantic and anxious phone calls from the field, as I fretted over the many obstacles that are inherent to field research. And it is staying on campus into the darkest hours of a bitterly cold January evening to help me to perfect the job talk that would later land me a great position. Without Steve, I can’t imagine how I would
have made it this far. I hope to one day be able to deftly provide the type of support and guidance to advisees that he offered to me.

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me the indispensable and trustworthy space to vent regarding the many challenges of graduate student life. Colin Odden provided both technical assistance as well as a great deal of existential and moral support. Melanie Hughes also deserves special recognition; she is a remarkable scholar and an even-better friend.

My family continues to be a source of encouragement and inspiration. The struggles that my parents have gone through and the perseverance they have shown serve as a constant reminder that staying the course comes with great reward. I am forever indebted to my amazing sister, Becky Harrison. She is truly a bright and shining light in my life.

Finally, I thank my best friend and partner, Ryan Light. A highly skilled sociologist, the academic contributions he made to this project are significant. But more important, he throws in that little extra on a daily basis and in all that he sets out to do. This is especially true of his patience and thoughtfulness; he somehow manages to always transform my excessive worry and anxiety into calm satisfaction. This is no easy feat. Thank you, Ryan. I can’t wait to see where our adventures take us together.
VITA

December 11, 1977…………………………Born – Youngstown, Ohio

2000…………………………………………B.A., Sociology, Youngstown State University

2004…………………………………………M.A., Sociology, The Ohio State University

2002-Present………………………………...Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

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Major Field: Sociology
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract......................................................................................................................  ii

Dedication ..................................................................................................................  v

Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................  vi

Vita .............................................................................................................................  ix

List of Figures ............................................................................................................  xi

Preface ........................................................................................................................  1

Chapter 1. Setting Sail: Theory and Method .............................................................  9

Chapter 2. Jumping Ship: The Nonmarket Costs of Exit........................................... 51

Chapter 3. Struggling to Stay Afloat: Nonmarket Forces and Outcomes of Occupational Decline................................................................. 86

Chapter 4. Changing Course on Choppy Waters: Innovative Adaptation as an Alternative to Exit and Voice ................................................................. 130

Chapter 5. Conclusion................................................................................................167

Methodological Appendix ........................................................................................183

References..................................................................................................................194
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Structure of the Louisiana Shrimp Fishing Industry ...................... 14
Figure 2: Real Dockside Price of Shrimp at Local, Regional, and National Levels:
1995-2006 .................................................................................................................. 17
Figure 3: The contribution domestic landings and imports make to the U.S. shrimp
market ........................................................................................................................ 22
Figure 4: 2001 Import Volumes from Both the Top Ten and the Remaining Shrimp-
exporting Countries Delineated by Production Method ............................................ 23
PREFACE

Like many recent college graduates, I had no idea what I wanted to do after graduation. While going off to graduate school was a distant goal, I knew that I wanted to get out into the “real” world and get a bit dirty before I re-entered the halls of academia. Little did I know just how dirty I would get when I made the decision to join AmeriCorps.1 When trying to determine to which AmeriCorps positions I should apply, I was particularly drawn to one program that was located in a small town in Southeast Louisiana. As a lifelong Midwesterner seeking adventure and the exotic, the job description was exceptionally fitting for me. Part of the time would be spent as an environmental educator, teaching school children and other members of the community about the severe coastal erosion problems Louisiana faces today. The other part of the time would be spent trudging around in the marshes and swamps planting different varieties of marsh grasses. Marsh grass, as I later found out, helps to hold soil in place, and is therefore a valuable defense against the wind and waves that accelerate coastal erosion. The job seemed perfect: it would both take me to an exotic location, and allow me to get (very, very) dirty. I applied for the job and as good fortune would have it, a few months later – in

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1 AmeriCorps is a U.S. federal government program dedicated to public service. Created under President Clinton by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, AmeriCorps provides opportunities for adults of all ages and backgrounds to serve through a network of partnerships with non-profit organizations and public agencies. Approximately 75,000 service opportunities are provided each year.
January of 2001 – I left town heading toward Louisiana, to a town named Bayou Crevette.2

On the day I first pulled into town for the year-long experience, I was immediately struck by the presence of the shrimp fishing industry. People could be found working aboard the many shrimp boats that were docked along the bayou-side, making repairs to get them ready for the upcoming season. The town’s seafood-related businesses – the net shops, hardware stores, and seafood docks – hummed with activity. The muddy smell of the bayou mixed with the distinctive odor of seafood that is inherent to fishing communities. And people were building boats; the visible location of some of the boat building businesses permitted people to witness the progress made on boats on their daily commutes through town.

June and Herbert were two of the first people I met that day. They were also among the many that year who were in the process of building a boat. A married couple in their seventies, they had worked a significant portion of their lives as shrimpers. They retired from shrimping in the 1980s after the last of their five children left the area to attend college. Now that they had grandchildren, they wanted to build a new boat so they could provide them the experiences of trawling. They expressed the desire to teach their grandchildren about the importance of hard work, and in the process pass along a love and appreciation for the craft that is intimately connected to their family history.

Like many others I met during that year, they were intensely proud of what the shrimp fishing industry provided their town and their family. Many of our conversations centered on their previous adventures spent aboard their beloved boat. Their boat was not

2 All of the names of people and places have been changed throughout this dissertation.
only the means by which they earned a living, but it was also their vehicle for exploring the world. During their younger days, June, Herbert and their children sailed the shrimp boat to many locations in Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean. June took great delight in telling me the story (on multiple occasions) of how they sailed their boat up the East Coast to Boston for their daughter’s graduation from college. As part of the festivities, they hosted the university’s president for a celebratory meal on-board the boat. They prepared the meal in the boat’s small kitchen, and used shrimp and crabs that they had themselves harvested from the inland waters of the Gulf of Mexico near their home.

It became obvious to me early on that people in this town took great pride and enjoyment in preparing meals for others – especially outsiders. And being an outsider myself, I enjoyed countless meals cooked by people who were eager to feed the “AmeriCorps Kids”, as we were called (though, at 23 I was hardly a kid). These meals almost always showcased ingredients that came directly from the rich, natural areas that made up the bayou community. These indigenous ingredients included a variety of meats – such as crab, shrimp, alligator, many types of gulf fish – as well as local produce like okra, cushaw, and merliton. The meals were usually accompanied by a story behind how these ingredients were obtained. If whoever prepared the meal had not caught the main ingredients themselves, then they had been given them by somebody else who had caught them – a friend, relative, or neighbor. Many people I encountered loved to boast about how – unlike those of us up North – they never had to buy seafood, adding that they would not want to eat that frozen stuff anyway.

Fresh shrimp was almost always incorporated into these meals, and as a result, I heard a great deal about the shirmping industry. Older folks told me stories about
shrimping before they had motorized boats, and about how they quit school – sometimes at age 11 or 12 – to learn the craft from their parents or grandparents. Other times, from younger people, I was told about the most recent trip out, when the shrimp we were eating were caught. A few of the AmeriCorps members even went out on shrimp fishing trips in order to experience it firsthand, although regrettably, my strong susceptibility to seasickness prevented me from enjoying that experience. The local pride in the shrimp industry was highly apparent, and multiple times throughout the year, shrimp were celebrated in the form of shrimp and seafood festivals, shrimp boils, and seafood cook-offs.

After planting thousands of marsh grass plugs, and talking to hundreds of school kids about environmental issues, the year-long program came to a successful end. AmeriCorps on the bayou was a more than adequate antidote to my post-college case of itchy feet. Renewed from months of crawling around in the thick mud of the wetlands, I decided to go on to graduate school to pursue my interests in work and occupations and the labor movement. Despite the many distractions and obligations that came along with graduate school, I could not forget about the bayou. As so throughout the years, I made several trips back to visit, the first one in 2003.

During this visit, there was an air of unease and concern that lingered when I spoke to people about shrimp fishing. This anxiety had not existed during my AmeriCorps year. Many of the folks I spoke with – whom I previously knew – expressed worry and anxiety about the future of the commercial shrimping industry. Dockside prices had abruptly fallen, and rumors swirled that these depressed prices would be permanent. Prices had fallen in the past, people told me, but this time was different; this
time they feared prices would not rebound. Surely, I thought, they must be exaggerating, because only two years previous the industry was very much alive and vibrant. When I visited June and Herbert, the severity of the decline crystallized for me: after only one full season shrimping on their new boat, they expressed regret over having built it, as they were struggling to make the necessary payments. I went back to Ohio feeling troubled and concerned, and continued to keep tabs on the state of the industry.

Two years later, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. Within a month of its devastation, I went back to the bayou, this time to offer my services to those who needed help with recovery. Fortunately, Bayou Crevette had been spared the level of flooding and destruction experienced by New Orleans other Gulf Coast communities. Shrimpers in this community were especially fortunate, as some coastal communities – many in Louisiana – experienced a complete loss of their fishing fleet and infrastructure. Bayou Crevette lost one of its prominent seafood docks (which was later rebuilt), but by and large the industry dodged the lion's share of Katrina’s wrath. But Katrina aside, the industry was still caught firmly in the grips of a downward spiral. Many community members that I spoke with continued to worry about how shrimp prices continued to plummet. And this time, their worries were compounded by the sharp increases in overhead costs, especially the fuel costs that subsequently pushed up the cost of other necessities, like ice, groceries, and supplies. It was plainly evident through the widespread worry and dismay expressed by shrimpers and non-shrimpers that the industry’s future was even grimmer than a couple of years previous.

But there were other, more visible changes signaling shrimping’s collapse that went beyond worry and dismay. One of the most noticeable changes was the substantial
number of boats that sat docked along the bayou-side adorned with “for sale” signs. Among these boats sat June’s and Herbert’s almost-new boat, used only two shrimp seasons. The increase in the number of these signs became the topic of a joke that I heard (time and again) from shrimpers: “It’s gotten so bad that everyone has decided to change the name of their boat to the same thing, ‘For Sale’”. Shrimping’s decline was also manifest through the closing of a few of the community’s net shops and seafood docks. Boat building businesses were also reeling, as people were no longer building boats. To put it simply, the shrimping industry did not have the same presence in the community as it did only four years earlier, when I pulled into town for the first time.

I went back to Ohio, this time feeling even more dismayed and confused over the state of the industry. What was happening? Why had the industry tanked so sharply in such a short amount of time? After all, over the past several decades, shrimp had become less of a luxury food, and more of a staple in the American diet. As such, the demand for shrimp has been relatively strong. After doing some preliminary research, the problem became abundantly clear: the waves of globalization had finally crashed into the shores of the U.S. commercial shrimp fishing industry.

Around the year 2000, the technology for growing shrimp in hatcheries had been greatly improved. As a result, large quantities of farm-raised shrimp are now being imported from countries like China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Ecuador. Although technology for cultivating shrimp in ponds began to expand as far back as 1980, these endeavors had been plagued by years of crop failures and disease outbreaks (Belton and Little 2008). But by 2000, these problems had been largely worked out or remedied, resulting in dramatic increases in the importation rates of foreign, farm-raised shrimp.
Subsequently, dockside prices for U.S. shrimpers plummeted sharply. Much like what happened to the U.S. steel industry over two decades earlier, shrimp fishers were now struggling to effectively compete against low-wage producers overseas. The sharp rise in overhead costs – especially fuel – has made circumstances and outlooks even grimmer for domestic shrimp fishers.

I was both fascinated and saddened by what was happening on the bayou, particularly by how shrimpers were dealing with the prospect – and the actual act – of leaving their industry behind. My interest in the collapse of the shrimp fishing industry is in no way haphazard, but is easily traced back to my own experience with occupational decline. I was born and raised in a rust belt town that experienced great hardship when the steel industry completely collapsed in the early 1980s. My father was one of the tens of thousands of steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio who lost his livelihood with the industry’s ruin. From a young age, I experienced many of the negative effects of deindustrialization firsthand. In addition to the financial problems related to high unemployment, the anxiety and tension created by my father’s inability to find reliable work took a toll on both his self-worth and also his marriage to my mother. And further, as a young child I watched as the once-quiet neighborhood I grew up in quickly transformed into the crime-ridden and poverty stricken area that it remains today.

Given this experience, I wondered if occupational decline would have the same effects on the bayou as it did in Youngstown. From this, many questions emerge: What, exactly, was happening to the once-vibrant Louisiana shrimp fishing industry? How are shrimp fishers responding to the collapse of an industry that is not only important to economic survival, but is also linked tightly to their heritage and cultural identities? And
how might the community be changed by occupational decline? These questions continued to nag at me, and eventually led me back down to the swamps and marshes of the bayou.
CHAPTER 1
SETTING SAIL: THEORY AND METHOD

If you have ever purchased American, wild-caught shrimp, there’s a good chance that it was caught by a Louisiana shrimp fisher. Louisiana is a significant player in the of U.S.’s seafood industry; one-third of the nation’s seafood comes directly from Louisiana’s estuaries, wetlands, and coastal areas (LaFleur, Yeates, and Aysen 2005). But if the seafood industry is a crowning feature for Louisiana, shrimp is its largest jewel. Of the entire Gulf of Mexico region\(^3\) that supplies an overwhelming majority of the nation’s shrimp - nearly 85% in 2006 - Louisiana was the leading producer, contributing almost half that region’s shrimp landings (Haby 2003).

Lucky for Louisiana shrimp fishers, Americans love shrimp. In fact, shrimp is the most-consumed seafood product in the United States today (Koerner 2006). But is hasn’t always been this way. When the Louisiana shrimp fishing industry began in the mid-late 19\(^{th}\) century, shrimp was not the popular menu item that it is today. Instead, it was a food that only poor people ate. It appealed primarily to Chinese immigrants, but it was also a common staple for the recently-arrived Cajun settlers who inhabited the land that surrounded marshes and coastal wetlands. Americans, especially wealthy Americans, did not eat shrimp, even though they could find it in the marketplace (Marks 2005). To be

\(^3\) Alabama, western Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas
sure, the shrimp that was available back then was not the fresh – or freshly frozen –
shrimp that we find behind the glass of the deli case today. Instead, it came sun-dried and
salted, or water-packed in a tin can. Most of it was shipped to China or the American
West, to meet the demand of an increasing Chinese immigrant population.

The Louisiana shrimp fishing industry as a whole also vastly different from what
we know today. Shrimp was not caught by independent shrimp fishers who owned their
own vessels; it resembled nothing close to what was pictured in “Forrest Gump”, with
large numbers of majestic shrimp boats gently bobbing along accompanied by clouds of
sea gulls. There were no motorized boats that dragged trawl nets across the ocean floor,
or pulled skimmer nets across the shallow surface of the Gulf waters. Rather, shrimp was
harvested primarily through the use of haul seines – or large, weighted nets that encircled
shrimp – that were pulled by hand or by sailboat. Those who worked the nets, called
seiners, were not owner-operators of their own nets or sailboats; instead, they were
waged workers who labored for companies, usually owned by shrimp processors that
paid notoriously low wages (Landry 1990).

Thus, the Louisiana shrimp industry as we know it today was borne out of
conditions whereby waged laborers supplied a specific commodity to distant and
international markets. But a series of technological advances that began at the start of the
20th century would profoundly transform the structure of the shrimp fishing industry.
Even more important, these changes would forever change shrimp’s reputation in the
U.S., first from a food of the poor and oppressed, then to a luxury food that symbolized
celebration or special occasion, and finally to the staple that it is today.
The first of these technological advances was the introduction of the otter trawl net that occurred in the late 1910s (Marks 2005). An otter trawl is a conical, bag-shaped net that is dragged behind a gasoline or diesel powered boat. Soon thereafter, in a town adjacent to Bayou Crevette, the skimmer – or butterfly – net was developed. These nets are attached to the bow of the boat, and can be lowered perpendicularly on either side of the boat (giving the boat a butterfly-like appearance) to skim the shallow surface of the water where shrimp are especially abundant at night (Landry 1990). The development of the shrimp trawling vessel was beneficial because it reduced the necessary labor power to harvest shrimp that haul seines required.

Other important advances include improvements in refrigeration, shipping, and transportation technologies. Trawl boats equipped with ice could travel farther distances from their docks for longer periods of time, which dramatically increased the volume of shrimp landings. Refrigeration technologies also permitted shrimp processors to shift their production away from canned and dried products - which could better sustain the hot, humid climate of south Louisiana – and toward fresh and frozen shrimp that were much more appealing to American consumers.

Around the time of World War Two, seafood gained popularity among the U.S. population. However, in comparison to meats – beef, pork, and poultry – it was relatively scarce. In the 1940s, with the rise of industrialized agriculture, meat was being produced at an unprecedented rate. But unlike farmers, shrimp fishers are subject to the seasonal production of a limited capacity commodity. Because of this, seafood supplies could not outstrip demand, and shrimp and other seafood products became considered a luxury food. Shrimp prices reflected this newly-found popularity, and skyrocket over a short
period of time: in the decade between 1940 and 1950, shrimp prices increased by over three times in real terms (Becnel 1962).

Together, the decreased labor requirements that trawl boats facilitated and the rise in dockside prices due to increased demand created the conditions for the owner-operatorship of boats that exist today. In addition to owning their own boats, many shrimp fishers pulled their resources to purchase and operate ice boats that brought ice and other supplies out to the boat, and also took shrimp from the boats to sell in the market. From these developments, shrimp fishers gained considerable independence from the shrimp processors that had previously employed them. They were no longer beholden to the companies for waged employment; however, they were not – and generally have never been – fully independent from processors. As Marks (2005:39) explains, by the mid-twentieth century:

A pattern of local market power in the fishery began to emerge of nominally independent, owner-operating shrimpers, free to sell to any of a variety of middlemen but often tied to particular buyers by a variety of financial and personal ties. These dealers sold to processors that had oligopolistic power to determine the prices those shrimp buyers could pay (while themselves subject to pressures on prices from buyers for national markets they could not control). The basic framework of this system remains in place to the present.

Throughout most of the post-war era, Louisiana shrimp fishers enjoyed relative stability in average dockside prices. Production and prices peaked in the late 1970s, largely as a result of a boat building boom spurred on by an increase in federal loan guarantees, but declined slightly over the 1980s. But the 1990s were a period of economic growth in the U.S, and consumers were spending money on luxury food items like shrimp. Indeed, as many trawlers who participated in the ethnographic interviews
used in this book, the 1990s were among some of the best years that the shrimp fishery had ever experienced (Marks 2005). It was during this time that imported shrimp began to enter the market at higher than usual rates. But demand growth offset the increase in imported shrimp, and dockside prices stabilized from their fall through the 1980s. As a response to the favorable market conditions, many shrimp fishers made investments in new boats, anticipating the shrimp fishery to remain stable as it always had. They were unaware that only a few years later, a glut of farm-raised, imported shrimp would force the industry into a sharp, and perhaps permanent, decline.

The Industrial Structure of Louisiana Shrimp Fishing

A general comprehension of the fishery’s industrial structure is useful for the purpose of this dissertation for several reasons. For starters, it can facilitate a greater understanding of exactly why the domestic shrimp fishery has recently fallen into a sharp decline, forcing many shrimp fishers to either leave the industry, or suffer the consequences of continuing to make it. Next, by having a basic grasp the basic industrial structure, we can also better understand the potential solutions that a few shrimp fishers have put forth as a way to remain viable despite the decline. Finally, throughout the empirical chapters, shrimp fishers often refer to shrimp processors and dock owners, often in an adversarial context. The industrial structure of the modern-day shrimp fishery forces most shrimp fishers to rely on processors and/or dock owners to purchase their products. Shrimp fishers are therefore subject to the prices offered by processors or dealers. As explained later in the chapter, dockside prices have dramatically fallen in recent years, and most
shrimp fishers believe that docks and (to a greater extent) processors hold their prices artificially low. But because of their position within the industrial structure, shrimpers must accept these prices.

Figure 1. The Structure of the Louisiana Shrimp Fishing Industry

Figure 1 depicts the general structure of the contemporary shrimp fishing industry. The Louisiana shrimp industry is divided into four distinct sectors. Participants are identified by the function they perform: production, handling/wholesaling,

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4 Adapted from Diop (1999).
processing, and retailing. Shrimp fishers are located within the production sector as domestic shrimp producers. Shrimpers typically own and operate the boats and nets used to harvest shrimp. A small percentage of Louisiana’s domestic shrimp is supplied by shrimper fishers in other states (mainly Texas and Alabama), but Louisiana shrimp comprises most of their domestic supply. The other component of the production sector includes foreign shrimp producers who supply shrimp products that are produced and harvested in foreign countries and shipped to the United States. Some of the imported shrimp are wild-caught by foreign shrimp trawlers, but the bulk of the imported supply is comprised of shrimp raised and harvested on aquacultural shrimp farms. Over the past eight or so years, the volume of imported shrimp has greatly increased, mostly as a result of improvements in aquacultural techniques for harvesting shrimp. This increase in imported shrimp is a significant factor in the collapse of the domestic shrimp fishery, and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

The next sector of the shrimp industry is comprised of the “first handlers”, or the wholesale sector. These enterprises are engaged in the handling of the shrimp landings. Dockside dealers (or seafood docks) are located within this sector. Dealers mainly purchase shrimp directly from the shrimp fishers, and they often offer other services to shrimpers, such as selling ice or renting dock space to shrimpers so that they can tie their boats up nearby the gulf. Some dockside dealers also engage in importing shrimp from other countries to sell to processors (LaFleur, Yeates, and Aysen 2005). Although some shrimp fishers bypass the docks and sell directly to the consumer, most of the shrimp

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5 The boundaries separating the four sectors are not always rigidly defined. For example, a single unit may perform only one function (e.g., a shrimper who does not possess the capability to process or retail their shrimp) or multiple functions (e.g., a shrimper who catches, processes, and sells their shrimp directly to the consumer).
fishers that I spoke with for this dissertation sell their shrimp to a seafood dock. There were three primary seafood docks located in Bayou Crevette.

Shrimp processors are located in the third sector. Shrimp processors are typically firms that buy shrimp from the first handlers (the docks) and process it into products that are useful for the consumer. Depending on specific demands, processors (or the “jobbers” that they contract the work out to) typically peel and devein, can, dry, bread, or freeze the shrimp. From there, the shrimp is typically sold to brokers or independent wholesalers who in turn sell directly to the consumers in the retail sector.

Because of the volume of shrimp that Louisiana produces, the shrimp industry is a highly valuable resource to the state. Singularly, it represents about 85% of the total value of the state’s edible fishery production (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries 2000a). The shrimp industry as a whole – the harvesting, handling, processing, distribution, and retailing of shrimp – contributes significantly to the state economy. At the end of the twentieth century, it was estimated that the industry contributed nearly $2 billion to the state economy. In addition, at that time, approximately 22,000 full-time jobs were directly or indirectly tied to the industry (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries 2000b). At the local level, the industry’s impact is even more apparent. In Terrebonne Parish, one of the state’s largest shrimp-producing parishes, the shrimp industry supplied over 3,100 jobs and generated over $52.07 million in salaries and wages (LaFleur, Yeates, and Aysen 2005). National, state, and local economies are indeed highly dependent upon the shrimp industry.

*The Import Crisis*
In 2001, dockside priced tumbled precipitously. To illustrate, dockside prices for Northern Gulf of Mexico (including Louisiana) 36/40 count\(^6\) headless shrimp went from $4.15/lb at the beginning of the May 2001 season to $3.10 that November. The following May, headless 36/40s sold for $2.60/lb, and the fell to $2.18/lb by the end of the season in November (NMFS 2004). This drop in dockside prices was unprecedented and much unexpected. Since 2001, prices have continued to fall, as depicted in Figure 2.\(^7\) What caused prices to drop so low in such a short amount of time?

\(\text{Figure 2. Real Dockside Price of Shrimp at Local, Regional, and National Levels: 1995-2006 (Constant 2000 Dollars) (Haby 2003)}\)

\(^6\) Indicates shrimp size. In this instance, it would take roughly 36 to 40 shrimp make up one pound of shrimp.

\(^7\) Louisiana’s shrimp prices are typically lower than other states’ because state regulations permit shrimp fishers in Louisiana catch a higher quantity of smaller shrimp than is permitted in other states.
Several key factors play into the collapse of dockside prices. First, in 2001, the U.S. economy began to falter, and domestic demand for shrimp flattened out. At the same time, shrimp imports continued to pour into the U.S. market at increasing rates, a phenomenon referred to by some as “the pink tsunami” (Carrier 2009). For multiple reasons, the U.S. is the most attractive market for shrimp exporters, far more so than the E.U. or Japan, the other major markets for imports. Around 2000, the E.U. and Japan were much more economically weak relative to the U.S., and thus unable to absorb any extra shrimp (Marks 2005). Additionally, unlike Europe and Japan, the U.S. had no significant tariffs or quantitative restrictions on imported shrimp. The lack of tariffs, and the strength of the U.S. dollar relative to other currencies, provided incentives for importers to dump their products on U.S. shorelines (Haby 2003).

But there is another factor, less economic but perhaps more significant, that explains the spike in shrimp imports that eventually led to the industry’s collapse: farm-raised shrimp. Shrimp aquaculture has existed for hundreds of years in various forms, but modern-day shrimp farming developed in Taiwan in the 1970s, and quickly diffused to parts of Southeast Asia and South America (Belton and Little 2008). From the 1970s to the end of the century, most of the imports entering the U.S. were harvested through trawling techniques, despite the availability of aquacultural capabilities. But if shrimp farming is such an old method for harvesting shrimp, why did it take so long for farmed shrimp to dominate the import market and eventually collapse dockside prices?

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8 Shrimp imports have made up a sizeable share of the domestic market since demand increased in the post-war era. However, prices for U.S. shrimpers remained stable because demand remained strong than supply (Marks 2005). This began to change around 2000, when supply has overtaken demand.
The answer to this question in many ways parallels the story of the growth of the modern day Agro-food system in the U.S. In the post-war era, the American diet began to include a great deal more of grain-fed livestock, especially chicken, beef, and pork products. It wasn’t because Americans suddenly and collectively decided that they liked these meats enough to incorporate them into most every meal. No, the American diet transformed as a result of changes in both technology and governmental policies that created huge surpluses in meat and grain. The creation of the agri-chemical industry (that included corporations like Monsanto and Archers Daniels Midland [ADM]) provided new means to minimize risks associated with farming – such as failures due to pests, poor soil quality, or livestock diseases. As a result of these and other technologies (such as the creation and use of hybrid seeds), more produce and livestock could be grown on the same amount of land, a process known as intensive agriculture. This turn toward intensive agriculture resulted in huge surpluses in grain and (especially) corn, that eventually drove prices lower, and many family farms out of business. Governmental policies for dealing with the surpluses encouraged farmers to turn toward more intensive means of growing food, or, as Pollan (2006) put it, “to get big or get out.” As a result, many family farmers were forced out of business, and industrialized farming became the norm while and surpluses have continued to accumulate.

The development and growth of the shrimp farming industry closely parallels this history of industrialized farming. In the 1950s, demand for shrimp far surpassed what domestic producers could supply on their own. To meet demand, shrimp imports began to gain a significant share of the U.S. market. Most of this imported shrimp was harvested through trawling methods. Yet even with domestic and foreign trawlers were working at
full capacity, demand continued to grow (Marks 2005). In the 1970s, foreign producers began to seek out other methods of harvesting shrimp to meet this demand.

As previously mentioned, shrimp farming has existed in some form for hundreds of years. These enterprises were typically quite small and produced enough shrimp to meet the needs of families or small communities. But as the global demand for shrimp escalated, companies and others involved in seafood exports began to look toward shrimp farming as a means to meet growing demand. Before long, shrimp farming took a sharp and decisive turn toward intensive production, following in the path of the industrialized grain and livestock farming in the post-war U.S. Funded in large part by U.S.-based agribusinesses like ConAgra, Armour, ADM, and Ralston Purina, foreign producers cleared more land for shrimp farms, and ratcheted up the concentration of shrimp grown in ponds (Carrier 2009; Belton and Little 2008). Intensive agriculture, akin factory farming, has been associated with a variety of problems (Pollan 2006; Schlosser 2005), and industrialized shrimp farms are no different. And these problems account for the decades-long gap between the rise of intensive shrimp farming and the arrival of the “pink tsunami” to the shores of the U.S.

As shrimp farming became more intensive, disease outbreaks became more common. And for nearly thirty years, shrimp farmers were plagued by many forms of disease that kept them from producing shrimp healthy enough for export. Just like cows or pigs, shrimp raised in close proximity on industrialized shrimp farms – akin to saltwater feedlots – are highly susceptible to disease, in large part because they are forced to live in high concentrations of their own waste. Poor management by shrimp farmers has only exacerbated the problems. For example, on some Thai shrimp farms, chicken
coops have been constructed over or nearby the shrimp ponds, so that the shrimp can be fed by the chicken manure falling from above (American Society for Microbiology 2008).

Around 2000, shrimp farmers had begun to reduce disease outbreaks. To a small extent, diseases were reduced as a result of improvements in aquacultural practices, but most of the reduction was due to the use antibiotics and other chemicals. Many of the chemicals used by shrimp farmers have been proven unsafe for human consumption. In 2001, when food inspectors at the E.U. tested shipments of imported shrimp from Thailand and detected the presence of chloramphenicol\(^9\) – a powerful antibiotic particularly harmful to human and banned in most countries – they rejected it. Most of that rejected shrimp found its way into the U.S. market, where food safety regulations are not as stringent, and where the chances of detection are much smaller.\(^{10}\) The dumping of the rejected shrimp accounts for a part of the spike in shrimp imports, depicted in Figure 3, and the subsequent plummet of dockside prices. Despite the E.U. and Japanese rejection of shrimp tainted with chloramphenicol and other chemicals, they are still being used by many large, industrial shrimp farms today. A 2003 survey of Thai shrimp farmers found that 74% reported using antibiotics on their shrimp (Holmström et al 2003).

\(^9\) Chloramphenicol is a “drug of last resort” used to treat meningitis and typhoid in humans. Chloramphenicol can cause aplastic anemia, a condition where bone marrow stops producing red and white blood cells and platelets, which carry oxygen in the blood (Wallerstein et al. 1969)

\(^{10}\) The Food and Drug Administration does run tests on imported shrimp, but at extremely low rates. In 2006, only 1.34 percent of imported shrimp were given a sensory examination, out of which .59 were inspected more thoroughly at a lab (Food and Water Watch 2008).
There are other reasons beyond the use of harmful chemicals that the shrimp farming industry has been a major source of controversy. Environmentalists have pointed toward the devastation of coastal wetlands and mangrove habitats that have resulted from the spread of industrial shrimp farms. In addition to a host of other ecological benefits, mangroves are essential to the prevention of coastal erosion; like the marsh grasses planted along bayou-sides, their root systems help to hold valuable sediments in place (Lewis et al. 2003). Wetland biologists estimate that in the past twenty years, 35% of the world’s mangrove forests have vanished, largely as a result of extensive shrimp farming (Valiela et al. 2001). Moreover, in some countries, especially China and Vietnam, violence has erupted when coastal residents were dislocated for the purpose of constructing shrimp ponds (Stonich and Vendergeest 2001; Siregar 2001).

Imported, farm-raised shrimp, however controversial or questionable, has taken over the market since the turn of the century, and appears to be here to stay.
1997 and 2001, annual exports of shrimp from all 100 or so countries that export to the U.S. grew by an average of 53.6 million pounds per year (Haby 2003). A sizeable majority of the shrimp, 49.3 million pounds, came from the ten largest exporting countries, shown in Figure 6. In 2001, Thailand was clearly the largest exporter of shrimp to the U.S. Since then, Vietnam and China have substantially increased their production (Belton and Little 2008). And, as Figure 4 demonstrates, most of the imported shrimp is farm-raised, as opposed to wild-harvested.

![Figure 4. 2001 Import Volumes from Both the Top Ten and the Remaining Shrimp-exporting Countries Delineated by Production Method (Haby 2003).](image)

Today, domestic producers supply only around 10% of the U.S. market for shrimp; most demand – over a billion pounds a year – is met through imports (Carrier 2009). Quite simply, shrimp trawlers lack the productive capability to meet the increased consumer demand. In other words, even working at full-capacity, shrimp trawlers provide only a minority of shrimp found in the market today. Although shrimp farms can be
found in numerous regions across the country, the U.S. lacks the warm and balmy climates necessary to harvest multiple crops a year. Turning toward shrimp farming is thus not an option for domestic producers seeking to maintain viability in the shrimp industry.

Over the past decade or so, a great deal of attention has been directed toward understanding the problems and pressures facing the domestic shrimp fishing industry as a whole. However, little systematic research has been done to examine the economic, cultural, and social impacts of such drastic changes for those most directly affected by such changes: the shrimp fishers, their families, and their communities. This research is an attempt to increase our understanding of the economic, social, and cultural consequences that accompany these far-reaching industrial and environmental changes.

How have shrimp fishers responded to far-reaching effects of the shrimp import crisis? And what are the consequences of these responses for the way shrimp fishers view themselves, their culture, and their community?

**Back to the Bayou**

To answer these questions, I returned to the bayou during the summers of 2006 and 2007. The research conducted over this period of time provides the empirical foundations upon which the remainder of this book is based. My goal during this time was to track down and interview as many current and ex-shrimpers as possible, to see what their plans were, how they were coping with and making sense of the decline. My previous experience

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11 See Appendix for further discussion of the methods.
living in the town, and my affiliation with a well-regarded non-profit organization, proved quite useful in helping me to find willing interview participants. While generally community members have a reputation for being friendly, hospitable, and quite open, many shrimp fishers also have a high degree of distrust of researchers, a sentiment that will be developed further throughout the book. But I learned that soon after I identified myself as “one of the AmeriCorps kids”, shrimpers’ initial misgivings and skepticism seemed to dissipate. As a result, many of the interviews lasted well over two hours, and not surprisingly, I was often invited to stay for lunch or dinner.

In order to find individuals willing to talk with me, and to get a more complete sense of the state of the industry, I also participated in many aspects of daily life in the community. I attended numerous community events such as local festivals and dances, seafood boils, and shrimping-related community meetings. Because a small but significant proportion of my own life had been based in the community, I had a fairly tight grasp on Bayou Crevette’s unique set of norms, customs, and concerns. In total, I ended up conducting fifty in-depth interviews with 19 current shrimpers, 17 former shrimpers, and 14 individuals connected to the shrimp industry, like at net shops and seafood sheds where shrimpers sold their catch. I also interviewed individuals in the tug boat and oil industry, in order to get in touch with ex-shrimpers.

I initially went into the field assuming that most shrimpers would either be making preparations to leave the industry, or would have already left. Bayou Crevette is unique in that it is located nearby the bourgeoning oil industry that supplies numerous well-paying, skilled jobs. Many of these jobs require skills transferable from shrimping, such as welding, repairing diesel engines, being a captain of a tugboat or supply boat for
offshore oil rigs. Shrimpers, therefore, need not suffer economically as a result of the collapse of their industry. In most scholarly accounts of deindustrialization, workers have few, if any, viable alternative employment opportunities (see Leach and Winson 1995). Most research in this area regards the lack of viable replacement incomes as they unequivocal catalyst of social and economic decline in communities (Dudley 1994; Fuechtmann 1989; Perucci et al 1988; Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Surely, if good jobs were available to those seeking employment, outcomes would have been much less devastating.

The farming literature is marked with similar themes. Rural sociologists have documented how the farm crisis of the 1980s forced many family and mid-sized farmers out of the industry, but replacement incomes were scarce. Rural communities are often located nearby communities undergoing deindustrialization, where jobs are scarce (Leach and Winson 1995; Jackson-Smith 1999). Policies enacted by the Reagan administration to deal with the farm crisis made it easy for larger, investor-owned farm operations to buy out smaller farmers. These agribusinesses often employed former farmers as laborers, enabling them to maintain a somewhat decent standard of living. But without a sufficient source of replacement income, many former farmers faced the same bleak prospects as the unemployed steel workers.

Shrimp fishers do not face the same shortage of employment alternatives described in many cases of occupational decline. They could easily shift gears and get a job in the oil or one of its attendant industries, and some did. But generally, this is not what I found. After returning from the field, and transcribing all of the interviews, it became clear that there were three primary ways that shrimpers had responded to the
decline. First, I was struck by the number of shrimpers who were adamantly refusing to leave the industry behind. Time and again, these individuals told me heartbreaking stories of mounting hardships that involved no only their finances, but also struggles with their families, personal relationships, and perceptions of themselves. But what is more, these persisting shrimpers also acknowledged that they could be making better money if they sold their boats and took other employment. This defied my expectations, and also the logic of rationality as it is typically discussed in the academic literature. The experiences of persisting shrimpers, therefore, raise importance questions regarding the impact of non-economic factors – such as culture, identity, and life worlds – inherent in decision-making processes: Why have so many shrimpers chosen to pass up opportunities to make a more economically secure living, knowing that they would struggle? What are they trying to preserve?

Next, I found that there were individuals who did, indeed, leave the industry behind for those other jobs. Most of these jobs involved either the oil industry or in one of its attendant industries, like welding, captaining a tug boat, or working in retail associated with these pursuits. These ex-shrimpers are all doing quite well financially in their new jobs, and many are for the first time enjoying benefit packages that include health insurance, paid leave, and pension plans. Despite this, they did not express the level of satisfaction that one might expect when lucrative employment opportunities exist. Quite the opposite, many of these individuals shared painful stories regarding their decisions to leave the industry behind. Among those I spoke with, anguish, regret, and betrayal regarding their decision to leave shrimping behind were common experiences. Again, these life stories elicit valuable questions regarding the interplay between
economic and non-economic considerations, this time with regard to the processes and consequences of obtaining new employment. What, exactly, is lost when shrimpers choose to leave the industry for other work?

Finally, there was a small group of enterprising shrimpers who had transformed their practices in order to adapt to the declining industrial conditions. By changing to adapt, these innovating shrimpers had managed to continue to obtain a good price for their shrimp. How were they managing to do this? The primary change involved installing on-board freezers that allow them to bypass the low prices offered at the seafood docks, and sell directly to the consumer. These shrimpers were distinctly different from those who were persisting, most notably in their increased levels of optimism regarding their futures – and their children’s futures – within the industry. Given their success, why weren’t more shrimpers changing to adapt these techniques? And further, what motivated these individuals to take the necessary economic risks involved in transforming their practices in attempt to survive in the industry?

Responses to Occupational Decline

Theories of Globalization

To try to answer all of these questions associated with my cases, I first turned to theories of economic globalization, as what has happened to the shrimping industry is clearly linked to global processes: shrimpers are struggling largely as a result of increases in the importation of foreign, farm-raised shrimp. This fits well with how researchers generally define economic globalization, as the “intensification and stretching of
economic interrelations across the globe” (Steeger 2003). Processes associated with economic globalization include increased flows of trade, capital, technology and investment across national borders (Castells 2000; Schofer and Granados 2006). The waves created by these processes have surely crashed into the shores of numerous fishing communities across the U.S., including my case study.

Over the past several decades, globalization has captured the interest of academics, researchers, and journalists alike. As a result, research in this area has swelled (Sumner 2004). But the literature is characterized by a general debate over its merits: Is globalization a helpful or harmful force? Despite the enormity of research on this topic, researchers have yet to reach a general consensus regarding the answer to this question (Wade 2004; Guillen 2001). Sumner (2004) points out that the general lack of consensus has to do with how researchers conceptualize and measure economic globalization.

Globalization critics typically focus on the repressive roles that transnational corporations and international organizations – such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) – play in shaping the policies and programs that pave the way for economic globalization to spread. Many of these researchers argue that these global entities reflect the interests of the wealthiest industrial countries – especially the U.S. – whose elite members of the business communities guide their policies and loan programs in their own self-interest. As a result of these policies, they contend, important governmental protections designed to shelter local cultures and people from the ravages of an unfettered free market have been eliminated, with disastrous results (Chase-Dunn 1998; Stiglitz 2003; Giddens 2002). In their view, globalization creates a great deal more victims than victors.
The wide-ranging, negative impacts of these policies have been consistently demonstrated by globalization detractors. Joseph Stiglitz (2003) reveals in particularly sharp detail the impact of economic globalization for developing countries. Based on his experiences as Chief Economist for the World Bank, he argues that that IMF and World Bank make a common practice out of linking loans to policies which have devastating impacts for populations in developing countries. For example, he shows how countries in economic straits have time and again been subject to the same IMF- and World Bank-sponsored neoliberal prescriptions: privatization, deregulation, and austerity programs aimed at dismantling welfare systems and cutting state expenditures. Because these policies are implemented without considering social costs, they have proven to be financially disastrous to working men and women in these countries, the real victims of globalization. Among other problems, he lists cuts in food subsidies, decreased access to education and health care, and higher rates of unemployment as direct outcomes of these neoliberal policies.

Other researchers focus on globalization’s victims in advanced, industrial countries. Harrison and Bluestone (1988) linked deindustrialization to globalization in their exploration of the “Great U-turn” of increasing inequality in advanced nations. They argue that the “globalization gambit”, as they call it, has resulted in increased outflows of direct investments from these countries, as firms in the manufacturing sector consistently decide to invest in search of lower labor costs. Deindustrialization that results from disinvestment has produced rising inequality, because it forced the portion of the labor force from the industrial sector, typified by higher average wages and a relatively flat income distribution, to the service sector, characterized by low wages and high levels of
income inequality (Alderson and Nielson 2002). Increased rates of free trade, along with enhanced transportation and communication technology, has been shown to facilitate the movement of production to developing countries, contributing to deindustrialization (Wood 1994; Alderson 1997).

The negative impacts of deindustrialization and plant closings for local communities and individuals have been widely documented by sociologists of work and occupations (Tarq et al. 1988; Dandaneau 1996; Smith 2002). In addition to economic woes, individuals facing layoffs and unemployment due to plant closing have also reported greater levels of stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, and a host of stress-related health problems (Hironimus-Wendt and Spannaus 2007). In short, these scholars have shed light on the victims of globalization.

Proponents of economic globalization, on the other hand, tend to focus on the benefits and positive end products of economic globalization processes. They point out how – contrary to what globalization detractors maintain – increases in trade and capital volumes for developing countries often result in improvements in living standards for citizens in developing countries. Wolf (2004) argues that neoliberal globalization is associated with increasing levels of economic development, which for many has translated into an unprecedented expansion of opportunities for social and economic mobility. In other words, individuals at the local level have actually benefited from globalization, and could therefore be considered among globalization’s victors. He also credits economic globalization for the declining rates of inequality and reductions in the proportion of the world’s population in extreme poverty that characterize the past 25 years. In his view, globalization is not the cause of persistent poverty. Rather, poor
political management in many developing countries should be blamed for the lack of prosperity within them. His solution to these problems is more free trade. This assertion is backed by Dollar and Kray (2002:120) who contend that “the current wave of globalization…has actually promoted economic equality and reduced poverty.” Not only do they argue that developing countries that are globalizing experience benefits, but they also contend that individuals in *non*-globalizing countries are those suffering the most, precisely because they are cut off from the world economy.

Defenders of economic globalization also assert that countries with borders open to global economic influences also increase their exposure to a diversity of political influences, most notably democratic culture. Exposure to democratic norms and values have been linked to the transformation of political structures to include the creation a free press, opposition parties, and voluntary organizations (Lizardo 2006).

The debate surrounding the merits of globalization generally focuses on costs and benefits – or the outcomes – of globalization, and who bears them. Researchers on both sides of the debate, therefore, view local actors and cultures as *acted upon* by global forces rather than as active agents capable of making decisions. They either emphasize the *victims* (the unemployed autoworker) or the *victors* (the Central American coffee farmer with an improved standard of living) of economic globalization. In the community of Bayou Crevette, global processes have arguably had negative impacts on the commercial shrimp fishing industry. But after spending hundreds of hours conducting and transcribing interviews, I was hard-pressed to find any true victims of globalization. While it is true that persisting shrimpers relayed stories of hardships and struggle, they have chosen to remain in even when they don’t have to. They are maintaining their
important cultural and occupational identities by remaining in the declining industry, and this is a source of great pride. In fact, many would look upon those who left the industry as more befitting of the victim label, because they were forced to give up their way of life.

But those who left also do not view themselves as victims. After all, they are faring much better financially after they had left the industry, and many for the first time in their lives are enjoying employment benefits, such as health care, paid vacation time and pension plans. Those who change to adapt to the declining conditions are not victims, either, as they have figured out a way to preserving both their ways of life and standards of living. In sum, those I spoke with weren’t merely reacting to globalization’s processes, they were interacting with them, and exhibiting real agency in the face of these changes. Focusing mainly on structural forces and their effects – as many globalization theorists do – ignores how people actually confront these choices.

*Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies*

One way that researchers have focused on individuals’ responses to global restructuring is by examining the various economic survival strategies that individuals and households employ to make ends meet in declining economic conditions. Many researchers in this area focus on family adaptive strategies (Moen and Wethington 1992), which view the household as a social unit. Households represent the day-to-day setting in which members collaboratively decide how to cope with economic downturns (Meyer and Lobao 2003). The vast literature on coping strategies documents how social structure
and context lead a variation of family adaptive strategies. Gender, culture, and spatial
location are particularly salient factors that interact to produce varied outcomes.

A great deal of research, both contemporary and historical, highlights how the
reallocation of female labor is central to ensuring the maintenance and economic survival
of households in times of economic decline. In the 19th century during economic shifts
from family- to factory-based production, the logic of household organization shifted to
accommodate these widespread structural changes. As men labored long days in the
factory, women assumed greater responsibility for managing the household. In addition
to the tasks of wives and mothers, women were responsible for providing food,
organizing the household, and overseeing the productive activities of children who often
labored in factories. To ensure the maintenance and persistence of the household, women
spent less time engaged in market-based labor. But when economic times got tough,
women took on jobs to make ends meet (Tilly and Scott 1978; Hareven 1982; Lamphere
1987).

Contemporary studies on economic survival strategies consistently emphasize the
critical role that married women and mothers play during times of economic decline.
These coping strategies are directed toward both market and non-market solutions.
Market-based strategies include taking on an additional job, working more hours at one’s
primary job, or picking up odd jobs in the informal market. Women also contribute in
important non-market bases strategies. For example, when times get tough, women may
choose to delay or limit fertility in an attempt to limit consumption. Other non-market
based strategies include relying on kin or social networks for monetary and non-monetary
assistance, cutting back on consumption, and self-provisioning by making the family’s
clothing and growing one’s own food. Meyer and Lobao (2003) have emphasized the importance of women’s involvement in political protest to fight against factors that lead to declining conditions.

While the importance of gender is well-documented, cultural context has also been shown to be an important factor in determining how people will cope with tough economic times. Culture is particularly salient for those who study drug dealing and underground economies in urban areas (Venkatesh 2006; Anderson 1990). Decisions to engage in illicit behavior as a means to economic survival are often based within a “backlash” culture that purposefully shuns mainstream values in favor of street credibility and toughness (Anderson 1990). For some, the proximity and normalcy of illegal activities common to urban areas allows them to be viewed as morally acceptable pathways to economic survival (Wilson 1996). But others may adhere to more mainstream values and reject illegal opportunities for economic maximization on the grounds that they are able to preserve their self-worth and pride (Lamont 2000). Even though they may struggle financially, maintaining self-respect allows individuals to view themselves as better off than those whose better financial standing is related to illegal activity. For example, Edin and Lein (1997) finds that poor single mothers tended to choose economic coping strategies that align with legally and morally appropriate cultural standards because they wish to pass on both mainstream values and a work ethic to their children.

Rural sociologists demonstrate how the influence of culture varies by setting in a rural or urban context. Sherman (2006) shows how rural areas are generally characterized by fewer competing cultural repertoires from which individuals can choose survival
strategies. Through her case study of a small rural community in Northern California, she demonstrates that cultural homogeneity found in rural areas often creates greater social pressure to find socially acceptable ways of coping with financial difficulty. Failure to adhere to norms and values can result in shame, marginalization, decreased social support, and fewer employment opportunities (907). Engaging in morally questionable activities, therefore, can translate into a loss in what she calls “moral capital” that functions in manners similar to other forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). The most popular and accepted coping strategies in this rural community involved finding additional employment and relying on self-provisional activities such as hunting, fishing, and gardening (see also England and Brown 2003; Moore 2001). Receiving help from relatives and finding cheaper housing options were also acceptable, and therefore common, strategies for coping. But there was a stigma attached to receiving government assistance, especially means-tested welfare programs. Those who received welfare for any length of time were labeled and shunned. As a result, many avoided welfare, even when there was a true need for it. Finally, drug dealing was collectively considered a morally reprehensible activity. Those who engaged in this activity were stigmatized and isolated in the community. Unlike the urban setting, there is no backlash culture sanctioning the drug trade, and the small size typical in rural communities brings about a lack of anonymity that those in urban areas are more likely to enjoy.

The literature on coping strategies provides important insight into the various ways that people deal with declining economic circumstances. But these studies typically focus on communities and households that face declining levels of employment that occur as full-time, steady jobs associated with manufacturing and industrial labor are
replaced by lower-waged service sector jobs. Shrimp fishers in my case study do not face the same economic circumstances. Their opportunities for stable, well-paying employment are plentiful because of their proximity to the bourgeoning oil industry. And although shrimp fishers that I spoke with have relied on some of the survival strategies documented above – especially working harder, cutting back, and relying on a second income – their unique circumstance has resulted in outcomes that are distinct from those facing declining employment conditions. Studies on economic survival strategies, therefore, provide an incomplete understanding of shrimpers’ responses. Shrimpers were not merely reacting to global processes; they interacted with them as agential actors in ways that produced varied outcomes.

Rational Choice Theories

I next turned to rational choice theory to try to understand the choices made by the three groups of shrimpers. Rational choice (RC) theory is appropriate to turn to because of its emphasis on individual actors. Theorists in this tradition conceptualize human behavior as an intentional choice between competing options, and therefore take the agency’s role in shaping outcomes seriously. RC theorists presume that actors have goals toward which their actions are intended, with the goal – and the action- shaped by preferences. Although they assume preferences exist, they are largely unconcerned with where these originate. Theorists in this tradition typically understand human behavior as reflections of individuals’ choices as they try to maximize utility and minimize costs. In
this way, social actors are presumed to always act rationally, in their best economic interest.

Over the past several decades, the RC approach has increased visibility and influence in many of the social sciences, especially political science (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). Sociology, however, has remained skeptical, and often resistant, to the approach (Baron and Hannon 1994). Sociologists have been particularly critical of the approach because of its over-reliance on instrumentality and subsequent neglect of how factors such as emotions, culture, and affectual attachments shape decision-making (Fararo 1996). They are further critical of the notion that actors possess complete knowledge of their range of available choices because it implies equivalence of actors’ abilities to both gain access to and process information. Sociological research shows that individuals often make choices based upon a limited understanding of their situations, sometimes resulting from an inability to process large amounts of information (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Simon 1957).

In recent years, since the 1980s, the field of behavioral economics has sprouted up and been thriving as an extension of neoclassical economics and the RC theory it informs (Camerer et al. 2003). This field developed against the backdrop of the criticism that classic economic thought is unrealistic because it fails to consider how psychological considerations and other nonmarket constraints influence decision-making processes. While behavioral economics as a field is relatively new, the ideas from which they construct their analyses are not. Behavioral economists draw heavily from Simon’s (1957) concept of bounded rationality that is based on the fact that actors’ rationality is
limited by a host of variables, such as cognitive limitations, the information that actors have, and the amount of time allotted to make decisions.

Behavioral economics surely moves us closer to an understanding of how non-economic factors affect outcomes. But the assumption that market logics are rational, while non-economic considerations are largely irrational, is still implicit in much the research using behavioral economics as a theoretical starting point. And thus far the relationship between economic and non-economic factors in decision-making processes has gone largely unexplored.

Retheorizing Hirschman’s Exit, Voice and Loyalty

Albert O. Hirschman’s (1970) famous work of *Exit Voice and Loyalty* (herein: EVL) represents an early attempt to bridge the existing gap between economic and non-economic – in this case, primarily political – explanations of social action. Hirschman is specifically interested in how individuals respond when they are confronted with a deterioration of organizational conditions. He argues that those facing such a predicament have two primary forms of recourse: to *exit* for better alternatives, or to use *voice* for improvements. His third concept, *loyalty*, is introduced as a way to understand what motivates some to cut their losses, while others stay in and fight with the hope of restoring conditions to those of the good old days. In other words, loyalty represents his attempt to acknowledge instances when non-economic considerations factor into decision-making. His model has since been used in a wide variety of research areas (see Dowding et al. 2000), and has provided an especially important context for research
work-related issues (Farrell 1983; Rusbelt et al. 1988; Withey and Cooper 1989; Hoffman 2006).

On its face, Hirschman’s framework is well-suited for understanding the three trajectories of shrimpers, for several reasons. First, unlike dominant theories of globalization, he places agency at the center of his analysis, thereby taking actors’ decisions seriously. Next, he focuses on responses to deteriorating conditions, an occurrence that Louisiana shrimp fishers currently face. His framework also attempts to incorporate non-economic factors into decision-making processes. But even though the three trajectories of shrimpers directly suggest his model, it does not adequately account for my three cases: some shrimpers are refusing to exit, despite the availability of better-paying employment alternatives, and at the same time are not actively using voice; those who have exited recounted tales of great hardship and struggle with the decision and act of exiting, which suggests that exit is not the easy solution to decline that Hirschman describes; and those who have changed their practices to adapt to the decline represent a form of agency not included in Hirschman’s model.

Hirschman’s model falls short in explaining shrimpers’ responses in part because he fails to incorporate how economic and non-economic forces combine to produce outcomes. His discussion of both exit and voice is guided by classic rational choice assumptions: when a situation begins to decline, rationally-motivated individuals are presumed to exit for better opportunities when they are available. When exit options do not exist, or when an individual believes that an improvement of declining conditions is possible, they may instead speak out in an attempt to change the organization from within by using voice. Although he defines voice as a political solution to decline, his
conceptualization draws heavily from RC’s assumption: people use voice only because they believe that they stand to benefit from it in the future, and that these benefits outweigh any costs that may incur as a result.

Hirschman does acknowledge that sometimes individuals are motivated by non-economic considerations, reflected in his concept of loyalty. He introduces loyalty as a contingency that shapes outcomes: those with greater loyalty are more likely to attempt to change the organization from within. But what are some factors that may inspire a high degree of loyalty for an individual? Hirschman briefly outlines some possible factors – high entry costs, allegiances, and affective preferences – but he never fully elaborates what loyalty actually looks like in practice. What is more, he never explores the outcomes of exit, voice, or loyalty for any individuals (Dowding et al. 2000). As a result, we lack a sufficient understanding of the processes through which economic and non-economic considerations play out for individuals who face organizational decline.

In order to understand the three trajectories of Louisiana shrimp fishers, I rewrite Hirschman’s model to incorporate a more nuanced understanding of how structural economic forces combine with non-economic factors – such as culture, emotional attachments, the meaning of life worlds, and so on – to produce unique outcomes. I borrow from the theoretical developments of bounded rationality and behavioral economics, but I depart their assumptions that market logics are rational and non-economic considerations are irrational. Instead, I show how non-market considerations are also highly rational. The logic of the market has its own rationality, but there are multiple rationalities to consider when actors are faced with important choices.
As a response to shrimp fishing’s decline, some individuals have chosen to leave the shrimp industry – and the way of life it provides – for better-paying, more certain employment alternatives. At first glance, it appears that these former shrimpers fit squarely into Hirschman’s model, thus acting according to the logic of RC theory: they leave to maximize economic benefits. It is tempting, therefore, to think of them as globalization’s success stories – individuals who jumped the sinking ship for one that’s much more safe and secure. But a deeper inspection, discussed in Chapter 4, reveals several important issues involved with exiting that Hirschman’s theory ignores.

First, Hirschman and those who follow also assume a similarity among actors facing the same incident of organizational decline (e.g., Turnley and Feldman 1999; Naus, van Iterson, and Roe 2007). Empirical models that have been used to test Hirschman’s theory cannot adequately account for how complex and varied social situations and cultural contexts impact actors’ available choices.

Next, Hirschman treats exit as a rather simple economic act, akin to walking out of a store or switching brands of laundry detergent. He gives little consideration to the deliberation process that precedes the choice to exit or use voice. Instead, individuals are expected to leave for more economically sound alternatives when they are available, except when they expect a short-term reversal of organizational deterioration. Therefore, the transition from one organization to another is presumed to be a smooth and clean process. Exit, thus, is a successful outcome of organizational decline. This assumption is replicated in most studies that use his framework, and is illustrated by the common use of
simple dichotomous measures of exit that denote its presence or absence (Rusbelt et al. 1988). But in reality, of course, exit is far from a simple or clean act, especially with regards to employment. Most exit involves switching to some kind of alternative, a process likely to be complicated (Light 2003). The case of ex-shrimpers provides a unique opportunity to glimpse this transitional process, and reveals fascinating insight. In chapter 4, I show how ex-shrimpers have indeed struggled with the decision to exit.

By studying exit as a process, I also gain insight into why some exit, while others choose to stay in and stick it out. What makes these two groups of shrimpers different? Are exiters less loyal to their craft? The design of my study disallows me to objectively measure the degree of loyalty of that each group possesses (if that is even a possible task). But I find that there are important differences regarding persisters’ and exiters’ family history with shrimping. Most of the exiters are first or second generation shrimp fishers, meaning that they either married a woman with family roots in the industry, or that their fathers were involved in the craft. Conversely, all of the persisting shrimpers were second generation or more, and their roots often went three or four generations deep. In other words, some persisters’ great-great grandfathers were shrimp fishers. Exiters did not have the same types of historical ties to the craft, and may therefore lack the same degree of cultural investment in the industry. But even so, does this mean that exiters do not suffer as a result of exit? Absolutely not.

Both Hirschman and RC scholars assume individuals to make decisions based upon a calculation of costs and benefits of actions. And of course, these analyses are primarily directed toward understanding economic costs. But through in-depth interviews with exiters, I uncover important non-economic costs of exit for ex-shrimpers. In doing
so, it becomes apparent that these individuals have not only struggled with the decision to exit, but they have also experienced real loss. These non-economic costs have been underexplored by critics of globalization who focus on more visible victims, as well as by globalization proponents, who wish to view free movement of labor as a positive. And by focusing on these exiters, my research adds the insight that non-economic costs industrial decline and economic dislocation – connected to globalization processes – can be as important to those affected as the economic costs.

The Persisters

Unlike the exiters, some shrimp fishers have chosen to stay in struggle against the currents of globalization pushing them out of the industry. These individuals, whom I call “persisters”, are featured in Chapter 4. Hirschman supposes that individuals faced with decline would leave for better opportunities, when they are available. But he also notes that individuals may delay exit in situations where they believe that speaking out – through voice – might reverse the conditions of decline. Using the logic of his model, we might expect shrimp fishers to either exit for the better jobs, or – out of a sense of loyalty to their craft - to actively engage in voice in an attempt to save their deteriorating industry. But neither one of these adequately describe how persisting shrimpers have responded. Instead, persisting shrimpers have made the choice to forego the better employment alternatives in favor of maintaining the meaningful occupational and cultural identities associated with shrimp fishing. And, contrary to what Hirschman’s model predicts, they are not optimistic about the prospect that their industry will recover. In fact,
none of the persisters that I spoke with believe that their situations will improve in the future.

Persisters’ pessimism regarding their economic futures may explain why they have thus far failed to seriously engage in voice activities. The lack of political activity among those I spoke with was particularly glaring, and puzzling. It’s important to note that there has been a small degree of voice activity associated with the declining industry. For example, several shrimp-related organizations have developed as a response to the flood of foreign shrimp into the US market. These organizations – led by the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) – have engaged in a series of legal battles to impose tariffs on foreign shrimp that they claim are dumped onto U.S. shores.¹² Many of the shrimpers I spoke with are dues-paying members of this organization, but have not actively participated in the organization’s activities, and even expressed reluctance to continue paying dues. Also, they generally lacked faith in the organization’s abilities to reverse the decline, or improve their own economic circumstances. Time and again, I was told by persisters that they stood to gain very little from their memberships in these organizations, and that they did not want a government hand-out that would take the form of compensation from tariff monies collected. But the prospect of making even just a little money back kept them paying their dues.

I argue that membership in this organization fails to encompass Hirschman’s conceptualization of voice. For starters, this organization is not fighting to decrease the amount of shrimp that come into this country, which has led to the depression of dockside prices domestically. Gulf Coast shrimpers are well aware that they lack the capability to

¹² Need to explain here that they did get tariffs imposed, but that by and large, shrimpers haven’t received very much money from these tariffs.
meet the expanding demand for shrimp in this country. Working at full capacity, domestic shrimpers only supply around 10% of the nation’s shrimp supply. They recognize that imports are necessary. Those shrimpers who pay dues to the SSA are involved in order to receive compensation collected from the tariff money. The compensation, however, is quite modest. And, for the most part, they have yet to take any kind of political action, or act in ways that fit Hirschman’s description of voice.

The persisters are not exiting, nor are they engaging in voice. Instead, they have deliberately made a choice to deal with the hardships and struggles that they described to me in our interviews. Rather than viewing them as globalization’s victims – as critics of globalization would likely do – I argue that they are better understood as globalization’s martyrs. Instead of allowing globalization’s tides to push them out of the industry, they are aggressively struggling to remain afloat, even when they don’t have to. The decision to act against their best economic interests flies in the face of the RC logic. And as a result, RC theorists would likely dismiss these individuals as irrational actors.

So what explains their behavior? I argue that persisting shrimpers are motivated to preserve their meaningful occupational and cultural identities above all other factors, even economic considerations. I do not claim that economic factors have no bearing on the decision-making of persisting shrimpers. Surely, economic aspects – such as debt load and employment status of other family members – factor into decision-making processes. But I show how non-economic considerations also carry significant weight with shrimpers, and argue that these factors cannot be dismissed or ignored. Exploring on a deep level the loyalty of shrimpers, and the meanings they attach to their life-worlds, shows us that their stubborn resistance to globalization is not an irrational act, but is
instead highly rational. It further highlights how local actors can be active participants in globalization processes, and are therefore key players in shaping outcomes. Theories of globalization (including critical theories) that strip local actors of their agency fail to understand the choices that they actually make, leaving us unable to understand why local actors so often obstinately refuse to acquiesce to the logic of the market.

Thus far, I have shown how loyalty – or the desire to preserve meaningful occupational and cultural identities – has significant influence on the persisters’ decision to remain in the declining industry. This demonstrates that non-economic considerations are important factors to consider in trying to understand outcomes of decision-making processes. Exiters, on the other hand, typically do not have the same level of cultural investment as the persisters, and made their decisions to exit based primarily upon economic preferences. But do economic and non-economic considerations operate separately, as mutually exclusive factors? In the next section, I show how the third group of shrimpers – the innovators – demonstrates that economic and non-economic considerations can combine to produce unique outcomes.

**The Innovators**

My third case study, elaborated in Chapter 5, focuses on a small and enterprising group of shrimpers I call the “innovators”. These individuals have changed their practices in various ways to adapt to the declining dockside prices that are sinking the industry. Adaptive innovation has involved several steps. First, all of the innovators have installed industrial-sized freezers onboard their boats, which instantly freeze the shrimp as it is
caught. Traditionally, freshly caught shrimp are thrown into a hatch filled with ice.

Freezers allow shrimpers to bypass the dock-side purchasers (who offer a low price) and sell the frozen product directly to the consumer. Because the shrimp are frozen so quickly after (and sometimes during) the live state, they are a higher-quality product, known as Individual Quick Frozen (IQF) shrimp. IQF shrimp yield a higher price on the market. Innovators have also begun to use the internet to sell their shrimp, in a deliberate attempt to bypass the docks and seafood processors.

Innovative adaptation represents another form of agency that Hirschman does not include in his model. Outside of exit or voice, Hirschman does not allow for other forms of agency in the face of decline. Because of this, he misses the possibility that individuals can change to adapt to deterioration. Surely, the qualities of the commercial shrimp fishing industry – where shrimpers are small commodity producers akin to being owner-operators of their own productive facility – provide shrimpers with a unique opportunity to adapt. Not all individuals facing industrial decline have the opportunity to change their practices. But understanding their responses forces us to look at other options that exist beyond exit or voice. For example, when the steel industry began to collapse in the late 1970s, workers did not have the opportunity – in terms of taking their own initiative – to change the way the steel companies operated in an attempt to remain competitive. As a result, many either used voice to save the industry (Lynd 1982), or exited if they had other options.

But there are other ways that steel workers responded that fall outside of his model, indicating that there are other forms of agency available to individuals facing decline. In some instances, workers collaborated to pull resources and buy closing plants,
re-opening them under worker- or community-owned ventures. The most successful example of this is the Weirton Steel Corporation in Weirton, West Virginia. When the National Steel Corporation (who owned Weirton Steel) announced that it would be shutting down the Weirton facility in 1982, workers and community members were devastated. But instead of rolling with this punch, employees responded by coming up with the idea to purchase and operate the mill themselves. The following year, an agreement was reached with the company; the employee-owned Weirton Steel Corporation purchased the Weirton Steel division for $194 million in both cash and debt. Throughout the 1980s, the employee-owned company enjoyed significant success, and was the largest employee-owned company in the nation (Lieber 1995). Similar attempts from steel employees facing shut-downs to buy and operate plats were attempted in Youngstown and Pittsburgh, but with no success (Lynd 1987). Attempts by employees – whether successful or not – to take over the means of production represents a form of agency not accounted for in Hirschman’s model, or by scholars of rational choice.

The case of innovative shrimpers permits an in-depth examination of other form of agency available to those facing decline. They changed their practices in order to adapt to the decline. Why did they choose this course of action, instead of persisting to preserve their traditional way of life as it is, or exiting for better alternatives? I argue that in making this decision, innovators’ preference hierarchies (to use the language of RC) were structured by a combination of both economic and non-economic considerations. This indicates that economic and non-economic forces do not operate separately – they are NOT mutually exclusive – but can intertwine to create still other unique outcomes.
What can innovators tell us about globalization? Interestingly, innovating shrimpers are using the very global forces that now threaten their industry – namely improvements in shipping and communication technologies – to successfully remain afloat in the declining industry. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of transportation technologies, these local actors are not only fighting against global forces, they are using them in judo-like fashion to advance their own agenda. Both critics and defenders of globalization agree that global forces sweep away traditional occupations -- but disagree about whether this is positive or negative. Through a detailed assessment of how local actors actually behave in the face of globalization, I find that the outcomes are not always straightforward. Globalization may pose significant challenges to maintaining meaningful occupational identities while at the same time create new and unexpected opportunities for preserving and extending traditional ways of life.

In what follows, I describe in much greater detail the cases of persisters, exiters, and innovators. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to provide some historical and cultural context to the rise and fall of the Louisiana shrimp industry.
“Losing my boat is like losing a baby. It hurts, you know? Like losing a baby.” Gerald, Exiter.

Gerald is an ex-shrimper who got out of the shrimp fishing industry in 2003, just as it began to collapse. I met him and his wife, Diane, at a shrimp boil that I was invited to by another ex-trawler named Lindel. Earlier that day, I had spoken with Lindel – who worked for an equipment company that supplies offshore oil rigs – and he encouraged me to attend that evening’s shrimp boil, promising that I would find “lots of former trawlers like me who’ll talk your ears off. And beaucoup shrimp to eat!” The shrimp boil was sponsored in part by a local energy company, and was held under a tent nearby one of its main offices that was located along the coast, in the heart of the oil industrial complex. The smell of fresh boiled shrimp and salty sea air hung low in the humid, summer evening air; people two-stepped to the sounds of Cajun French songs played by a local swamp pop band; and people’s plates were piled high with Gulf shrimp, bread, and vegetables. But all the while, we were surrounded by the imposing infrastructure of the oil field comprised of large machinery and cranes, semi-trucks, and nondescript, tin-roofed warehouses. Tugboats and shrimp boats were both docked alongside the water’s
edge, side-by-side. The location of the shrimp boil aptly emblemized how the seafood and oil industries had neatly blended to become part of the community’s shared identity.

Lindel introduced me to Gerald, who immediately exclaimed “You’re from Ohio?! What are you doing all the way down here?! Have you had any shrimp yet?” I explained that I was a researcher who was looking to speak with ex-trawlers about what their lives were like after they got out of the industry. “Oh lord,” he said, “it was thirty-three years that we did that.” He explained that he learned how to shrimp as a young man from his step-father, and eventually went on to own his own boat. Diane’s father had also been a lifelong trawler of fifty years, although she rarely trawled with him, and only occasionally went out with Gerald: “It’s too hard of work,” she explained. “But sometimes I’d go out on the weekend with him, because I wanted to be with him.” They had two children, both daughters, but neither of them spent much time on the boat.

Gerald and Diane told me the same story regarding the declining state of the industry that others did, about prohibitively high gas prices and the problems with imported shrimp. Gerald expressed how he loved trawling and that he did not want to leave, but the prices had dropped too low in a very short amount of time. Unlike other times when prices had fallen, this time seemed different to him, as rumors swirled among shrimpers that the unprecedented surge of imports would permanently keep the prices low. Around this same time, an acquaintance offered Gerald a job as a seafood wholesaler, and it seemed to him too good to pass up, so he took it. And thus far, he feels as if his decision has paid off, as he is doing quite financially. But despite this, he told me that, “I’d rather be shrimping because that’s what I love to do.”
Clearly, for Gerald and Diane, shrimping was more than a job. Their attachment to the industry crystallized when I asked them to tell me about their boat. “We had a big boat, a beautiful boat,” he told me. They owned the same boat for thirty-three years, and were always sure to perform the yearly maintenance necessary to keep it in good shape. Selling the boat was one of the most difficult parts of leaving the industry, particularly for Diane, who proclaimed, “I was sad. I didn’t want him to get rid of the boat.” At that point in the conversation, she reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. “It’s hard, you know. I have a picture of the boat in my wallet. Wanna see it?” Much as a proud mother might, she showed me the dog-eared, wallet-sized photo of their boat, named after Gerald’s stepfather. And although it had been four years since they sold the boat, she beamed with pride as she described the boats’ features, as if she were bragging about a grandchild. “Losing my boat is like losing a baby. It hurts, you know? Like losing a baby,” Glen explained. To Gerald and Diane, the boat was more than a fishing vessel, or an object that enabled them to make a living. To them, the boat was part of the family. “I really do miss it,” Diane solemnly stated.

As the shrimp fishing industry collapsed, Glen left for a more certain and economically sound employment alternative. And so far, that decision has paid off, as Glen admits that financially, he is doing fairly well in his new job. Given this, it is tempting to regard Glen – and those like him – as one of globalization’s success stories. But by digging a bit deeper into exiters’ perspectives on their transitions out of the industry, I find that even though they are better off financially, they experience exit as a personal tragedy. Unlike the smooth, uneventful transition Hirschman describes, exit turns out to be a complex, painful experience. And although Hirschman recognizes that
exit may carry non-economic costs, so far these costs have not been adequately explored or understood. In this chapter, I use in-depth interviews with those who left shrimping for more lucrative employment opportunities to analyze these non-economic costs. In doing so, I reveal what is lost when deeply-meaningful traditional occupational identities are abandoned.

The Complexity of Exit

Hirschman’s concept of exit is fairly straightforward: when faced with declining organizational conditions, individuals who have alternative options, and no hope that voice will lead to improvements, will exit. Exit therefore prioritizes market forces, and this explains the “economist’s bias in favor of exit and against voice” in accounts of organizational decay. In this way, Hirschman understands exit as a solution to decline. It follows that those who exit are victors over deteriorating conditions, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. For Hirschman, exit is a form of agency that is firmly rooted in interest calculation. Thus, after carefully weighing the economic costs and benefits of exit or non-exit, actors choose the option that maximizes their economic interests.

While Hirschman’s framework has been widely-used to understand decline in a variety of organizational settings, it is not without theoretical shortcomings. First, Hirschman treats exit as a rather simple economic act, akin to walking out of a store or switching brands of laundry detergent (Light 2003). This assumption is replicated in most of the studies that use his framework, best illustrated by the common use of a simple dichotomous measure of exit denoting its presence or absence (Rusbelt et al. 1988). But
in reality, exit is far from a simple or clean act, especially with regards to employment. Exit involves switching to some kind of alternative, and it is unlikely that this transition from one or job to the next is a smooth, clean process. Research on job switching has highlighted the various disruptions associated with transferring jobs, including change of residence, work hours, work roles, or job skills (Brett 1980; Nicholson and West 1988; West et al 1987). These disruptions have been shown to be negatively correlated with self-esteem and well-being, and positively correlated to anxiety and depression levels (Munton and West 1995). Rather than the straight, smooth road Hirschman and those who follow have envisioned, exit more likely resembles a winding road, with many starts, stops, and speed bumps along the way.

Next, by conceptualizing exit as an outcome of an actor’s calculation of market-based costs and benefits, Hirschman also fails to give proper credit to structural forces that operate. In other words, his framework preferences pull factors that induce actors toward exit and away from voice. As a consequence, we are left with an incomplete understanding of the push factors that force exit, even when that option lies outside of an actor’s actual preference set. This oversight raises important questions regarding exit: What about those situations where people who might otherwise want to stay but are pushed out by unfavorable market conditions? What does this tell us about how agency actually functions in cases of exit? Hirschman’s conceptual framework of exit accords individuals with a high degree of agency, when in fact, exit may be the least agential option. Exit turns out to be a complex, painful experience which is in many ways exit less agential and more passive than persisting; those who exit do avoid a tragically doomed
fight against market logic but they do so by allowing the winds of the market to blow them wherever it leads.

Finally, both Hirschman and those who follow have tended to focus on how the individual reacts to organizational decline (e.g., Turnley and Feldman 1999; Naus, van Iterson, and Roe 2007). In doing so, they assume a similarity exists among those who face deteriorating conditions. They therefore have failed to account for how actors’ varied social situations and cultural contexts impact available options. Surely, a great deal of diversity exists among individuals who face organizational deterioration. Moreover, not all individuals have access to the same information.

To his credit, Hirschman does recognize that exit may carry non-economic costs. For example, he cites how “high entry costs” to some organizations – such as family or country of origin – may act as a barrier to exit. But generally, the non-economic costs of exit have gone largely unexplored. My in-depth interviews with those who left shrimping for more lucrative employment opportunities provide a unique opportunity for understanding the non-economic costs of exit by interrogating just what is lost when deeply-meaningful occupational identities are abandoned. And I find that former shrimpers I spoke with are (for the most part) better off financially. But as I will show, they experience exit as a personal tragedy rife with loss, regret, and depression. For them, exit is not an easy solution but it turns out to be a complex and painful experience. These non-economic costs have been underexplored by globalization scholars, and my research therefore contributes to this body of knowledge.

In what follows, I first describe why shrimp fishers were inclined toward exit rather than voice. Their failure to use voice is initially puzzling, as shrimp fishers
(including many in this analysis) have used voice in the past when they perceived their industry was threatened. Why did they fail to use voice this time? Such an exploration is important because in order to fully understand exit, we must also understand why individuals fail to use voice. Next, I show that exiters do fit Hirschman’s model, in that their decisions to exit are grounded primarily in market logic. But, what separates them from those who do not exit? I next answer this question, by highlighting the inequality that exits among shrimp fishers regarding economic – as well as non-economic – consideration. Finally, I explore the outcomes of exit, with specific attention focused upon the non-economic costs.

_Turtles, TEDs, and Sea Planes: Why Voice is Not a Viable Option_

Hirschman’s (1970) concepts of exit and voice are wholly intertwined in what he describes as a “see-saw relationship” (34). Whether one chooses to use voice depends upon several factors. First, Hirschman argues that voice will take a greater role as opportunities for exit decline. In the absence of any exit option, he argues that voice is the only way that dissatisfied individuals can react to the decline.¹³ When equal or better alternatives do exist, he states that the likelihood of voice depends primarily on two factors: 1.) an evaluation that voice efforts (one’s own or others’) will restore conditions to their pre- decline state; and 2.) a judgment that trading the certainty of exit for the uncertainty of voice will be worth the effort.

¹³ I argue in Chapter 5 that Hirschman fails to acknowledge that individuals can develop innovative techniques to adapt to declining circumstances.
Shrimp fishers have a variety of exit options. For those who wish to exit, this is an abundance of well-paying and more certain jobs provided by the offshore oil industry or those industries that support it. Voice, therefore, is an option, but not their *only* option. So why did they choose to forego voice and go straight to exit? When I inquired about the lack of protest activity among shrimpers, many answered trawlers are too independent to come together, or that they are simply too hard-headed to ever reach a consensus. But this explanation is severely lacking, because shrimp fishers have used voice activity in the past when they felt their industry was threatened. Why did so many choose exit over voice this time? In order to fully understand the answer to this question, we must re-visit shrimp fishers’ previous experience with voice efforts.

In 1987, the federal government passed a regulation mandating that all shrimp trawlers install TEDs into their nets. The device is a grid of bars that is fitted into trawl nets to allow the escape of sea turtles – many species that are endangered – that are incidentally taken through trawling. While these devices are effective at reducing the number of turtles caught, trawlers argue that they lose a significant part of their catch through the hole created by the TED. The extent to which shrimpers are upset about pulling TEDs cannot be understated. In order to fully understand why shrimp fishers are so displeased with TEDs, it is necessary to provide the contentious historical background against which TEDs regulations were enacted.

Beginning in the late 1970s, after the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, a number of environmental organizations joined together to raise awareness and request action regarding the threatened or endangered status of many species of sea turtles, especially the Kemp’s Ridley sea turtle, listed as critically
endangered. Because one of the contributing factors to turtle mortality is the unintentional capture of sea turtles in shrimp trawls, shrimp fishers became a target of environmentalists’ political campaign waged to protect the turtles.

Not surprisingly, shrimp fishers did not receive these accusations favorably. They felt unfairly singled out by the environmentalists. While it is incontestable that shrimp trawls sometimes ensnare sea turtles, many trawlers felt it was unfair for them to bear the full brunt of the blame for sea turtle mortality. Often times, they argued, the turtles they caught were unharmed or simply stressed and capable of being fully revived. Trawlers pointed their fingers at the oil and chemical companies, claiming that they were more to blame for the depletion of sea turtles, and that they should share some of the responsibility (Margavio et al. 1996). The debate was highly contentious from the get-go.

Regardless of exactly who was to blame for accelerated sea turtle mortality, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) – the agency in charge of protecting turtles and managing fisheries – was under tremendous pressure to find a solution to the problem of turtle mortality. At first, they attempted to come up with a resolution that would appease both parties. In the late 1970s, they began to experiment with technology that would prevent turtles from being captured in trawl nets. These devices were highly effective at excluding most turtles, but the loss of shrimp – around 30 percent per drag – was much too high to expect trawlers to voluntarily comply. Instead, researchers developed a release device that would allow captured turtles to escape. Although this device had a 97 percent exclusion rate for turtles, shrimpers complained that their heavy weight was dangerous (as the metal TED could hit an unmindful trawler), and that they were still losing a significant part of their catch. Further, many Gulf shrimpers –
especially in Louisiana – argued that they rarely, if ever, caught turtles (McDonald 1990). Many refused to trawl with them.

To accommodate these concerns, a smaller, lighter, and collapsible TED was introduced in 1983. These newer TEDs were also designed to reduce the shrimpers’ overall bycatch, and not just to exclude turtles. Fishery managers believed that trawlers would find this feature appealing, because the less bycatch in the net, the less drag they experience, and the more they could save on fuel. A voluntary program was initiated, and the NMFS agreed to pay for the cost and installation of these TEDs. Despite these efforts, trawlers remained skeptical and opposed to the devices. It soon became obvious that the voluntary program was not working.

Meanwhile, the environmental community along with the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) – a unit of the U.S. Department of the Interior dedicated to the management and preservation of wildlife – increased their pressure on NMFS to make TEDs mandatory instead of voluntary. They argued that by failing to make TEDs mandatory, NMFS was not abiding by the ESA, and they threatened a lawsuit against them. In the fall of 1986, they ramped up their opposition even further. Led by the Center for Marine Conservation, the environmental community served notice of their intention to sue, and warned that if the NMFS did not comply with provisions laid out by the ESA and make TEDs mandatory, the suit would demand complete closure of the shrimp fishery in all U.S. waters (Margavio et al 1996). Not surprisingly, this action greatly intensified the conflict between trawlers and the environmental community. Faced with

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14 And in fact, turtles are more abundant in some areas than others; they are significantly more common off the Florida in the South Atlantic than in Louisiana. Although they are less common, sea turtles can be found in the waters off of Louisiana coast, and therefore all trawlers were subject to the regulations (Margavio et al 1996).
imminent closure, shrimp trawlers’ organizations requested mediation in the hopes that a compromise could be struck. But these negotiations broke down.

In 1987, regulations mandating the use of TEDs were officially enacted. But the conflict was far from over, and a bitter battle between conservationists, state and federal governments, and shrimpers raged on. Shrimpers, particularly in the Gulf and especially Louisiana, were outraged over the regulations. Their biggest complaint was that the laws were enacted with no attention paid to the technical and economic impacts of TEDs for shrimp fishers. And Gulf shrimpers, especially in Louisiana, still complained that they seldom encountered the endangered turtles.\textsuperscript{15} They cited the lack of scientific evidence that could prove one way or the other exactly how many turtles they catch, and how much revenue shrimp fishers lost due to the TEDs. Over the next two years, a series of court battles would be waged. Louisiana shrimpers enjoyed political support from their elected leaders; at one point the Louisiana legislature declared the use of TEDs to be illegal, but this was overturned. They also were successful in postponing the enforcement of TEDs until late July of 1989, in order to allow time for studies to be conducted. Shrimp fishers felt very confident that these studies would vindicate their claims of revenue loss. In line with what Hirschman predicted about voice, they felt very confident that their voice efforts would pay off, and deemed employing voice as worthwhile.

Shrimpers used the time allowed by postponement to grow their opposition movement. They formed an organization called the Concerned Shrimpers of America (CSA). As the date for scheduled enforcement grew nearer, their movement gained momentum. In the early weeks of July 1989, shrimpers staged a series of relatively small

\textsuperscript{15} In Florida, TEDs regulations were passed in 1988. Florida’s waters are more turtle-rich, and therefore there was less opposition from trawlers in these areas.
blockades in shipping lanes along the Louisiana and Texas coasts. These small blockades were planned to lead up to a mass protest to be held the last weekend of July, when the regulations were scheduled to be formally enforced. On this weekend, CSA called for shrimpers from Texas to Florida to head to the closest port to block boat traffic, but they encouraged trawlers to go to Galveston, where their efforts would be focused. On that day, over 400 vessels showed up in Galveston. Boats lined up in formation and blocked port traffic, greatly disrupting commercial shipping (Margavio et al. 1996). When shrimpers refused to disperse, the Coast Guard used water cannons to force shrimpers out, but they remained. In all, the blockade lasted 36 hours, and was called off only after President Bush agreed to review the regulations, which kicked off another series of meetings and legislative actions. Regulations were suspended, then reinstated; injunctions were filed, and then dismissed. Enforcement was delayed once again.

The battle ended a year later, when federal law made trawling without a TED a criminal offense. Fines and penalties for noncompliance were stiff, and shrimpers were forced to observe the laws. Eventually, protest and non-compliance activity subsided, and CSA formally disbanded three years after the blockade.

In 1998, the NMFS mandated the use of bycatch excluder devices, or BRDs, for all trawlers in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico region. BRDs – pronounced “birds” – are similar to the TEDs: they are an opening in the shrimp trawl net that allows finfish and other accidentally captured aquatic animals to escape. When the NMFS enacted the BRD regulations, there was very little organized outrage on the part of Louisiana shrimp fishers. With the TEDs episode fresh on their minds, voice did not seem like an option worth exploring.
Most of the shrimp fishers I spoke with had participated in several of the TEDs blockades, and some protested in Galveston. But even after the 15 or so years that had passed when I spoke with trawlers, they still harbored a great deal of anger about TEDs. Current and ex-trawlers cite the establishment of the TED regulation as the first domino in what would become the eventual decline of trawling. Some trawlers left the industry after the TEDs drama played out, even before the industry began to collapse. The issue is not that they felt as if threatened and endangered species are not worth trying to save. Rather, those I spoke with felt that the regulations had been passed without proper consideration to the impacts on shrimpers; as such, they believe that perhaps a better solution to the problem could have been established. There were two major complaints trawlers had with TEDs: they lose a significant portion of their catch, and they rarely (if ever) caught the Kemp’s Ridley sea turtle that the device is designed to protect.

Nick, 38, got out of the industry in the late 1990s to work in the administrative department of a tug boat company. He got into trawling when he married his wife, whose father owned a trawl boat. But after the TEDs episode, he began to re-think his career as a shrimper, and eventually left for work elsewhere.

The TEDs, that put a big hurting on it. That was the beginning of it for me. But, I don’t know, it’s hard to say what’s what. I knew one trawler, I think he was trawling at that time about 26 years, and he said he caught 2 of ‘em his entire life. And he threw them back overboard. It’s not like the trawl drown them... I mean, they’re losing 20% of their catch every hour for something they catch once in a lifetime. That’s what’s not fair about the study. I trawled for 10 years and I never seen one. [Nick, Exiter]

Even though Nick’s tenure in trawling was short relative to others I spoke with, his experience was much the same.
Albert, age 42, was a former shrimper of 23 years who just put his boat up for sale. I contacted him by calling the number listed on the “for sale” sign on his boat, and he agreed to speak with me about why he decided to leave, and invited me down to his father’s retail store where he was working in the meantime. He had planned to find work as a diesel mechanic, a field in which he had received formal training. I spoke with both Albert and his father, Larry, at the store. He had been a trawler during the battle of TEDs, and participated in several local blockades. The episode left him feeling bitter. He complained that TEDs were inefficient, and often resulted in losses of both volume of catch, and fuel:

They make us pull these TEDs with these big holes in ‘em. Me and you can pass through with no problem. Ok? That’s ridiculous…Cause if you catch a crab trap or something, the flap stays open and everything goes straight out that’s in the bag [trawl net]. You drag it for nothing, you’re burning fuel for nothing. Understand? So, you losin’ that drag. You might pick up five or six bushels of shrimp on that side of the boat, and you might pick this side and there’s a bucket, you know? How that makes you feel about pulling that TED, and you got a crab trap stuck in that damn thing? You drag it 3-4 hours, and you pick that up? I mean, you burn the diesel, it’s gone and there’s nothing you can do about it. And if you tie it closed or if you don’t pull it, the Coast Guard comes and they seize the boat. [Albert, Exit]

What made the TEDs regulations such a hot-button issue for ex-trawlers like Albert and Nick was that they believed that main reason that they had been forced to pull them was baseless. Like Nick, Albert also claimed that normally, he rarely encountered sea turtles: “I saw two turtles two times in 23 years. And it was a Loggerhead both times…. Now, those Ridley turtles? They’re not around here. I’ve never caught one in 23 years,” he
explained. “If this is true,” I replied, “then why do you have to pull TEDs? Wasn’t there research conducted that showed turtles to range in these waters?”

Larry and Albert replied to this question with an unexpected answer that illustrates the hostility and distrust that trawlers experienced during the TEDs battle. They claimed that in the years following the TEDs regulations, when many trawlers were still refusing to pull them, officials from NMFS and the FWS intentionally seeded the inshore waters with Kemp-Ridley sea turtles in an attempt to catch and fine trawlers for catching the endangered turtles.

Larry: The National Marine Fisheries, they passed the law, okay? He [Albert] is trawling in [a nearby lake], which is west of here. A seaplane comes and lands in the water. Guess what they’s throwing out? Turtles! Turtles!

Albert: Dropping the turtles from the plane. I swear to God.

Larry: They all saw ‘em with the binoculars. The deckhands said they was throwing ‘em in the lake.

Albert: I swear to God.

Larry: And then National Marine Fisheries, Wildlife Fisheries, come around and say, “Hey pick up your rig.” Be he never caught turtles before. The turtles are over by the St. Padre Island, because that’s where they lay eggs. Ok. But they busted a bunch of people with the turtles.

Their claim that the U.S. government has actively engaged in acts of sabotage directed toward shrimp fishers is certainly hard to believe, and initially I received this information with skepticism. But over the course of my fieldwork experience, I heard this exact story – or ones very similar – over and over again from both current and ex-trawlers. Mike, an ex-trawler who left the industry three years prior, was particularly adamant in his claims
of turtle plantings. Mike was one of the most active shrimp fishers on the bayou during the TEDs episode. He participated in the blockade at Galveston.

Mike: You see some [sea turtles] once in awhile, lately. Before, when I first started trawling, when I was young, and my daddy was young, you wouldn’t see it. Now, you started seeing them, because they plant them. I was in [a nearby town] trawling, and I saw a sea plane come throw ‘em, the little turtles.

Jill: You saw that yourself?

Mike: Yeah, drop them off. And, uh, in Texas, if the season opens like tonight, tomorrow night, they come with a supply boat - Wildlife and Fisheries and Texas A&M - with cages full of little turtles. They would throw them overboard. We trawl in that. Then, uh, we catch them and they’re dead. And sometimes, it was proved that they would be dead before the season open. Some of them was killed, like, the wheel of the boat ran over them. Or something like that. And, uh, they never caught nobody, well, they mighta caught a few of them doing that. Only some they caught with a turtle in their net, ya know? Besides that, I never heard nothing about people catching turtles.

During most of the conversations I had with current and ex-trawlers, these stories about sea planes dumping turtles would be shared with no provocation. The frequency with which they occurred was surprising, as these accusations of sabotage sounded paranoid and unlikely. During one of my last conversations with Lindel, I asked him if he had heard the rumors about turtle-planting.

The first time I heard it was from Albert and all. The first time I heard that I was like [skeptically], “yeah, maybe.” But then, Mr. Gerald —you know, Mr. Cheramie? — he said he seen it with his own eyes. When he said it, then I kind of believed it. [Lindel, Exiter]

Whether or not these accusations of turtle planting are true is beyond what this analysis is capable of showing. But that so many trawlers believe and pass on these stories is important. These stories hold great significance to getting us closer to an understanding as to why trawlers have failed to use voice tactics – like the blockade – to
fight to save their industry from collapse. The struggle over TEDs had greatly impacted those who lived through that experience. Coming out of it, trawlers were highly distrustful and disdainful of federal agencies and governmental authority figures. Current and former shrimpers with whom I spoke with unanimously lacked faith that decisions affecting the shrimp fishing industry would be made with any consideration of how trawlers might be affected. Their often paranoid distrust of government is manifest through their conviction that those with the authority to make decisions regarding their industry were intentionally acting against trawlers best interest, and trying to push them out of the industry altogether.

For many shrimp fishers, the way that the battle over TEDs played out was a reason for exit. They saw the regulation as an omen that more would come in the future. Lacking any faith that they had any ability to change the course, they decided to tie up their boats and find employment elsewhere. Other shrimp fishers hung on a little longer, remaining in the industry after the crisis began in 2002. But when the crisis hit, many decided to exit instead of engaging in another battle, one in which they had little faith they could win. Therefore, ex-shrimpers fit squarely within Hirschman’s model: in an act of rational self-interest, they exit for better opportunities.

*Jumping Ship for Higher Ground: Exiters and Market Logics*

Through the conversations I had with exiting shrimp fishers, it was clear that their decisions to leave were influenced primarily by market-related factors. Therefore, ex-shrimpers do act in accordance with Hirschman’s model: after a calculation of the
economic costs and benefits of exit, they have chosen on the side of rational self-interest. Through my conversations with ex-trawlers, it was clear that the shrimp crisis – high overhead costs and low dockside prices – was a chief concern of trawlers.

Dave and Lynette, a married couple, had trawled together for most of their married life, almost thirty years. Dave, a third generation shrimp fisher, began trawling with his father when he was a teenager. Lynette’s father had worked as a tugboat captain for most of his life. When Dave and Lynette got married, Lynette’s father encouraged him to procure a captain’s license to use as a back-up to shrimp fishing, as something to fall back on if there was ever a need. Dave obliged, but through the years he worked on tugboats only occasionally. For most of the year – from May until November – he and Lynette trawled mostly the in-shore waters on their fifty-foot steel hull boat. When I asked him what he did during the remaining months of the year, he replied:

If it was a real good year, I like to hunt. I’d go hunting, and then work on my boat. If it wasn’t much of a good year, well, then I’d go to work on the tugboat, go hunt, and then I’d work on the boat. I’m always working on the boat. In February I start getting the boat ready for May. [Dave, Exiter]

Because Dave had a captain’s license, he had the option of working during the off-season to make extra money. But generally, he chose not to. Before the shrimp industry collapsed, there was no financial need to work on the tug, as they could make enough money during the seven months trawling to last until the next season. For Dave – like many other trawlers – hunting was a priority.

But when the industry began to decline, every year became a little more difficult, and Dave found himself working on the tugboat more and more often. Eventually, he realized that he was making more money on the tugboat than he was trawling. The
biggest problem, he and Lynette explained, was the high expense of making a trip, combined with the low prices:

Dave: I remember when the fuel was like 20 cents, 30 cents, 32 cents a gallon, compared to the 2 dollars-plus a gallon that it is now. The ice was 2 or 3 dollars a block. And now, it’s 11.50. The small shrimp, the 80-100s [shrimp per pound], was always right around a dollar a pound, and now it’s 40 cents a pound . . . [W]hen it was good, we’d catch 7 or 800 pounds a day. But we’d have $500 instead of $1500 of expense. We’d get 1.00 or more a pound instead of 40 or 50 cents a pound. Shrimp pays less now than it did twenty years ago, just in raw numbers, not including any kind of adjustments.

Lynette: When you sit there and realize that you’re working for fifty cents a pound, you’re ready to shovel it all overboard.

Dave and Lynette’s frustration with the depressed state of the industry – combined with a viable exit strategy provided by Dave’s captain’s license – eventually led them to put their boat up for sale. It had been three years since they sold their boat, and Dave has been working year-round as a tugboat captain ever since. Lynette is no longer employed.

Concerns regarding the depression of dockside prices were and rising overhead costs were echoed over and over again by both current and former shrimpers. The price of fuel was particularly disconcerting, as its sharp increase had not only affected shrimp fishers’ ability to fill their boats, but it had affected the price of most consumer goods as well. Many exiters complained that the decline had damaged their purchasing power as consumers, such that they were no longer able to maintain the same standard of living. Wendell, a first generation trawler who now worked for a company that equips offshore oil rigs, decided to exit when he realized that he was working harder, but consistently making less:

With shrimping, if you not making the price, you not making the money. But, everything else is going up. When I was doing it, you
could go buy a truck for 10 thousand dollars. You can’t do that now. It’s 35 thousand for a full size truck. The economy is going up, but not the shrimping. It’s not keeping even. And now you gotta get a good catch every time you go out. I couldn’t do it [Wendell, Exiter].

Again, we hear about the significance of pickup trucks to shrimp fishers. Wendell’s inability to afford the cost of a new pickup truck served as a warning to him that the shrimping crisis was significant. He got out in 2002, when he was offered a job by Lindel, a former trawler who was also Wendell’s neighbor.

So far, I have shown that many trawlers chose to exit as a direct result of the TEDs regulations. These individuals perceived the TEDs law as an omen of things to come, and feared an ever-growing number of regulations that would make their work lives more difficult. Other shrimpers hung on after TEDs, but chose to exit – instead of using voice – after the industry began to deteriorate in 2002. And still others have persisted through all of the hardships, and are still trying to make a living, even as their economic futures become ever-more bleak. Why have some decided to exit the industry, while others choose to remain?

**Exiters Vs. Non-Exiters: What Are The Differences?**

Many of the stories shared with me by those who stayed in the industry and those who left – the persisters and the exiters – were identical. Individuals in both groups described in anguished detail how the shrimping crisis and the growing number of regulations threatened the continued existence of the industry. Both groups cited how in order to survive in the industry, shrimpers must deal with working harder and harder for less and
less. And both groups described how the decline of the industry affected them physically and emotionally, sometimes affecting their relationships with family and friends. Why, then, do individuals who share common experiences with occupational decline respond so differently? Why might some exit, while others persist?

Armed with assumptions drawn from previous research on economic survival strategies, I presumed that the answer to these questions may likely be found by examining the varied economic contexts of persisters and exiters. Rural sociologists who study small-scale or family farmers have highlighted various ways that farmers have attempted to adapt to the farm crisis. Relying on a spouse’s income, working a greater number hours, and cutting back on household expenditures are all ways that farmers have adjusted their practices in order to continue farming (Moen and Wethington 1992; Meyer and Lobao 2003; Lamphere 1987). Therefore, farmers who do not have a spouse that can contribute to the household income – or those who carry a higher debt load – are in a less advantageous position to continue farming than those who may have those benefits.

After re-visiting the interview transcripts, it became clear that both exiters and persisters make decisions with economic considerations in mind. For example, some persisters had wives who were employed outside of the industry, had boats that were completely paid off, or had no dependents at home. But I also found persisters who did not having working spouses and who are still paying off their boats. Many persisters still had children at home, whereas some exiters chose to exit well after their children were fully grown. Although economic considerations surely explain some of the difference in understanding decisions to exit or remain, there was no definite pattern that existed
among those I spoke with to say for certain that economic context alone— or even primarily— determines whether one will stay in or exit.

I went back to the transcripts to look for differences that may provide a more complete explanation of the differences between persisters and exiters. And upon closer examination, I found that there was a clear pattern linking family history with the decision to remain in the industry. I found that exiters’ familial roots in the industry did not go nearly as deep as the persisters. Of the seventeen exiters I spoke with, only six were second generation or more. In other words, only six exiters had fathers or grandfathers who also worked as shrimpers. Most of the remaining exiters were men who married women whose fathers had trawled, and they took up the craft only after they got married. In contrast, all of the persisters were at least second generation or more, and most of them had roots that went three or four generations deep.

In addition to economic considerations, I argue that having a deeper personal and cultural investment in the industry acts as a significant barrier to exit. Lifelong, multi-generational trawlers have accumulated a lifetime of experiences that are grounded in the basis of the work that has historically been performed by family members. Family relations have been powerful in shaping their sense of purpose, and the meanings attached to their everyday lives. And because shrimp fishing is a locally-specific occupation, their understanding of community is also understood largely on the basis of work. As such, their stake in the continuation of shrimp fishing is likely greater than those individuals whose family histories are grounded in other occupations, like the oil or one of its attendant industries.
The Costs and Consequences of Exit

Despite the vast amount of research attempting to replicate or extend Hirschman, so far few have used an ethnographic approach (for an exception see Hoffman 2006). Most of these empirical studies have conceptualized exit as a singular event: actors either exit or they do not. Exit, however, is not merely an outcome. Depending upon the type of organizational deterioration one is experiencing (i.e., switching brands of soap vs. switching occupations or romantic partners), exiting for an alternative may be fraught with complications (Light 2003). Because few have studied exit as a process, we know very little about the causes or consequences of exit (Dowding et al. 2000). In-depth interviews with ex-trawlers living on Bayou Crevette provide a unique and valuable opportunity to explore the repercussions of choosing to exit.

The Benefits of Exit

Many ex-trawlers cited the benefits and improvements they have experienced in their work lives since they left the industry. Those who left for jobs associated with the oil industry are by and large faring quite well financially. For example, Lindel, age 40, a first generation trawler, left the industry to work for a company that supplies offshore oil rigs with specialized equipment. His father was not a trawler, but when he was in high school he worked as a deckhand on neighbors’ and relatives’ shrimp boats. Right after high school he got a job working as a deckhand for a tugboat company, and continued to work on trawl boats when he was needed. When he met his wife, her father was a lifelong
trawler, and he helped Lindel transition to becoming a full-time trawler. But Lindel continued to work the off-season in the oil industry to make extra money. When I asked why him why decided to finally leave shrimp fishing behind, he replied:

Probably when I started making more money in the oil fields. That’s probably it, when I started making more money. And there were times in shrimping I was doing real well, like I said, you know, in ten days I made like $5,000. And, I can’t do that here [in his current job]. But I’m doing real good here. But that [$5,000 in ten days] was when it was good at that time. This job is a steady check now. There’s no guessing, like in trawling. You know? [Lindel, Exiter]

By continuing to work in the oil industry even after trawling full-time, Lindel maintained his connections to the industry. When he decided to leave trawling, he used these connections to find a job in the company for which he now worked. And since joining the company, he moved up the ranks fairly quickly, and was the head manager of operations when I spoke with him.

Lindel cited the many benefits of working for his company. In addition to receiving a steady paycheck - mentioned in the above quote – he cited numerous other benefits to exit.

The benefits? Well, I think that workin’ with a company like what we’re working for, we got like the option for hospitalization, a retirement plan, we got safety bonuses. We got, uh, some program where every quarter, or every three months we get performance bonuses. So, for our company, depending on what people make, we get a bonus every 3 months. That’s one thing, as a trawler, the only bonus you gettin’ is some fish and some crabs! But, that’s pretty much it. [Lindel, Exiter]

Because shrimp fishing on Bayou Crevette is primarily an owner-operator venture, shrimpers receive no health benefits or pension plans. They must pay their insurance
costs completely out-of-pocket, a reality that persists – like Daniel and his wife Caroline – readily recognize.

Daniel: I don’t want to know how much a year I pay in insurance. You got health, car, boat.

Caroline: I feel like I’m writing a check every other week for insurance.

Daniel: One thing good about working for a big company is just for the insurance, sometimes. We’re up to $700 and something a month, for all of us. Seven hundred and something for health insurance. Some guy might have a little job making 2-3 hundred dollars a week, but they have insurance. Couple hundred dollars a week, but the company pays for the insurance.

Employer-provided benefits were just one advantage of exit that ex-trawlers cited. As I previously discussed, family is central to Cajun culture. Because it has become less common for entire families to trawl together, being out on the boat requires trawlers to spend time away from their families. This is especially true for those with larger boats that trawl further out into the Gulf. Both Lindel and his co-worker Kurt trawled on larger shrimp fishing vessels, and often they were gone for up to twenty days at a time.

Kurt: You gotta put more hours into it. More hours in the day, the day and night, you do what you gotta do.

Lindel: And also, you know he trawled on big boats and I trawled on big boats and, I know we used to leave the dock and go out like 15 or 20 days, that’s like 15 or 20 boxes [or 2,000 pounds of shrimp] a day. You would stop, throw and anchor, and check the engine, and change the oil and you’re back at it again. It’s rough.

Researcher: Do you think with this kind of work you get to spend more time with your family?

Lindel: Oh, definitely. For sure.
Other trawlers also cited more family time as an advantage of exit. This was particularly important to Jack, a third generation trawler who got out of the industry in the 1990s after the TEDs regulations were passed. While he started out trawling on smaller, wooden boats mainly in the in-shore waters, he eventually purchased a larger, steel trawl boat that allowed him to trawl year-round in the Gulf. While he made a very comfortable living as a trawler, it required him to be away from his family for long periods of time.

When we were shrimping, a long trip was 30 days. We stayed 30 days. And a lot of times, I’d make a trip, say in the Texas area. I’d go my 30 days, unload my shrimp, I’d get ice or whatever I needed, and I’d make another trip and come home. Sometimes it takes me 60 days before I’d come home. That’s just the way we worked in those days. That’s the way my dad worked. My dad didn’t have the boats we had, he had a wooden boat. It wasn’t as good. They could hold shrimp probably 10 to 12 days…When we went from the wooden boats to the steel boats, we could carry a lot more fuel, better insulated boats, the ice would last longer. We went from staying 10 days offshore to staying 30 days offshore. Instead of coming to the dock 3 times a month, we coming to the dock once a month. We made real good money in the 60s and 70s because of the amount of time we spent on the boats. My wife and I went 19 weeks, I was home 2 nights in 19 weeks. That’s what I had to do. That’s where I made my living, that was the only thing I knew. [Jack, Exiter]

After the TEDs regulations, Jack began to worry about the industry’s future. He sensed that trawling was going to become more difficult in the future. Eventually, he was approached by an oil field representative about using his trawl boat to remove debris when offshore oil rigs were dismantled. As he explained, “Once they remove a platform, we’re supposed to sonar it and dive on it. You get a trawler to trawl the area, in a mile radius, to make sure all the debris has been picked up.” Oil companies paid him handsomely for his services, and eventually he became involved in site-clearance full-
time. After almost a decade, he developed his own company that builds trawl new boats – and transforms old trawl boats – to perform site clearance duties. While his five children are all full-grown, his wife works at the company, and he enjoys being able to spend time with her throughout the day.

The Costs of Exit

Relying on Using Hirschman’s framework, exiting for a better or equivalent standard of living is understood as successful outcome: once individuals exit, they are no longer considered in his model. And as I have shown, the benefits that ex-shrimpers have enjoyed since exiting the industry. But to stop there and declare exiters the victors of globalization – those brave souls who rode the waves of globalization to dry ground – would be an act of imprecision. By probing on a deeper level how ex-trawlers perceive their transition out of the industry, I spotlight important non-economic costs that are overlooked in accounts of exit. Ex-shrimpers’ social situations and cultural contexts shape the process of exit, and the outcomes are not always favorable.

As discussed in Chapter 3, many persisting shrimpers are reluctant to exit the industry because they are accustomed to the freedom and flexibility that accompanies being “my own boss.” As owners of their own vessels, shrimp fishers are in charge of making all of the decisions relating to the production process. Leaving the industry behind would likely entail moving from self-employment to waged labor, a process known as proletarianization. In this way, shrimpers are similar to family-based farmers, who also tout the advantages of being their own bosses (see Mooney 1988). Previous
research on the decline of family farms has shown how farmers’ reluctance to obtain waged employment is significant to understanding why they continue to work harder for less (Nelson and Smith 1999).

Indeed, many ex-shrimpers admit that they would prefer to be their own boss. Admittedly, when I inquired about the loss of autonomy involved with waged labor, many exiters replied with statements about the benefits of waged employment, rather than acknowledge the loss of self-sufficiency. But some exiters stated that they have been able to maintain that sense of autonomy in their newer positions. This is especially true with regard to tug boat captains, who are at the top of the on-board hierarchy.

Dave: You a captain, you’re the boss of the boat. Now, you take orders from the office where you work for, like, take this barge and go over there and load it. But, you know, you gotta run the boat. You’re in charge of the boat.

Jill: So, do you perceive yourself as still maintaining a semblance of being your own boss?

Dave: Yes. The only thing, I can’t get off the boat when I want. I work a schedule, 7 and 7. Seven days on and 7 days off.

While Dave admits that he lacks full control over the conditions of his employment – such as when he chooses to work – he still perceives himself as the boss; he is, after all, the captain of the ship, so to speak. And the work itself is considerably easier than the back-breaking labor that shrimp fishing requires. Based upon this, some might rush to the judgment that Dave is truly a victor of decline: he found new employment and still maintained the sense of autonomy that so many farmers and fishers fear losing. Was Dave really victorious? I followed up my question by asking him if despite all of these
benefits, he’d rather be trawling. He replied, “Well sure. No doubt about it. Cause it’s in my blood.”

Lindel also enjoyed a management position at his company. He is the most highly ranked among those in his office; he is therefore in charge of all of the others. He sets the schedules, is in charge of hiring and firing, and has considerable say over day-to-day operations. He is paid very well, and noted that “When we were younger, if you ask us if we’d be making the money that we are now, I’d laugh.” Most of his days are spent working behind a desk, which, when compared to shrimping, is on the other end of the physical labor spectrum. Even given his cushy workplace conditions, he still noted that:

As far as doing it and liking it, I’d much rather trawl then do what I’m doing now. Even though over here, you come to work, you’re guaranteed a check. You go out on your shrimp boat, you’re not guaranteed. You gotta go out and catch shrimp. [Lindel, Exiter]

These statements indicate that while proletarianization may be considered a deterrent – and cost – of exit, it fails to fully capture the full extent as to what is lost upon exit. These costs involve the cultural and social aspects of shrimp fishing.

I spoke with Albert at his father’s supply store on a balmy July day. He had only recently decided to get out of the industry, and put his boat up for sale just a few weeks prior to our conversation. He explained that he went out trawling for the opening of the May season that year, hoping that he would do well enough to want to continue on in the industry. The previous year had been a particularly bad year; he hardly made enough to break even and pay his debts. When the season ended, he questioned whether or not he should even try to make the May season. He even put it up for sale. But when spring began to break, he decided to give it one last try, to see if he could make enough to
convince himself that he should stick it out. He hoped to take the “for sale” sign off of his boat. He embarked on the spring ritual of getting his boat ready for May: he made sure the engine was properly functioning, applied a new coat of paint, repaired nets and hardware. He was aware that this might be the last time he made a trip with his boat that he owned for twenty-two years.

About a week before him and his two deckhands embarked, Albert noted the dockside price of shrimp. For the size of shrimp he thought he may catch the most of – the 80-100s or 80 to 100 shrimp per pound – the docks were offering about a dollar per pound. While that was a lower price than had been offered in the past, he deemed that price to be worth the effort. But he explained that the day before the opening:

They [the dock owners] dropped it down to 30 and 40 cents a pound. You gotta fill that boat up just to pay the expense, and to make just a couple of dollars. It’s almost like, you know, I’m not even going to go to the opening, you know, I gotta fill the boat twice just to pay for the expense! You know? So. It’s to that point. You can see where it’s at, huh? In the toilet. [Albert, Exiter]

Despite this, he and his two deckhands left on opening day, and stayed out for almost a week. And although they caught shrimp, the price was simply not high enough to cover his expenses. When they came back, he decided that he could no longer make it. He left the “for sale” sign on his boat.

Leaving shrimp fishing was something he never thought he would do. As he explained to me his connection to his boat, he became visibly upset, and broke down into tears.

My dad and my grandpa built that boat for me. And I never wanted to sell my boat. So I built it with the best stuff I could, you know? [begins to cry] Grandpa died. But, I built this to keep. It was never intention on selling this. Like I told you, when we first started
shrimping, and I built that boat in ’85, and we used to go out and we was getting paid like $1.50 for 40-50s [shrimp per pound], and it even went up to 2.40 and 2.50 for 40-50s. Right now, I think it’s 80 cents. And it goes down, it doesn’t go up. Nothing goes up... [Albert, Exiter]

Much like Gerald and Diane – whose story opened this chapter – Albert’s was deeply attached to his boat. The boat not only provided him with a good living for most of the years he trawled with it, but it also symbolized his connections to family and heritage. Albert was very close with his grandfather, for whom the boat was named. His grandfather was the one to teach Albert to shrimp. Albert’s father was never a trawler; he had owned his own store for most of his adult life. But when Albert was little, he would trawl with his grandfather. Albert loved to trawl, and when he graduated high school, his father and grandfather pulled together the funds to build Albert his own boat. Eventually, his grandfather became too old to trawl on his own, so he would ride along with Albert, offering what assistance he could. Later in the conversation, Albert pulled out old photographs that depicted some of their most successful trips on-board the boat.

Albert was working in his father’s retail store for the time being, and planned on finding work as a diesel mechanic. Years ago, he had become certified as a diesel mechanic, not to use as a back-up to shrimp fishing, but so that he’d be able to work on his own engine. But the certification would now come in handy; he was confident that he’d eventually find a decent job. But in the event that he did find another form of employment, it would be inaccurate to depict him as a success story, as a victor over the foe of occupational decline. Trawling was more than an occupation for Albert.

Once it’s in your blood, it’s hard to get it out. You know, it’s, if I could be doing it, I’d be doing it right now. [Albert, Exiter]
Other exiters also shared their experiences of pain and loss as they transitioned out of the industry. Lynette and Dave also experienced difficulty with reaching their decision to exit, as well as with selling the boat. Lynette and Dave were both in the early fifties, and had been married for over thirty years. Together they had three children, two sons and a daughter. One son was a mechanic, and the other one had a job in the oil industry. As mentioned above, Dave received his captain’s license years ago, when he and Lynette first got married. He sometimes worked as a tug boat captain in the off-season, mostly to make a few extra dollars to get them through until the next year. His experience on the tug boats made it easier when he decided to quit shrimping and work on the tugs full-time. But this does not mean that it was easy.

For Lynette and Dave, like many of the ex-trawlers, the most difficult part of leaving the industry was selling their boat. Lynette and Dave had a particularly strong attachment to their boat, as they built it using the money they received when their only daughter met her tragic fate.

Lynette: The boat was named after my daughter. And she was killed in a car accident. So, when that happened that’s when he bought the boat.

Dave: The insurance money, I bought the boat with that.

Lynette: And it was named after her, it was the Miss [Daughter’s Name]. That was her name.

Dave: She didn’t want me to sell it. But, it was costing me money to keep it every year in front of the house when it wasn’t making no money. I said, I gotta let it go. I didn’t get what I wanted for it.

Lynette: No, he gave it away.
Their boat not only symbolized their independence and cultural heritage, but it also directly symbolized their daughter. From the tragedy that took their daughter’s life, they were able to build the boat that they always wanted, and on which they presumed they would trawl for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps the most difficult part for Lynette was hearing what happened to the boat after they sold it. They sold their boat to an individual who was not from their community, but from one about an hour away. They considered this a blessing, because they did not want to be reminded of the boat; it would have been difficult for them to have to drive by it on a regular basis. Her son works near that community, and would often see the boat.

Lynette: And I tell you what, the story that [her son] told me about the boat…

Dave: Ah, don’t worry about it. That’s him, now.

Lynette: It breaks my heart because the guy who bought it just about destroyed the whole boat already.

Dave: Tore the boat up.

Lynette: Oh yeah, [her son] said that he saw that boat. He said, “Mom, you’d have died if you seen that boat.” I said, “I don’t want to hear anymore.” We took care of it. I mean, that was the home away from home, you know.

Dave: That right there, had air conditioning, hot water heater, a stove. The only thing we didn’t have was an icebox. We lived out of ice chests. But it was home away from home.

For trawlers, their boats often hold a value that goes beyond a dollar amount. Often this is symbolized by how trawlers choose to name their boats; many boats are named after specific family members, or in reference to family history of some sort (i.e., one trawlers’
fathers’ boat was named after the trawlers’ favorite TV show as a child). While it is possible for them to put a price tag on their boats through the selling process, it is impossible to quantify boats’ true value.

**Conclusion**

If we did not fully understand the process and consequences of exit for shrimp fishers, we might be tempted to consider them as triumphant over the formidable forces globalization and occupational decline. After all, they appear to fit squarely into Hirschman’s model: As their industry began to decline, and where they deemed voice an unsuitable option, shrimp fishers exited for better opportunities. And, at face value, their decisions appear to be paying off financially. But unlike most studies that use Hirschman’s framework, I use ethnographic data to study exit as a *process* rather than an *outcome*. By studying the process of exit, I add important insight into Hirschman’s model.

I explore why some individuals choose to exit, while others remain faithful to the craft, even in the face of mounting hardships: What makes these two groups of shrimpers different? Naturally, exiters and persisters run through a series of economic calculations when deciding whether to stay or exit. Economic factors – such as a working spouse or a lower debt load – surely make it easier (or more difficult) to stay in, regardless of what and actor truly desires. But I show that economic factors do not fully explain why some choose to exit and some choose to stay. Instead, I argue that we must also look to non-economic factors – such as familial connections to the industry – in order to understand why some exit, while others do not.
Through in-depth interviews with exiters, I also uncover important non-economic costs of exit. I show that these individuals did not arrive at their decisions to exit lightly; rather, the decision was made only after considerable deliberation. And although many are enjoying the financial benefits of their decisions, they have also experienced real loss. These non-economic costs have been underexplored by critics of globalization who tend to focus on the more visible victims of globalization, such as unemployed and/or displaced factory workers. Nonmarket costs have also been minimized by globalization proponents, who wish to view free movement of labor as a positive feature. By focusing on these ex-shrimpers, my research adds the insight that non-economic costs of industrial decline and economic dislocation – that are part and parcel of globalization processes – can be as important to those affected as the economic costs.
CHAPTER 3

STRUGGLING TO STAY AFLOAT: NONMARKET FORCES AND OUTCOMES OF OCCUPATIONAL DECLINE

“I never had so many heart aches in my life. Never so many heart aches in my life, like trawling is. If there’s a hundred things about trawling, probably 80-90% stabs you through the heart like a vampire with a stick…But, when you can win that one or two or three times, it pumps you up! It’s the greatest thing you will ever see. It’s an addiction. I love it.” Glen H., Persister

Glen, a bearded and very tanned man in his mid-40s, is a 3rd generation trawler who began trawling with his father and older brothers when he was just six years old. Glen is known for being an outspoken personality; just about every current and ex-shrimper I spoke with recommended him as somebody from whom I would gain a rich understanding of the present state of the industry. “Glen will tell you like it is, he don’t hold back nothing. You’ll be entertained, yeah,” remarked one trawler. When I met with Glen at his house, his big personality was immediately present. As I pulled up in the driveway, he was just finishing up mowing the sprawling field he owned that sat across the road from his house. Before the formal interview began, he insisted that he show me around his property – stretching over five acres – that bordered a canal brimming with fish, alligator, crabs, frogs, and nutria rat (a non-native and problematic rodent). He proudly boasted about how he and his 7 year-old son regularly caught their nightly meals from this canal, including the catfish dinner he later prepared for me.
Like most of the other community members I met, Glen was intensely proud of his cultural heritage as a Cajun, which, like others, he associated with a high degree of self-sufficiency and independence: “We can literally live off the land,” he remarked. But only a short time after meeting him, two other sentiments became evident: he was very angry about the current state of the industry, and very pessimistic about its future. Much of our conversation was spent discussing the industry’s troubles. He explained to me in colorful detail the hardships and emotional strain he has experienced since the collapse of the industry began only five years earlier. But when I asked if he had plans to leave the industry, he remarked that he would stay in as long as he could, as bleak as the prospects were.

His dogged refusal to exit was puzzling, especially given the abundance of job opportunities that were available right down the road. Moreover, he was no stranger to working in the oil industry. As a young man in his early 20s, he worked for a few years on the tugs. He had a valid captain’s license, which was necessary to work on the tug as a captain, and from time to time would return when extra money was needed, not uncommon among shrimp fishers. He knew from experience that working on the tug boats was not only quite lucrative, but when compared to shrimp fishing, it was much easier on the body. Talking about the last time he’d worked on the tug a few years back, he said, “My hands turned back like a woman’s, ‘cause I didn’t trawl in a year, almost a year. Normally trawling, it’s like you have some barnacles on your hands…’cause you always pulling on ropes, you always pulling, you always doing something. It’s hard on your body.”
Why would Glen – and others like him – choose to remain in a dying industry, when it comes with economic, personal, and family struggles? In this chapter, I answer this question by exploring the relationship between work, place, and identity. First, I document the severity of the shrimp fishing crisis for shrimp fishers and their families. I show how in order to remain afloat, shrimpers are working harder for harder for less and less, all the while having to make important sacrifices and dealing with emotional instability that negatively impacts personal and familial relationships. Next, by interrogating Hirschman’s concept of loyalty, I show how non-economic factors significantly play into shrimp fishers’ decisions to remain in the industry. These factors are often dismissed or ignored by globalization scholars. Exploring on a deep level the loyalty of shrimpers, and the meanings they attach to their life-worlds, shows us that their stubborn resistance to globalization is not an irrational act, but is instead highly rational. Last, something about how they are globalization’s martyrs.

*After The Collapse: The Difficulties of Staying Afloat*

Over the course of the two summers I spent in the field, I heard numerous stories of pain and hardship from current and former shrimpers alike. The shrimp industry began to decline around 2002, and almost immediately, shrimpers felt the negative impacts. Among the most noticeable consequences for trawlers was the dramatic drop in dockside prices over a short period of time.

Glen illustrated just how dramatic this drop in prices has been for shrimpers. Glen has one of the larger boats on the bayou, measuring around 60 feet. The larger boat size
permits him to trawl farther out in the Gulf than those with smaller boats, although he mainly sticks to the inland waters. And while larger boats enable a fisher to produce more shrimp, they are more expensive to operate. Glen often trawls alongside his friend Arty, who he has known since the early days of his youth. Both of them began trawling before they graduated from high school. He spoke with great assurance about his ability as a shrimp fisher; he perceived him and Arty to be among the most highly skilled shrimpers on the bayou. But the pride and confidence that characterized much of the interview frequently gave way to frustration. He told me - with anger in his voice – about an outing the previous year:

Last year, last season, in 4 days and 4 nights we hardly slept, we put 230 boxes, that’s 23,000 lbs of shrimp in my boat in 4 days [a box of shrimp weighs 100 pounds]. A number of years back that would have been $30,000 in 4 days. [The shrimp buyer] tells me, he said, “Oh Glen! You and Arty are my best fishers. Look what you brought in, in 4 days for the shrimp buyers!” He said that we’re his best trawlers. But the check he gave was for $16,000. It should have been a $30,000 check, it would have been in years past.

Accounts like this one were consistent among persisting shrimpers, no matter the size of boat.

Raymond and Ellen are a married couple who have trawled most of their married lives together. They are both 3rd generation shrimp fishers who learned the craft from their fathers and grandfathers when they were children. They trawled together for a few years after they got married, and even continued to do so after they had children. But while their children were still young, Ellen was diagnosed with cancer. After the diagnosis, Raymond obtained a “land job” working offshore on an oil rig “in case, uh, well, you know.” And even then, they purchased a small shrimp vessel – a Lafitte skiff
that measured around 15 feet long – so that they could still catch some shrimp to stock away in the freezer, which Raymond and his son did on his days off. Eventually, Ellen overcame the cancer and regained her strength and wanted to return to the shrimp industry, and 23 years ago they purchased their boat. Raymond grew up working on larger boats – like the one Glen owned – with his father, but because of Ellen’s illness, they decided to buy a somewhat smaller boat that measured 42 feet. They mainly trawl the inland lakes, and do not venture into the Gulf often. But even though they have a smaller boat, they still must work harder to maintain the same standard of living.

Raymond remarked:

[In years past] I would trawl for 40 pounds, 50 pounds of shrimp per drag. That’s all I’d need to do. The price was there, they paid us, and the expenses were low. Now, no. Now, you gotta catch a lot of shrimp…I figure about, right now, you gotta catch about 150 to 200 pounds per drag. You gotta at least average that. One drag you might make less, but the morning drag or afternoon drag might be extra good, so it, uh, accumulates. It has to average 150 pounds. You gotta do at least that much for it to pay. [Raymond, Persister]

The drop in dockside prices alone is enough to call into question the possibility of continuing on in the industry. But along with declining prices has come a sharp increase in overhead costs. This increase is driven mostly by rising fuel prices, which have bumped up the price of ice, groceries, and other supplies, like hardware and engine repair. This worrisome combination – falling prices and rising costs – has made it especially difficult to remain viable.

I met J.T. and Donny as they worked on getting J.T.’s boat ready for the next trip out. Both lifelong trawlers in their early 40s, they have known each other their entire lives. Their grandfathers and fathers all worker their lives as shrimp fishers, and were
close friends. J.T and Donny continued the tradition of friendship; they grew up on their fathers’ boats, learning how to trawl together. Now neighbors, each man owned his own boat. Like other persisters, they described how the industry had recently changed, and how much harder it had become. They were particularly concerned with the rising overhead costs. J.T. remarked:

I’m in a situation where I’m in a bind. And, if the price keeps on falling, and the price of diesel fuel keeps going up, we ain’t gonna be able to operate. Right now on this day, stuff is good, but if the shrimp gets real less, where you only catch 2-3 hundred pounds a day, we can’t make it. No way... With insurance and all, or breakdowns. I mean, the expense of diesel fuel, ice and groceries, and net repairs. If you lose a rig, that’s it. Me, I pull aluminum trawl boards, those boards I pull, that’s $5,000 a set. That’s pretty expensive. People don’t understand, it costs us to operate these boats. [J.T., Persister]

Across the board, persisters shared with me their concerns regarding escalating costs and lower shrimp prices. Another theme that remained consistent among persisters involved the employment of deckhands, or those individuals who go out with the trawlers to lend their efforts to catching shrimp. Sometimes deckhands are the sons or relatives of the trawler. Indeed, most trawlers cut their teeth as deckhands before they go on to own their own boats. Other times, deckhands are roustabouts who go boat-to-boat inquiring about employment prospects. Still other times, trawlers in need of a deckhand informally spread the word regarding their need, and they find deckhands on a word-of-mouth basis. The larger the boat, the more help is required: Glen and J.T. both have larger boats, and typically have 2 deckhands; Raymond and Ellen, who own a smaller boat, serve as each other’s deckhands; and Donny usually works with one deckhand. Deckhands are an important resource for shrimp fishers, as shrimping is difficult work. The more help one has, the more they usually able to catch.
Deckhands are paid a certain percentage of the total amount of the catch. When shrimping was in its heyday, working as a deckhand provided a pretty decent living for those who did it full-time. And when the season is at its busiest – usually during the first weekend or two of the season – the demand for extra help can serve as a quick way to make money for those who wish to make a few extra dollars. I was familiar with the fast-money nature of serving as a deckhand from my experience as an AmeriCorps member. During that year, two of my co-workers (who were brothers) worked as deckhands on their uncle’s boat for the opening of the May season, the busiest time of the year. Before they left for a weekend drag, one of them boasted about how much money he would probably make in just a few short days. But he was well-known for telling tall tales, and I more or less dismissed his claim as just another one of his exaggerations. When he showed up to the office for work on Monday morning, he gleefully pulled me aside to show me his weekend earnings: a thick wad of money that he said totaled $1300, earned for three days’ work. Being that AmeriCorps members received a wee pittance for a stipend, I felt quite envious of his newly-acquired wealth, as well as a little guilty for dismissing his claim. Although he was visibly excited by the money, he noted that he expected to make a bit more, and has earned upwards of $2000 in a weekend in the past. “How can I get on one of those boats?” I asked.

The collapse of the industry has had several significant consequences for both deckhands and trawlers. First, deckhands are quite an expense for trawlers. Not only must fishers pay deckhands a proportion of their catch, but (for long-term, steady deckhands) they must also take out health insurance to guard against the cost of a possible injury. And in recent years, as the industry has decline, the cost of health insurance has
continued to soar. Before the collapse, when shrimping was lucrative, deckhands earned a pretty decent living. It was common for a deckhand to work season after season on the same shrimp boat. In this way, shrimp fishers and deckhands forged relationships – and sometimes friendships – built on mutual respect and hard work. Having a good, reliable deckhand is highly important, and when they are found, shrimp fishers hold on to them as long as they can. J.T., who trawls with two deckhands, has formed close relationships with both of them. The collapse of shrimping, however, has hit him hard, and he worried that he would have to let one go to try to cut back on expenses:

We got crews to take care of, they’re good guys…With this boat, I don’t just feed my family, I feed 3 families. You gotta make money to feed 3 families. And it’s hard. I don’t know if I can do it no more, and it bothers me. [J.T., Persister].

In addition to his own family, J.T. also felt responsible for the economic well-being of his deckhands’ families. With each unsuccessful trip out, he knows that there are others besides his own family who suffer the consequences. For J.T., letting go of a deckhand would not only result in more work for him, but it would result in unemployment for a friend.

Shrimping’s collapse has also made it difficult for deckhands to earn a living, and as a result, many deckhands have chosen to find employment elsewhere. Why do deckhands follow the logic of Hirschman’s model, exiting for better opportunities, while many trawlers do not? After all, both perform the same basic duties on-board the boat, working equally as hard toward the goal of netting the highest possible quantity of shrimp. Yet there are important differences between deckhands and trawlers that lead to dissimilarities in levels of investment each has in the industry. One primary factor
contributing to differences involves boat ownership. Like other productive enterprises, the division of labor is based primarily on ownership: trawlers have more power and authority than deckhands. Deckhands are hired by and answer to trawlers, who are in turn their own bosses, a benefit of trawling cited time and again by shrimp fishers. Deckhands, therefore, do not have the same type of economic investment in the industry. For them, it is much easier to walk away.

But there are important non-market differences to consider as well. Many deckhands did not grow up in trawling families. Rather, they work as roustabouts, or laborers who travel around and perform temporary work. Sometimes they are lifelong residents of the bayou, but other times they have drifted into town to find employment in oil, and end up working as a deckhand on the side, a phenomenon that is becoming more and more common as sons and other younger relatives choose not to go into shrimping.

Because deckhands are now choosing more often to work in the oil fields, trawlers currently have a difficult time finding and keeping those who are dependable and hardworking:

Right now, we have problems getting deckhands. ‘Cause before to go work on the tugboat or in the oil industry, as like a deck hand or a roustabout, it don’t pay that much. You understand? So before they could make more money on the shrimp boat. So it was easy to come by a deckhand. Nowadays you could make more money on a tug or in the oilfield as a roustabout than workin’ on the shrimp boat, so it’s harder to find people that wanna work. [Teddy, Persister]

This issue was particularly troubling to Daniel, age 44, who was a 4th generation trawler. Daniel owns and operates a 57 foot boat that requires the help of two deckhands.

Recently, he had a string of bad luck with finding and keeping deckhands. The problem, he told me, was that the deckhands who could be depended on to show up and work hard
are more and more often choosing to go work offshore in the oil industry. Moreover, those who are left in the pool of available deckhands are often those who cannot find work elsewhere because of dependency issues or criminal records:

Yeah, the deckhands you find now, they can’t go find a job nowhere else. They can’t take no drug screen and all that. Most of them, you know. There’s still some that are good. But I would say 90% of them, not good. They can’t find no other job. [Daniel B., Persister]

When I spoke with Daniel, he was preparing to leave the next day for a week out on the shrimp boat. He was apprehensive because he was to take two new deckhands with him. He was very pleased with his previous deckhand who worked with him for almost three years, but a heart problem – the man was about 60 years old – forced him to quit. He was apprehensive of one of the new deckhands, because he was “a young kid and he had just been kicked out of the Army”, but this was one of the only people he could find that was willing to work.

Trust is a major sticking point to shrimp fishers. Many trawlers are reluctant to hire a deckhand with whom they are unfamiliar. If trawlers do not find a deckhand that they personally know, they are often found through recommendations of other trawlers they trust. Other trawlers refuse to hire a deckhand with whom they are not familiar.

During a recent outing, Paul, a 3rd generation trawler also in his mid-40s, opted to go out with only one deckhand instead of his usual two, because he could not find someone that he knew and trusted was willing to work.

I can’t find a guy to work for me…Somebody I don’t know I won’t work with because they might cut your throat while you’re sleeping and take your boat… I lose a lot on trips when I don’t have a deckhand. And since Katrina, nobody wants to work. [Paul, Persister]
Not only do trawlers worry that deckhand they hire might be lazy or unable to perform the strenuous job duties, but they also worry about deckhands’ characters, and whether they can be trusted to not steal, or worse. Trust is so important to Paul that he accepted the consequences of being short a deckhand: more work.

In addition to industry-related struggles—working harder for less, dealing with increased overhead costs, difficulty finding and keeping deckhands—persisters have also had to make real sacrifices in their lives outside of the industry in order to remain afloat. One of the most frequently-cited causality of the shrimping crisis involves hunting. Hunting, especially for duck and deer, is a popular pastime for people living in Bayou Crevette. Traditionally, trawlers would make enough money in six months that they could spend the winter months hunting, trapping, and fishing, before they had to get their boats ready for the next season that begins in May. In Bayou Crevette, hunting does not entail taking a day or even weekend trip into the woods. Instead, hunting involves owning or renting a hunting camp—usually a small cabin-like structure in the woods—and staying out for weeks at a time, usually with their families or friends. Donny spoke about the importance of both hunting and trawling as a source of identity: “We was born to hunt and trap in the winter and come back over here in the summer to shrimp.”

But since the collapse, many have had to sell their camps, or to skip on the yearly rental of the hunting camp. For example, Daniel used to own a hunting camp in Mississippi, but a few years before the interview, he sold it to try to cut back on expenses:

When I first had my boat, 26 years I’ve been having my boat. We used to make some money, and have a little bit of money on the side. We’d trawl for six months and we’d head to Mississippi for hunting season.
We’d set up camp and enjoy life a little bit. . . Now, no. You gotta hold on to the couple of things that you got, to try to survive to the next season. [Daniel B., Persister.]

Rural sociologists have documented the significance of hunting to rural culture. Marks (1991:15) notes that, “For many southern men living in or close to rural landscapes, hunting . . . comes with the air and with the land and with the people who live there. Hunting is woven into the very fabric of personal and social history.” This statement fittingly describes many rural communities in Louisiana – known as “the sportsman’s paradise” – including Bayou Crevette. Many trawlers spoke about learning how to hunt and fish with their fathers, and teaching their own sons to do the same. Glen discussed the importance of teaching his son, who was seven years old, how to hunt and trawl:

He needs to know how to trawl so he can go catch some shrimp. He needs to know how to catch crawfish. He needs to know how to kill a duck. Kill a deer, catch a rabbit. He needs to know how to do that. And I need to teach him. [Glen, Persister]

But Glen, too, worried that he would not be able to continue to take his yearly hunting trips, illustrated in the following exchange with his wife, Linda:

Linda: In the wintertime, he’d go hunting for duck.

Glen: I’d go hunting all alone.

Linda: And then he’d go back to trawling.

Glen: But I don’t know if I’ll be able to hunt no more.

For persisters, skipping the yearly hunting trip is no small sacrifice. Hunting is deeply rooted into the culture of the community, but it also serves as an important part of family socialization.
Another consistent theme woven through persisters’ responses regarding how their lives have changed involves another (somewhat stereotypical) aspect of rural culture: their pickup trucks. Pickup trucks abound around the community of Bayou Crevette. The significance of pickup trucks is consistent with research on rural culture documenting their importance to rural culture (Kline 2002). Pickup trucks are very practical vehicles: the dominant forms of employment – oil and fishing – entail a great deal of hauling for which pickup trucks are required. What is more, pickup trucks are also useful vehicles for popular leisure activities, like hunting, fishing, or canoeing.

Paul explained that it has been customary for trawlers to purchase a new pickup truck about once every three years. In this narrative, he explains how the decline of shrimping has prevented people from buying new trucks, and he argues that this is damaging to the local economy:

Every 3 years, you would go buy a new pick up. A $30,000 pick up truck times 40,000 people [the number of shrimp fishers Paul estimates is in the industry nationwide]…That’s a lot of money. And that’s just pick up trucks! You need nets, and you need ice, and you need freezers, and you need trucks. [Paul, Persister].

In addition to its practical value, pickup trucks serve as an important marker of wealth. Daniel explained that he has been unable to purchase a new pickup truck; instead, when I first spoke with him in 2006, he was driving an older one:

I have a seventeen year old pick-up truck, that everyday I pick up a piece that fell off, you know? It’s embarrassing. [Daniel B., Persister]

Driving an older pickup truck may not seem like a major sacrifice. Indeed, it is not the same as being unable to pay a light bill or one’s mortgage. But for those persisters I spoke with, the sacrifice was significant.
Thus far, I have demonstrated the various work-related obstacles that shrimpers have been forced to struggle against since the industry has deteriorated: lower dockside prices, higher overhead costs, difficulty finding and keeping good deckhands, sacrificing significant elements of cultural identity. Those who choose to remain in the industry are working harder and harder for less and less. But what are the effects of this struggle for life outside of the industry? In the next section, I show how the deterioration of the shrimp fishing industry has resulted in a host of personal and emotional problems for shrimp fishers and their families.

The Personal and Social Consequences of Persisting

Previous research has documented higher rates of anxiety and depression among those dealing occupational decline (Targ et al. 1988). Shrimp fishers on Bayou Crevette are no exception to this finding. Depression and melancholy were consistent themes woven throughout persisters’ narratives. I was particularly struck by the number of times that shrimp fishers – current and former alike – broke into tears as they spoke of the prospect or actual incidence of leaving the industry behind. After all, shrimp fishing is a dangerous and physically demanding craft, and the men who perform the demands of the job possess qualities that conform to ideals of hyper-masculinity: large physicalities, pursuit of excitement and adventure, aggressive natures, fiercely independent, and disdainful of authority of any kind. For these men to be reduced to tears – in front of a woman they barely knew – was particularly powerful, and telling of their attachment to their occupational identities.
One of these incidents happened as I spoke with two 3rd generation shrimp fishers, Randy and Keith. I approached Randy as he was attempting a small repair onboard his boat that was docked along the bayou-side. Keith stopped by later to ask Randy a favor, and stayed to participate in the interview. Randy, age 50, has been trawling since he was nine years old; he dropped out of high school to trawl full-time. Keith, age 40, has been trawling full-time since graduating from high school. Both men had strong and hulking physicalities, with calloused hands that – accurate to Glen’s observation – indeed had the appearance of being covered with barnacles. Their lifetimes in the sun had aged them beyond their actual years.

Similar to other persisters, they discussed the difficulties of shrimp fishing, and how much harder it had become since the decline:

We used to make some good money, and let me tell you, it ain’t easy. It’s hard work. I’m 40 years old, and he could tell you, I’m like a 70 year old man right now. My shoulders, my neck. But, we love to do it. We work hard, and we go by ourselves a lot on these boats, so that we can be able to do what we did, and you know, we can still hang. A lot of people would have just left. [Keith M., Persisted]

Like other trawlers, Keith touted the virtues of hard work, and came across as boastful as he described the exacting nature of shrimping and the benefits of being independent. But when I asked how things have changed since the decline, he became visibly upset:

When we was in good times with shrimping it was great. My wife told me recently, she said, you know, she said [begins to cry], she said, you don’t seem too excited. And I’m not. We was on a high around here. When shrimp season was open, we was on a high. And now, they took that high from us. You know? [Keith, Persister]

The shrimp fishing crisis has been particularly hard for Keith. Unlike Randy, whose children are grown, Keith has several small children at home that he has to support. To
make up for some of the losses he had experienced, he has taken up odd jobs, and had spent the past few days painting a house for a neighbor. Although this income has helped ease financial strain, he explained, having to go outside of shrimping to find other employment is partly related to his feelings of melancholy and disenchantment:

My main income is shrimping. But I paint on the side because I got a lot of bills. I don’t like it. But I got a family, I got 2 kids. I gotta keep it together. Randy’s kids are grown, he don’t have any bills. He can get by like that. [Keith, Persister]

In addition to decreased expenses, having grown children is beneficial because there is less concern regarding how to manage time to ensure that one is spending enough time with the family. Lower dockside prices means that trawlers must work harder to maintain the same standard of living, which decreases the amount of quality time one can spend with family. Donny has three children, two daughters and a son, all school-aged.

When you’re out there on the boat, you wanna be home with you family. And when you’re with your family, you know you got bills to pay and you want to be out there. I been having trouble since the May season. I’ve been having trouble with my trawl, and the little bit of money I had, I spent it on my boat. I’m at the end of my rope, I ain’t gonna lie to you. [Donny, Persister]

Working harder for less, being unable to spend quality time with family, and having to give up important experiences like hunting, have certainly taken a toll on the bodies and minds of persisters. Daniel related how the shrimping crisis has changed the way he perceives himself as a shrimper:

I used to be proud to tell someone I was a shrimper. Now, if you ask me what I do, I won’t even tell them sometimes. I tell them I’m the scum of the earth, in trawling. That’s how it changed. You met this old man who was sitting right here [A reference to his father, who participated in the earlier part of the interview]? He used to trawl. He got more money than he can spend. Now, we just struggle. That’s the truth. I’m not bragging or nothing. That’s how it is. [Daniel, Persister]
Research on occupational decline has also shown how emotional problems resulting from job loss have also been linked to higher rates of marital stress, divorce, and family problems (Targ et al. 1988). This, too, is consistent with what I found in the field. I meet Charlene during my interview with Daniel. She is good friends with Daniel’s wife, and stopped by to visit while Daniel and I chatted on his front porch. When I introduced myself, and told her about my interests in understanding how the shrimping crisis has affected those living on the bayou, she unflinchingly responded:

You know, that’s what broke up our marriage. Too much stress. Yeah, he took it out on me: the boat, the shrimp prices. Thirty-five years of marriage. I gave him a choice, the boat or me. And he kept his boat. I don’t hear the boat. I gave him a choice. I didn’t want him to do that no more...I had enough of being unhappy and struggling with the price problems. I had my own problems trying to raise the kids, and trying to carry the load. [begins to cry] And I couldn’t do it no more. And I won’t do it no more. [Charlene H., ex-wife of persisting shrimper]

Charlene, who was “fifty-something”, married Arty (one of Glen’s friends) right after they graduated from high school. Both Arty and Charlene are from families with long histories in the shrimp fishing industry. As a young girl, Charlene regularly trawled with her three uncles on their boat. She always figured she would marry a shrimper. After she married Arty, they had four sons. Her sons were all raised on-board the fishing boat; they trawled as a family. Shrimp fishing provided them a good living. She proudly noted how, “I raised my kids on the boat. I went trawling when my third son was 9 days old. I went on the boat with him, a baby. I got pictures of it. Me and my brand new baby in the shrimp boat.” Only a few seconds later, her pride turned to gloom, and she added, “I
sacrificed my life, and it didn’t get us nowhere. Because of the prices now, you can’t really make it.”

She went on to explain how since the decline, her husband became more and more stressed out. He frequently worried about the prices, about the boat, and about how they were going to make ends meet. After awhile, his stressing became too much for her: “I think it was 5 years that [he] was a broken record. ‘Well’, I told him, ‘do something about it. Go find yourself a job.’ He didn’t like that.” To try to make ends meet, she picked up a part-time job waiting tables. She thought that it would ease some of the financial burden, but her taking a job upset Arty, who was frustrated that they could not make ends meet as a trawling family. He wanted to be the sole provider, as he had always been. Finally, after years of frustration and fighting, she issued him an ultimatum, the boat or their marriage. To her disappointment, he chose the boat.

In addition to destroying their marriage, she also noted that Arty’s dogged insistence to keep trying to make it as a trawler eventually hurt his relationship with his children. He desperately wanted them to become trawlers, and for some years, they all served as deckhands. But as the struggle to survive as a trawler became more and more severe, they wanted to look elsewhere for how to make a living. This upset Artie:

You know how they say you can unload to the ones you love? But it makes you hurt so much…And my kids, he did it to my kids. He wanted to make them so tough and make them work, and make them trawlers. They couldn’t take him. . . My little boy went, and he don’t want to be a trawler. I don’t want him to be. I used to be on [Arty’s] side and make the kids be, uh, tough. Well, I don’t want that kind of life for them now. [Charlene, Persister’s ex-wife]
Even though she left the marriage and is now living on her own, she still worries about Arty’s health and well-being, and remarked that she feared for his life: “That boat’s gonna put him in his grave… It’s gonna put him in there earlier. It’s so much stress.”

Charlene’s worries about her ex-husband’s life were not completely unfounded. The shrimping crisis, she explained, had been tough for many families around the bayou. The uncertainty surrounding the industry had pushed many out in search of other work, but she knew others who chose to stay in, who have faced mounting financial and emotional struggles. She and Daniel even knew an individual who committed suicide after shooting a U.S. Marshall who came to seize his boat that he could no longer afford.

Daniel explained what happened:

[He] wasn’t making ends meet. So, he went and had to buy fuel from the man at the shed on credit. Fuel, ice, and hardware. The man said, “Sign this little paper, go and get what you need, and then you’ll have to pay me.” So, he went on trawling, and was struggling. He couldn’t pay the man, and the guy who let him charge fuel and supplies wanted his money. He was tired of not getting his money. So he borrowed money against his boat to pay the man, about $10,000, so he could be finished with that man, you know? But then he couldn’t pay his boat note, he got his boat seized. He got it taken away from him for his $10,000. When the US Marshall came to seize the boat, the guy broke out a gun, he tied the US Marshall to the boat. Took the gun and shot him, lit the boat on fire. Took the gun and shot himself. [Daniel, Persister]

Surely, this example lays at the extreme end of the continuum of shrimpers’ responses to decline, and is therefore atypical. Yet it is a powerful illustration of the desperation that may be felt when one’s livelihood and way of life are threatened. And while most shrimp fishers would never engage in such behavior, the retelling of this story indicates that shrimpers draw the connection between the decline and suicide.
So far, I have shown the difficulties that persisters have had to deal with since the decline. These hardships have had negative impacts on both the health and emotional well-being of trawlers, and their families. Clearly, these individuals have suffered greatly since the decline. But we also must recognize that these individuals have chosen to struggle in these ways. There are numerous employment alternatives available to shrimp fishers; indeed, some have already exited. But why do some trawlers stay?

“I Don’t Want to Do That, I Want to Do This”: Refusing to Exit

Shrimp fishers have clearly suffered since the onset of decline around 2001. But despite alternative employment opportunities, many are refusing to quit trawling, and willingly accepting the consequences. Certainly, this flies in the face of market logic weaving through RC theories, and Hirschman’s influential framework. Given the crisis of shrimping, rational choice (RC) theorists would assume that because individuals seek to maximize personal profit, shrimp fishers would exit. What is more, because shrimp fishers have a plush economic cushion on which to land upon exit, RC theorists may not deem them valuable to study: even though they are dealing with occupational decline, they have even better alternative employment options. What can we learn from such an uneventful transition from one form of employment to the next?

Hirschman departs from RC theory through his acknowledgment of the possibility that individuals might delay or forego exit, even when exit is possible. When actors think that they possess the ability to “do something” about the decline, they may attempt a reversal by engaging in “voice”, that he defines as “any attempt at all to change rather
than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs” through some kind of appeal to higher authorities (30). Examples of voice include staging a boycott or strike, circulating a petition, or even just singularly voicing complaints to management of some other authority figure. Voice is directed toward positive change, and thus contains within it the optimistic belief that such change is possible.

But given lucrative alternatives, why would an individual willingly trade the certainty of exit against the uncertainties of possible improvements that may be brought through voice? Hirschman’s answer to this is his concept of loyalty, understood as the degree of attachment that an individual has to the organization. According to Hirschman (1970:78), loyalty “holds exit at bay and activates voice” thus serving as a liminal state that determines action. Those on the front lines of voice activities are therefore presumed to be the most loyal individuals. However, Hirschman notes that not all loyal individuals may be on the front lines, or even on the battlefield at all. Rather, some loyal individuals will neither choose to exit nor use voice; instead these individuals “suffer in silence” but “hardly without the expectation that someone will act or something will happen to improve matters” (78, emphasis in the original). Through loyalty, Hirschman’s acknowledges the potential influence of non-economic factors (attachments). But his conceptualization does not stray from the basic assumptions of RC theory as he presumes that loyal individuals will forego exit when they believe they stand to benefit economically from it in the future. If they did not believe in the possibility of future benefit, they would exit.

As I have shown, the shrimp fishing industry is in a clear state of deterioration. But persisters are not acting according to Hirschman’s framework. Persisters have many
available alternative employment options. In fact, proportionally, Louisiana has more jobs for blue-collar workers than other parts of the modern U.S., and most of these are concentrated around the southeastern and southwestern areas, where Bayou Crevette is located (Henry and Bankston 2002). And while the fishing industry is deeply rooted into the culture and economy of the community, oil now employs more people than agriculture and fishing combined. Shrimp fishers therefore have friends, relatives, and neighbors who are employed by the oil or its attendant industries – some fishers have even worked those jobs themselves – and they know they good living that those jobs can provide.

During our conversation, Daniel pointed out that his neighbor works in oil. The house was much bigger than any other on the street, and sat on a very large lot. A shiny, new Mercedes Benz was parked in the driveway. “See that house right there? That’s oil money,” he told me. Daniel’s two brothers left the industry years ago, before the decline, for other employment. One of his brothers works for a company that cleans up oil-related messes (“he deals with the oil slush”), while the other one has a job as a boat captain, and works primarily in and around the African coast: “He gets $500 a day doing that.” Daniel knows that he could be making more money – and dealing with less uncertainty – if he left shrimp fishing. Yet he has instead chosen to continue on. I asked him how long he would stay in shrimping:

For as long as possible…But this will tell you how things had changed. When we built this house, the first night I slept in it, it was paid off. Right now, I don’t know if I could even make a house payment. That’s how things change. But I’ll stay as long as I can. [Daniel, Persister]
Similarly, others persisters know that they could make a better financial living if they left for another job. J.T., for example, obtained a captain’s license three years prior to our conversation, right when the industry had noticeably changed for the worse. A captain’s license is necessary to run tug or supply boats for companies, one of the most lucrative jobs to be had:

There’s a lot of good jobs to be had in the oil field. If I tied this thing up right now, I’d go and make me $300 a day. I have my captain’s license. But I don’t want to do that. I have a captain’s license. But I want to do this. [J.T., Persister].

J.T. knew that this license guaranteed him a more secure living, and remarked that he obtained the license “for back-up if I ever needed it.” But much of our conversation detailed the hardships of trawling, and how they are “working harder than ever just to get by.”

Other persisters not only knew others who worked in the oil industry, but had experienced life working in oil or one of its attendant industries. They knew firsthand the financial stability these jobs can provide. For example, for several years, when his family experienced some financial hardships, Randy worked on an offshore platform to make extra money:

I worked the oil fields, my bones got sore working offshore. I’m trying to do this at my own pace. I work when I want, do what I want. I love doing this. It’s a lot of harder work than sitting offshore driving the boat, but, I really like doing this. [Randy, Persister]

Here, Randy acknowledged that working offshore is not only lucrative, but it is also easier than trawling. “My bones got sore” is not a reference to hard, strenuous labor; rather it references the idle nature of captaining a boat.
Persisting shrimpers are well-aware of the benefits of leaving trawling. And unlike other workers facing deindustrialization and occupational decline, they have multiple opportunities available upon exiting their jobs. Despite this, they are refusing to exit the industry, and the way of life it provides. Yet at the same time, they are not using voice, as Hirschman’s model would predict. These two options aside, the only other explanation Hirschman’s model provides is that persisters are being “dumbly faithful” to their craft, patiently waiting for deteriorating conditions to be restored. On its face, this appears to be a reasonable explanation. After all, many industries are subject to periods of booms and busts, especially those that depend upon nature to cooperate, like farming and fishing.

But after digging a bit deeper, this explanation proves equally lacking. Across the board, persisters expressed great pessimism regarding the future of the industry. They do not hope for future improvements; rather, many are bracing for the deterioration to worsen. J.T. and Donny explained that in the past, the industry has indeed cycled through periods of booms and busts. But they differentiated down-cycles of the past from their present predicament:

Donny: In the 80s, things got real bad. The price didn’t drop that much, but shrimping was so bad. It was a bad year for shrimping. Banks was taking a lot of boats, people was losing boats like crazy.

J.T.: But even then, the shrimp prices were good, the fuel was low. Now, it’s unbelievable. The shrimp prices are so low, they’re at the same price today than they were 20 years ago. Do you believe that? And it’s not gonna get better, it’ll even get worse maybe.

This exchange highlights the two key differences between previous industrial downturns and the crisis of trawling that they face today: fuel costs and imports. Before the decline,
bad years were characterized by either low dockside prices that corresponded to an overproduction of shrimp, or low yields due to insufficient numbers in the shrimp population. These problems usually corrected themselves in a year or two. But the rising fuel costs and the flood of imported shrimp have delivered an unprecedented one-two punch from which the industry may never fully recover. These are conditions over which shrimpers have little control. The future for persisters is uncertain and bleak.

It’s as simple as that: we get a dollar a pound, and fuel is $2.50 a gallon. That’s scary. I can’t compete with that. Who knows what’ll happen? I can make this story last a whole book, but it can be broke down to just that. I’m scared [Paul P., Persister].

In sum, high fuel costs and low dockside prices have put a stranglehold on the shrimp fishing industry. As a result, shrimp fishers who wish to remain must deal with mounting economic, personal, and familial troubles. And as conditions continue to deteriorate, their hope for future improvements continues to diminish. But shrimpers have a clear choice regarding their economic futures. They can stay in and continue to struggle, or they can leave for one of the many available job opportunities supplied by the oil industry. Persisting shrimp fishers, therefore, willingly accept the consequences in order to protect their meaningful occupational identities. Why do they choose to struggle? What do they gain from dealing with the hardships? In the next section, I answer these questions by exploring Hirschman’s concept of loyalty.

**Going Down With The Ship: Nonmarket Forces and Decision Making**
One of the most valuable contributions of Hirschman’s theory is his insistence on the influence of nonmarket forces as a solution to organizational decline. “The economist,” he writes, “tends naturally to think that his mechanism [exit] is far more efficient and is in fact the only one to be taken seriously” (16). But he later goes on to note, “Exit and voice, that is, market and nonmarket forces, that is, economic and political mechanisms, have been introduced as two principal actors of strictly equal rank and importance” (19). Actors’ decisions to exit or use voice turn on the concept of loyalty, understood as encompassing nonmarket forces. Indeed, Hirschman’s contribution is significant. However, he never fully elaborates: what, exactly, constitutes loyalty; the mechanisms through which loyalty influences decision-making; or the outcomes of actors’ choices to exit or voice. Therefore, we have little understanding of what it means to be loyal (Dowding et al 2000).

Persisting shrimp fishers provide us with a valuable opportunity to understand how loyalty actually functions in the face of decline. And I show how persisting shrimpers are motivated to preserve their meaningful occupational and cultural identities above all other factors, even economic considerations. To be sure, I do not claim that economic factors have no bearing on the decision-making of persisting shrimpers. Economic aspects unquestionably factor into deciding whether to keep fishing or cut bait, so to speak. Among those I spoke with, there was great variation regarding economic factors that may make it easier to remain. For example, owning one’s boat outright, having a working spouse that contributes to household income, or having children who are grown surely make it easier to forge ahead earning a living as a trawler. Moreover, as the industry has collapsed, trawlers wishing to get out are having a tough time selling
their boats, as few people are looking to invest in shrimping’s future. Yet, it’s important to note that owing a boat and keeping a boat note would not necessarily prevent a trawler from exiting. Some ex-trawlers have “tied up” their boats, meaning that they are no longer trawling and are looking to sell, but have not done so yet. In the meantime, they are working other jobs.

Although important, economic considerations alone do not explain why persisting shrimp fishers choose to stick it out. If economic issues were the sole determining factors, then shrimp fishers would have either exited, or be making real plans to exit in the future. There is no real pattern that exists among the persisters I spoke with. Some have mortgages and boat notes, while others have no real debts. Some have young children at home, while others have no dependents.

In order to reach a complete understanding of why they stick it out, we must how economic and non-economic factors combine to produce outcomes. Non-economic considerations weigh heavily into shrimp fishers’ decisions to stay in or exit. Exploring on a deep level the loyalty of shrimpers, and the meanings they attach to their life-worlds, shows us that their stubborn resistance to globalization is not an irrational act, but is instead highly rational. It further highlights how local actors can be active participants in globalization processes, and are therefore key players in shaping outcomes. Theories of globalization (including critical theories) that strip local actors of their agency fail to understand the choices that they actually make, leaving us unable to understand why local actors so often obstinately refuse to acquiesce to the logic of the market.

If we are to understand the significance of what is at stake in shrimp fishing’s deterioration, we must begin by understanding the complex and deeply valued meanings
that shrimp fishers attach to the craft. While each shrimp fisher I spoke with had his or her own unique stories to tell, there are multiple similarities that emerge and weave through the narratives. In the community of Bayou Crevette, where the shared work of shrimp fishing has been so central, notions about the relationship between work, family, and place combine to provide a distinct and highly valued cultural identity. In what follows, I first outline the overlap between work and family spheres of life involved in shrimp fishing. I show how the industry is connected to both family history and the everyday life of families. Next, I demonstrate the importance of place. Last, I show how the deeply valued meanings of family and place form the backdrop against which the meaning of work is derived.

“*It’s In My Blood*: Family and Shrimp Fishing

Fishing has long been a way of life for Cajuns living in Bayou Crevette. From the earliest days of Acadian settlement around the swamps and marshlands of coastal Louisiana, harvesting marine resources has been and important part of life for Cajun people. The valuable resources supplied by the land offered a means for both daily survival and for economic livelihood. Bayous and marshes supplied by the Mississippi River contained a bounty of fish, shrimp, crabs, and oysters that could be caught for both consumption and for the market. Forests and marshlands further provided an abundance of animal life to trap for both food and the fur trade.

The rise of the Gulf shrimp industry in the early 1900s was important coastal towns like Bayou Crevette for several reasons. Economically, of course, it situated them
within the larger context of the national economy. Commercial shrimp fishing became a viable way to earn a decent living. But beyond economic value, the industry also played a key role in shaping the distinct, shared cultural identity that has persisted in Bayou Crevette. Shrimp fishers, like others working in extractive industries, share a strong sense of occupational identity that is characterized by a high degree of convergence between work and non-work life (Deseran and Riden 2003; Margavio and Forsyth 1996). The connection between shrimping for family consumption and shrimping for market consumption has provided a basis for cultural identity that still persists in present-day Louisiana.

For Cajun shrimp fishers, there is a great deal of overlap between occupational and family spheres. Traditionally, all members of the family would lend assistance to fishing efforts. And although trawling as a family has become less customary for U.S. commercial shrimp fishers as a whole (Maril 1883) – as many women have opted to work outside of shrimp fishing or stay at home – recent research has found that it is still a fairly common practice among Louisiana shrimpers (Margavio and Forsyth 1996). Indeed, the persisters I spoke with either currently trawled with kin, or had family who had their own boats.

When I asked trawlers why they chose to get into the industry, persisters’ answers typically involved some reference to family. Most shrimpers began trawling with their families as young children. Children’s involvement in shrimping was so commonplace that schools trawling was sanctioned by schools to let sons (but rarely daughters) out of

16 In their comparison of Texas and Louisiana shrimp fishers, Margavio and Forsyth found that among Texas shrimpers, trawling with kin was uncommon. Louisiana, on the other hand, reported high rates of trawling with kin.
school early for summer vacation so that they could participate in the opening of the May
season with their parents:

J.T.: We been doing this since we been kids. Both our fathers had boats, and we went to work with them during the summer vacations. And for like the winter and Thanksgiving vacations, we went to work. And then, when we got out of school, this is what we did.

Donny: They used to let us go early for the May season. This is almost 30 years, me and him. Since I was 14 or 15 years old, they let us out of junior high early to go help our parents out.

J.T.: We used to work as a family, you know. My older brother worked, and when we got outta school, my mom would come, my sister same thing. That’s why we built this boat. To be with the family.

Trawling was a family effort that included daughters as well as sons, and mothers as well as fathers. Family fishing outings not only served as a way to bolster family income (as there was no need to hire deckhands), they also provided valuable experiences through which knowledge and abilities were passed from one generation to the next.

Surely, the deep cultural significance of shrimp fishing to self-identity resulted in part from this generational transmission of knowledge and skill.

J.T. Not too many people can do what we do. It’s not easy work. The more you catch, the more you gonna make money. It’s hard work. Sometimes you catch a lot and you can fill your hole, sometimes it’s dirty. You know? Crabs, fish, it depends. It’s not easy sometimes. People don’t understand.

Donny: You have breakdowns. Yeah, you don’t just get shrimp anywheres. You got to know what you doing. If not, it’s like Forrest Gump, you out there, and you can never catch any shrimp. Well, it’s almost that bad sometimes, if you don’t know where to get shrimp.

JW: You gotta have the knowledge and all. And that comes from our parents.
Donny references the movie Forrest Gump to demonstrate the specialized knowledge and skills required to be successful in the industry: shrimp fishing is not something just anyone can do. In the film, Forrest purchases a shrimp without any previous experience with or knowledge of the craft. His primary motivation in purchasing the boat is to keep a promise to his friend, Bubba, who he met while he was in the Army, and with whom he later served in Vietnam. Bubba was a shrimp fisher from Alabama, and Forrest and Bubba pledged to buy a shrimp boat as soon as they were finished with their tours of duty. Bubba was killed in the line of duty, and when Forrest inherits money from a deceased relative, he buys a boat to keep good on his pledge. But he’s inexperienced, and when he first takes his boat out, he fails miserably at catching any shrimp. These skills and experiences that are passed down from one generation to the next provide shrimp fishers with knowledge required to do well in the craft that is unique to their shared cultural identities.

Time and again, persisters emphasized the craft’s connection to their family histories in order to explain their reluctance to exit the industry. Perhaps there was no phrase I heard more often throughout my conversations with both current and former shrimpers than “it’s in my blood.” Shrimp fishers used this phrase to explain why, despite all of the hardships and struggles, they continue to try to make it in shrimp fishing. With this simple expression, shrimpers demonstrate that trawling is not merely a job or a way to earn a living. Rather, shrimp fishing is a significant part of their identities and ways of life, and is tightly bound to their own family histories. Shrimp fishing constitutes an important part of themselves, in a very literal sense.

17 As with any “Hollywood ending”, Forrest ends up successfully catching shrimp when good fortune spares his boat in a hurricane, and he is one of the only shrimp fishers to trawl that season.
It’s in our blood. Our grandfathers did it. Her [Ellen’s] daddy did it. And, his daddy did it, you know. So, I guess you could say it’s in our blood. We love to do it. [Raymond, Persister]

Similarly, Daniel’s wife Caroline also emphasized the connection to family to describe why it is difficult for people to quit:

From my perspective of shrimping, it’s something that’s in you. It’s a part of who you are, it’s what you love to do. And, you know how to do it. It’s like, sometimes you can’t hardly find any shrimp [when trawling], and it’s like, how do [trawlers] ever find this shrimp? It’s a skill. What I see is it’s like, in your blood, you know you work hard, and you buy a boat or you build a boat. You put all your energies into it. This is your life, it’s a part of our culture and heritage. Him [Daniel], it’s four generations. His daddy taught him how to do it, and his daddy’s grandpa taught him how to do that. It’s passed down. So it’s hard for them to part with it. I had a trawler come over here yesterday, he said, “As long as I could still make a few dollars, I’m not getting out of it.”...So, it’s a culture and a heritage, and a way of living over here. [Caroline, Persister’s Wife]

All of the persisting shrimp fishers I spoke with were second generation or more, meaning that at the very least, their fathers worked as shrimpers. And most of the shrimp fishers I spoke with were in their mid-40s or older. This is consistent with previous research that finds the tendency for Louisiana shrimpers to be slightly older than fishers in Texas and Alabama (Margavio et al, 1996). Most of these individuals came of age during the fifties and sixties, before the rise of the oil industry, when Bayou Crevette was primarily a fishing and farming community (Henry and Bankston 2003). Yet even among younger trawlers, who grew up after oil industry expanded, I found consistency in the meanings assigned to shrimp fishing.

I approached Tommy, age 30, as he worked to repair a hole in his wooden boat that had resulted from a recent collision with a dock. His boat was docked alongside the bayou in a row of four large, wooden boats. All of the boats belonged to members of his
family: two of the boats belonged to his younger brothers, and the other to his father, Vernon. He was a fourth generation trawler, and he took great pride in explaining his family’s passion for wooden boats. Most shrimp boats are now constructed using fiberglass and steel, and wooden boats have become rare: “We try to hold on to them best we can. They’re disappearing. Kinda like us,” Tommy explained. In his family, boats have been passed down along with the knowledge and passion for the craft. When he graduated high school, his father gifted him his old boat after building a new one for himself. And when Tommy’s brother Teddy, now 26, graduated from high school, Tommy gave him his old boat, and with his father, built a new one for himself.

In all, there are five siblings: four brothers and a sister. Three of the brothers trawl, but the other left the industry to go work for his father-in-law when he got married. Like the other persisters, Tommy and Teddy grew up on the deck of their father’s boat: “When we was growing up we was the whole family on the boat, on my dad’s boat. There was 5 of us. My mom still goes with my dad.” He and Teddy were the youngest trawlers I spoke with. When I remarked that I had found very few younger trawlers, Tommy answered that younger folks often choose to work in the oil industry because the money is good. Despite this, and all of the struggles, he didn’t want to do anything else except trawling:

I have a couple more cousins, that they’re my age. But there aren’t very many younger folks. There’s a few. They just like me, they try, they struggle. But it’s in our blood. And we don’t wanna do something else. [Tommy, Persister]

Here, Tommy acknowledges that fewer younger people have chosen to carry on the family legacy in the industry.
Another form of imagery trawlers used to describe the importance of trawling to
their identities was to liken trawling to an addiction. This imagery is powerful, because
not only does it describe how shrimping is a part of them – as something that flows
through their veins – it is also something that they perceive that they need to do. This is
the imagery that Glen used to describe how he perceives trawling that opened the
beginning of this chapter. Like any addiction, Greg notes that shrimping comes with
heartbreak and letdowns. “If there’s a hundred things about trawling, probably 80-90% stabs you through the heart like a vampire with a stick,” he remarked. “But, when you
can win that one or two or three times,” he added, “it pumps you up! It’s the greatest
thing you will ever see. It’s an addiction. I love it.”

The addiction metaphor was used by trawlers on many occasions. Alvin, 45, is a
second generation trawler who grew up shrimp fishing with his cousin and brothers.
Alvin has five children, ranging from 10 to 26 years old. He described how he tried
working a job in the oil industry in the past to try to make extra money, but he did not last
long. “It’s in my blood,” he said. “In my blood, you know? Like a crackhead. You always
gotta go back for the hit of crack; I gotta go get my hit of shrimp.” He was unhappy
working offshore on an oil rig, even though the money was pretty good. After a short
time, he returned to shrimping, and has been doing it ever since.

*Born on the Bayou: The Importance of Place*

While family has been important to constructing a sense of identity among shrimp fisher,
it is not the only prominent factor. The natural environment also holds great importance.
The swamps, marshlands, and bayous that surround the community produce an abundance of valuable resources for the community. These resources have greatly contributed to the economies of households, the community, and the state. But in addition to supplying economic resources, the environment makes up a significant portion of the tapestry against which shared cultural identity is forged.

When I asked shrimpers – both current and former – what it means to be Cajun, they often referenced the natural environment with the phrase “we live off the land”. The rich and fertile land provides an abundance of resources that have provided Cajun people with both everyday subsistence as well as a means to earn a living.

My grandfather was a trapper, a fisherman, a shrimper. He lived off the land. He passed 10 or 12 years ago. My uncle did the same thing. He trapped, he shrimped, he did some fishing. He had a summer garden, he had a winter garden he had a calf that he grew every year. He had a hog, he had chickens, he had ducks. He went duck hunting, deer hunting. He lived off the land. The only time he couldn’t live off the land, was in March and through the middle of April. Nothing was in season then. During this time, he would carve wooden boats, he’d go to the shipyard, and sell ‘em. That’s what he did. [Jack, Exiter]

Hunting, trapping, and growing one’s own food have since become unnecessary for everyday survival. But now these pursuits constitute important components of leisure activities. The importance of food to Cajun cultural identity has been well-established in previous research (see Ten Eyek 2001). It is often noted that people living in Southern Louisiana don’t eat to live, they live to eat. My experience in the community confirms this observation. A central part of the Cajun cuisine involves local ingredients supplied by the surrounding estuaries, bayous, and marshes. Shrimp, crabs, crawfish, redfish, okra, alligator, etc. are all central to the floodways of Southeastern Louisiana. Part of the cultural significance of Cajun food is how these ingredients are obtained. These skills are
often passed on to young children, who grow up playing in the swamps and marshes, and going with their parents on fishing trips.

When I was a little bitty kid, my daddy did all kinds of things. When we was little, we was raised up doing that stuff: catching crawfish, perch, crabs, killing snakes. We did everything. When I was like my little boy right here [age 7], we was catching crawfish in the back. We grew up on the back of the little shrimp boats. [Glen, Persister]

The natural environment holds obvious importance to individuals and communities in southeast Louisiana. The shrimping industry has also significantly contributed to the landscape of bayou town like Bayou Crevette. Scholars draw a distinction between natural environments and landscapes: natural environments contain rocks, rivers, and mountains, while landscapes hold the meanings attached to these objects. Landscapes therefore are symbolic environments that are grounded in culture and reflect our self-definitions.

Cultural groups transform the natural environment into landscapes through the use of different symbols that bestow different meanings on the same physical objects or conditions. These symbols and meanings are sociocultural phenomena …and result from on-going negotiations in a cultural context…[S]ymbols and meanings that comprise landscapes reflect what people in cultural groups define to be proper. (Greider and Garkovich 1994: 2)

The fishing industry contributes significantly to the landscape of Bayou Crevette. In addition to all of the shrimp boats that line the bayou flowing through the middle of the community, many of the town’s businesses are related to shrimping. The hardware stores, net shops, seafood docks, and ice houses all provide the community a distinct identity. Many trawlers worried about how the decline of shrimping would affect the character of the community, and what this would mean for their place within it:
Vernon: You know, this bayou here, and [others nearby]? That’s all, uh, fishing industry right there. You got people that shrimp…That’s all we got, I mean, you take that out the way, you get us out the way. You take the shrimping industry outta here, you’d shut down half of the hardware stores on the bayou. And there’s a bunch here. They got all the net shops. Those would be gone. You take out the fuel docks.

Teddy: And the ice houses.

Tommy: The boats that pass down the bayou, they don’t fuel up here.

Teddy: No.

Tommy: They fuel up in Houma or New Orleans or somewheres. They don’t fuel up here. You can take that out of here. They would shut down the ice plant. It’d change this town.

Other trawlers also commented on how the decline of the shrimp fishery has begun to change the character of the community’s landscape. The most striking change for many trawlers has been the decrease in the number of working boats traveling up and down the bayou that runs right through the heart of the community. The bayou is flanked on either side by the town’s two main roads; in order to get anywhere in the town, it is necessary to take either one. In year’s past, when the season was at its peak, there was a steady parade of boats coming in from or going out to the Gulf. But many have sold their boats, or have tied them up and they sit docked alongside the bayou’s edge. The reduction of boat traffic has not gone unnoticed.

You go up and down the bayou, and uh, 10-15 years ago you saw a lot more boats than you see now. It’s sad. [Daniel, Persister]

For many individuals on Bayou Crevette, family, work, and environment all overlap to produce a distinctive cultural identity. The natural environment and the landscape each emphasize the community’s shared dependence on the fishing industry, such the even those who do not make a living as a commercial shrimp fisher still
recognize the centrality of the craft in shaping who they are, and where they come from. And although it is getting much more difficult to remain viable within the fishing industry, these three factors – family, environment, and work – work in combination to prevent people from exiting.

I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. It’s a heritage we have, I did it, and my dad did it, and his dad did it. It’s in my blood and I love it. And you gotta work so hard, they’re making us work extra hard. I might catch 200,000 pounds now. That’s a lot. You got less boats, less competition, more shrimp. But they keep pushing the price of shrimp down, down. From a dollar thirty, down to a dollar, or less. [Paul P., Persister]

Clearly, place and family are central to the formation of a shared occupational identity. The natural environment provides the resources from which people have forged a living, and the skills necessary for success within the industry have been transmitted through the generations. The meanings of family and environment are thus important nonmarket factors that prevent people from leaving the industry behind. In the next section, I highlight another important nonmarket factor shared by persisters: the meanings attached to work.

The Meaning of Work

In Bayou Crevette, occupational patterns and statuses were shaped largely by the dependence on extractive industries like fishing, trapping, and logging. These environment-based and primarily self-employed enterprises are characterized by a significant overlap of both work and family routines. The freedom and flexibility that accompanies self-employment has become a highly valued cultural feature for Cajuns.
Being self-employed in [fishing] allows Cajuns to set their own work schedules. They can work when they want to or when they need to. For a Cajun the business of life is not business; it is living. Cajuns genuinely enjoy these activities and the family life these pursuits sustain. Cajun shrimpers that we interviewed spoke of the good life, something to be enjoyed…Very often, they connected shrimping with freedom—not the freedom of contemporary American individualism, but the freedom to be with family…They enjoy catching, cooking, and eating the bounty nature has so richly supplied them. And the enjoyment is doubled because it is shared by kin. This is the core of Cajun culture (Margavio et al 1996: 21).

Indeed, the “core of Cajun culture” is formed by the interconnection between family, environment, and work.

Trawling is, by all accounts, a strenuous – even grueling – occupation. Many, like Glen who described his hands as looking like barnacles, depicted the laborious nature of the craft using vivid descriptions. Daniel told me, after returning from a trip out the day before, “Man, last night I hurt bad, I was walking around like I’d been riding a horse for 3 months,” to which his wife added, “Last night he made the whole room smell like that stuff he was rubbing all over for hurt muscles, for ankles and backs. You know that stuff?” What is it about trawling that shrimpers find so appealing?

“I’m my own boss, for one. So, I don’t have to listen to nobody. And I work at my own pace, which is worth it. I mean, when the season opens I don’t come home for a bit, you know, I stay gone. I just come in and go out. And, I mean, that’s how I like to work. [Tommy, Persister]

“I’m my own boss” is a phrase I heard nearly as often as “it’s in my blood” when I asked trawlers why they doggedly persist. Clearly, this is an important quality of shrimp fishing. Being one’s own boss has numerous benefits, including working at one’s own pace, setting one’s own hours, and making important decisions regarding the way the
ship is run. Persisters value the freedom, flexibility, and self-sufficiency that accompany their way of life

But freed freedom and flexibility fail to fully encompass the value of being one’s own boss. Trawlers also place high value on hard work itself, and share an extraordinarily strong work ethic. And, for them, it makes sense: The harder they work the more money they stand to make. Hard work doesn’t just benefit trawlers, but is necessary to achieving success and remaining viable in the industry. This assertion is best exemplified through the following anecdote shared by an ex-trawler who left the industry a decade ago:

Those of us that did well in the shrimping industry, we got up and went to work every morning. Got up, went to work. I do the same thing today. I tell you a for instance. When we, I guess, maybe 13 or 14 years ago, we went out on the big boats, we was having a tough years. We were on one of five boats that were running side-by-side, all of us friends. We were looking for shrimp. When you’re looking for shrimp, you run 15 minutes, then you slow down you put your test net in the water, and you pull your test net up. Unless you super tired, the engine noise or whatever, it breaks up your sleep. It’s hard to rest. And, we had been doing this for probably 30 hours. One of the boats, there were two other guys, it was about two in the morning. We was about to call it quits for the day. We’re tired, you know, the noise and all? The four of us [each on his own boat] had payments to make, we had kids to raise. We kept going. Well, about midmorning, we hit some shrimp. The four of us found some shrimp. We were four friends running side by side. The other guys were 30 or 35 miles behind us. So we changed channels on the radio. We all shut up. We were very careful what we said. We didn’t want them to know about the shrimp. They called, and they called, and they weren’t sure where we were at. They found us, 24 hours later, I had 10,000 pounds of shrimp in the hole. They were hot. They were mad, and you know, when they finally came on, we had to talk to them. They was cussing us. But I said, “Woah, woah, woah, woah, woah! You slept for 6 hours. We didn’t sleep. We haven’t slept yet. We haven’t slept yet. You all was getting sleep. Why would we get on the radio, and tell you what we’re catching? So everybody can come in on us?” The four of us kept going. That’s how you make it. [Jack, Exiter]
Although the men onboard all five boats were friends, they did not want to share their bounty of shrimp with those who they felt did not earn it. “You have to work hard for what you have,” Jack told me. To this he added, “Are we gonna let ourselves become a welfare nation?” Along with the value of hard work and self-sufficiency comes a disparagement of those whom they do not perceive hold these same standards.

Like the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful, the work ethic is also passed down from one generation to the next. Trawlers learn this work ethic as young children, onboard their parents trawl boats. One of the reasons cited for not wanting to take a job in the oil industry is the set, hourly wage. Many trawlers expressed reluctance to take a job where they can work as hard, or as little, as they want and at the end of the day have the same amount of money in their pockets:

Tommy: That’s the thing. From the tugboat job to this job. On this job, the more hours you stay up and the more hours you put and the harder I work, the more money I’m gonna make. The other way, you know, you get a set price no matter what you do.

Teddy: Yeah, you could have an easy job or you could have a hard job. Stay up many hours at a time, like you might now as a tugboat captain, but you get paid the same no matter what you do. You might sit around, or kill yourself, and still get the same check at the end of the week. With trawling the harder you work the more you get paid.

But since the decline, others told me, working hard has not necessarily translated into more money:

J.T. What’s so exciting about this business is that the harder you work, the more money you can make so you can better yourself. It’s not like you getting paid $10 an hour no matter what you do or how hard you work. If you don’t work hard you won’t make no money. It’s not like that any more. We working harder than ever just to get by.

Donny: The more shrimp you catch, the more excited you get.
J.T.: You excited because you have a good drag, you see it on the deck, you knew it was more money. And you wanted to earn even more.

Donny: You put a big drag of big shrimp of the deck, you excited, you wanna keep going.

J.T.: I always said, it’s an honest living.

J.T.’s assertion that shrimp fishing is an “honest living” also speaks to the virtue and meaning that trawlers attach to their ways of life.

Clearly,persisters place a high premium on working hard. And they understand the family as an important mechanism through which a work ethic is learned. But many trawlers fear how the collapse of the shrimp fishing industry will likely weaken this work ethic in younger and future generations:

Kids nowadays, all they want to do is play on the TV, or play sports at school. That’s no good for the kids, unless they’re really good at sports. It makes money for the school, and if he makes the coach win, fine, but after the sport is finished, it does them no good. You gotta teach your kid how to work, especially boys. If you don’t teach your boy how to work, he won’t know the world. [With my 10 year old son] I take him out trawling the day school is out. As a matter of fact, I took him out 2 days before school ended. He made five trips in a row with me. He didn’t want to go play with his friends, he wanted to come trawling with me. He loves to trawl. And he works, too. He don’t just come and do nothing. [Henry, Persister]

Not only does Henry find it valuable that his son learns to value hard work, but he also attaches importance to the experience of passing on a solid work ethic to his son. He draws a distinction between his son and other non-trawling children his son’s age. In his estimation, those other kids are losing out, wasting their time watching TV or playing sports.
Summing it Up

If we didn’t look closely at the struggles and perspectives of the persisters, we might be tempted to discount them as merely being irrational, or “dumbly faithful” to their way of life (Hirschman 1970:31). They are clearly loyal to their way of life, but they do not behave in ways that Hirschman, or RC theorists, would predict: they are neither engaging in voice efforts to save their industry, nor do they think that others will save it for them. In fact, they hold out very little hope that their situation will improve in the future. The high costs of fuel and imported shrimp – the one-two punch that has nearly knocked out the industry – are perceived as permanent parts of their industry. How, then, can we understand their behavior?

By interrogating and revising Hirschman’s concept of loyalty, I show that this kind of stubborn refusal to exit is not irrational, but highly rational. Persisters decide to stay based on a calculation of not only economic factors, but also noneconomic factors. These nonmarket forces, inherent in the culture and identities of shrimp fishers, act as barriers to exit in a way not predicted by Hirschman’s model. By exploring how meanings attached to family, place, and work interact to shape the unique occupational identity, I shed light on how loyalty actually operates in the face of deterioration.

By drawing attention to shrimp fishers’ dogged persistence in the industry, I also contribute to the debate on globalization. Persisting shrimpers are not the passive victims of globalization that critics of globalization often depict. They know they can leave, and that they could be making better money in other jobs pretty easily, yet they willingly and actively persist on and deal with the hardships. Therefore, rather than victims, I argue that
Persisters are better understood as globalization’s martyrs. Persisters are choosing to suffer for what they love, even when they don’t have to. Of course, not all individuals facing occupational decline are fortunate to have alternative options. Steelworkers, for example, did not have the option to stay in steel or work at another job when they were told that their plants would close. But the uniqueness of this case reveals what is hidden even in places where people do not have economically attractive alternatives.

To say that they are victims of globalization is to ignore the agency they exercise in making the choice to remain in the dying industry. Theories of globalization (including critical theories) that strip local actors of their agency fail to understand the choices that actors actually make, leaving us unable to understand why local actors so often obstinately refuse to acquiesce to the logic of the market.
“Most people just dread the future, I see a shining light. If we can ever break this cycle, this is what has to be done.” Jacob Martin, Innovative Adapter.

When I first met Jacob, I presumed that he would be like most of the other trawlers I had met up to that point. A multi-generational trawler, he dropped out of high school to work as a deckhand on relatives’ shrimp boats, and by age twenty he had owned his own boat. He liked to hunt in his spare time, and talked about how much harder he had to work now that shrimp prices had fallen and expenses soared. He was also intensely proud to consider himself a Cajun; like so many others, he equated his ethnic identity with the work he performs. “We live off the land,” he told me, “Being Cajun is kinda like what we were brought up doing. Not everybody’s fortunate to be able to keep doing what they was brought up doing.” But as the conversation unfolded, it became obvious that there was something different about him. There was something about him that set him apart from the other shrimpers I had spoken with. Demographically, he was in his late thirties, and so he was younger than most of the other shrimp fishers I had met. But it wasn’t his age that made him different. No, it was something less palpable than age or any other physical characteristic.
What, exactly, was it about Jacob that set him apart from the other fishers? For starters, Jacob approached the production and sales aspects of shrimp fishing much differently than other shrimp fishers. When I arrived at his home for the interview, he had just returned from the farmer’s market (almost two hours away) where he sells his shrimp every Saturday. “I sold out of shrimp again,” he proudly told me. “We do real well up there. We sell out just about every week.” Most trawlers sell their catch to the seafood docks, and not directly to the consumers. In doing so, they must accept whatever price the buyers are willing to pay. But as I came to discover over the course of the interview, Jacob markets most of his shrimp himself. In addition to the farmer’s market, he also sells to several local grocery stores. And perhaps most inimitable, he has a fully functioning website through which he can sell his shrimp to anybody across the U.S. that would like to buy it. He ships nationwide.

Jacob also boasted about the higher quality of his shrimp as compared to most other trawlers. Several years ago, he invested in on-board freezer technology that allows the shrimp to be frozen immediately after it is caught, often in their live state. Most other shrimp boats store their catch in a hatch filled with ice until they are able to unload it at the dock. The shrimp can sit in the ice hole for days at a time, but because they are not frozen, they deteriorate in quality over those days. Because his shrimp is quick frozen and thus higher-quality, he is able to sell it for a higher price. And because he bypasses the shrimp processor, he profits even more.

But it was not merely the way that Jacob catches and markets his shrimp that set him apart from others. Perhaps the most significant difference was his optimism regarding his future within the industry. I met Jacob toward the end of the first summer of...
fieldwork. Throughout the summer, I had become accustomed to hearing shrimp fishers recount their past and present struggles, as well as their troubled concerns for the industry’s future and their places in it. But Jacob was different. Like others, Jacob shared frustrations with what had become of the industry, and struggled a great deal as a result of the crisis. But instead of trying to persist on the same choppy waters, he decided to change course, and adapted to the shrimping crisis by innovating his practices. And so far, the decision has paid off.

Throughout my fieldwork experience, I ran across two other individuals who, like Jacob, changed their practices to adapt to the decline. And so far, they, too, have experienced considerable success. These individuals, who I call “innovative adapters”, do not fit Hirschman’s model: they have not exited, but they are not using voice in the way Hirschman defines it. Instead, this small but enterprising group has successfully adapted to the logic of the market in ways that allow them to remain viable producers while simultaneously preserving the meaningful occupational and cultural activities associated with their way of life.

In this chapter, I focus on the process and consequences of changing to adapt. In doing so, I argue that Hirschman’s conception of agency is too narrowly defined. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of production and shipping technologies, these local actors are not only fighting against global forces, they are using globalization in judo-like fashion to advance their own agenda. While this option may not always be available to individuals facing deterioration of organizational conditions, I argue that innovative adaptation in place is an important form of agency in many organizational settings.
Hirschman’s framework of exit, voice, and loyalty lays out the options available to actors who face deteriorating organizational conditions. First, there is exit, or leaving the organization altogether. Exit is most likely when better or equivalent options exist outside of the declining organization. But what about those instances when individuals do not wish to exit, or when exit is unavailable? Hirschman argues that, “The voice option is the only way in which dissatisfied customers or members can react whenever the exit option is unavailable (33).” He defines voice as “any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs” through some kind of appeal to higher authorities (33). His broad definition encompasses a wide range of behavior, from individually speaking up or voicing complaints to engaging in a mass demonstration, but all actions are directed toward a higher authority with the goal of bringing about positive change. Exit and voice, although distinct, are closely linked: the role of voice is strengthened as opportunities for exit decline. In other words, where high-quality exit options are unavailable, or when the costs of exit are too high, individuals are expected to engage in voice.

After exit or voice, actors in Hirschman’s model have no further options for action. But the case of Louisiana shrimpers reveals an additional way that actors can respond in cases of decline. Throughout the fieldwork experience, I ran across a small but distinct group of shrimp fishers that have responded to the shrimp fishing crisis by changing their practices in order to adapt to the declining occupational conditions.
Innovative adaptation involves changes in the way that they catch, store, and market their product. Motivated by a combination of both economic and non-economic considerations, these individuals found a way to both continue to earn a decent living while protecting the meaningful occupational and cultural identities associated with shrimp fishing.

In what follows, I first outline the components of innovative adaptation by answering the question: how, exactly, have some shrimp fishers managed to remain viable during the decline? Next, I describe the process by which shrimp fishers decided to change their practices. I show how like other trawlers, innovative adapters have struggled a great deal as a result of shrimp fishing crisis. But instead of exiting or turning to voice, they changed their practices in order to adapt to the decline. But is changing to adapt truly distinct from exit and voice? I next answer this question, detailing how innovative adaptation is an additional form of agency. Unlike voice, where actors appeal to higher authorities for change to come from above, innovative adaptation is a process of change that comes from below. Next, I show how innovative adaptation has resulted in positive outcomes, with both financial and personal rewards. But if innovating has led to successful outcomes, why have the persisters thus far failed to adapt? In the last section, I answer this question, focusing on the risks and difficulties associated with innovating.

The Components of Innovative Adaptation

The traditional way that in-shore Gulf shrimpers catch and market their shrimp is fairly straightforward. After shrimp is caught and sorted from by-catch and debris, it is stored in
the boat’s ice hole. The ice hole is a large, insulated hatch located under the back deck of
the boat that is filled with ice before the trip. The shrimp remain on ice in the hole until it
can be unloaded and sold to seafood docks or shrimp processors, who then freeze and
package the product and sell directly to the buyer. The processors, therefore, have control
over setting the price that shrimp fishers receive at the docks. Because shrimp fishers are
at the mercy of the prices set by shrimp processors, they largely blame the processors for
the collapse of the industry. On the whole, the strategies used by shrimp fishers to remain
viable have been developed to bypass the shrimp processor.

*On-Board Freezers*

The primary way that shrimpers have adapted to the decline is by investing in on-board
freezer technology. These large freezers take the place of the ice hole – freezing and
storing the shrimp until they can be unloaded. There are multiple benefits to having on-
board freezers. The first involves the storage and quality of shrimp. On-board freezers
can be used to produce a higher-quality and value-added product, known as individual
quick frozen (IQF) shrimp. Most of the imported shrimp that consumers buy in the
supermarket today are frozen according to IQF specifications. However, recall from
Chapter 1 that much of the imported shrimp contain traces or even high levels of
antibiotics and other chemicals, some of which have been made illegal in the U.S. and
Europe. But generally, IQF shrimp are a value-added product for several reasons.

First, during the freezing process, the shrimp are spread out evenly to prevent
clumping, so that each shrimp is individually frozen. Unlike shrimp that are frozen in
large blocks (as is traditionally done for shrimp caught on boats without freezer technology), individually frozen shrimp can be sorted according to uniformity of size and/or quality. Uniformity is especially important to chefs, restaurateurs, or retail markets who rely on consistency of product. Furthermore, because IQF shrimp can be thawed individually, they are more convenient than shrimp purchased in a block. Block frozen shrimp must be thawed in its entirety for it to be consumed. But with IQF shrimp, a consumer can thaw eight shrimp or eight pounds of shrimp depending upon need, thus reducing the likelihood of waste.

One of the most important features of IQF shrimp is its superior quality (Condrasky, Viuya and Howell 2005). During the freezing process, the shrimp are flash frozen very quickly using carbon dioxide that preserves the shrimp’s moisture and texture. Because they are frozen so quickly after their live state – and sometimes while they are live – the quality of the meat is typically higher than shrimp that sits in the ice hole for days at a time before they can be fully frozen. Shrimp are often stored on the boat for up to 10-12 days before it is unloaded at the dock. Over this time, it can deteriorate in quality. Because of its higher quality, IQF shrimp is sold at a higher price than block-frozen shrimp. Enhancing the quality of shrimp has been the primary focus of adapters precisely because it can yield a higher price. The marketing campaign that adapters have joined to sell their products requires that the shrimp be of a superior quality.

In addition to the value-added features of IQF shrimp, freezer boats provide another – perhaps even more significant – advantage: they enable shrimp fishers to reduce their dependency on the shrimp processors and sell directly to the consumer.
Shrimpers without on-board freezers are hamstrung: because they need to unload their shrimp, they are forced to accept the low prices offered by the shrimp processors, so that they can clear their boat out and go make another trip. On-board freezers, on the other hand, instantly freeze the shrimp individually. This enables shrimp fishers to package and sell their shrimp directly to the consumer, thus yielding a greater profit. Bypassing the processor – or cutting out the “middle man” – can really add up because commercial shrimp fishers typically deal in very large quantities of shrimp. For example, if a shrimp fisher can sell his or her product directly to the consumer for $1 more per pound when selling 10,000 pounds of shrimp, s/he profits an additional $10,000 that would have been made if the fisher sold to the docks. While investing in the freezer technology is initially quite expensive, the returns have been promising.

*Bending the Forces of Globalization: Using Technology to Market Shrimp*

In addition to installing on-board freezers, adapters have also changed the way that they market and sell their products. Instead of selling all of their catch to docks and/or seafood processors, shrimp fishers have taken the responsibility of selling their own shrimp. There are several ways that adapters sell their products. All of them have used farmer’s markets as a way of selling their shrimp. Moreover, the adapters all have found supermarkets that will regularly purchase their products. For example, one innovator regularly sells his shrimp to two of the state’s three Whole Foods markets. Another innovator regularly supplied the local grocery store chain with her shrimp. These
connections were made by visiting the stores in order to work out deals, or were opportunities created by word-of-mouth.

Two of the three adapters have developed their own marketing companies through which they promote and sell their shrimp. Each had a fully-functioning website that facilitated marketing and sales. Through the website, customers could order shrimp for delivery anywhere in the United States. And at the time of the interviews, each innovator was attempting to obtain the certification necessary to ship internationally. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of shipping and transportation technologies, these local actors have not only fought against the global forces that have led to collapse of their industry, they have bent them in ways advance their own agenda.

By changing the way they catch and market shrimp, the innovative adapters have significantly modified their operations. And thus far, they have experienced relative success as a result. But it is important to recognize that they did not transform their practices completely on their own. Rather, the adapters – especially those who developed their own marketing companies – were able to restructure their operations in part by forming alliances with various marketing and promotion groups developed to promote Louisiana and/or American seafood products. Such organizations, like the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board (LSPMB) and the White Boot Brigade (WBB), have recently formed with the purpose of promoting domestic, wild caught seafood as a higher-quality and more sustainable alternative to imported shrimp. In addition to getting shrimp fishers’ product out there in the market, these organizations also help shrimp fishers to innovate their businesses to produce a higher-quality (IQF) final product.
Shrimp fishers who have adapted to the decline by changing their practices have thus far enjoyed a higher level of financial success than those who merely persist doing things the same way. As a result, adapters are also more optimistic regarding their futures than non-adapters, and did not report the same levels of stress and depression that persisters often described. But, how and why did the adapters decide to make changes? In the next section, I show how like other shrimp fishers, those who went on to make changes also struggled a great deal after the industry began to collapse. But instead to merely taking the struggles as they came, these individuals decided to make changes to deal with the shrimp fishing crisis.

**Struggle as a Catalyst For Change**

Much like the exiters and persisters, adapters also suffered a great deal as the shrimp fishing industry began to collapse. Before the decline, they trawled in the same way that persisters continue to today: they went out to catch shrimp for around 10-12 days at a time, and stored their shrimp in their boats’ ice holes until it could be unloaded at the docks. They relied on the docks to purchase their shrimp, and from there it was taken to the processor for eventual distribution. Because they were subject to the low prices offered by the docks, adapters shared the same stories of struggle that were recounted by other trawlers.

Lori was thirty-eight years old when I spoke with her at her home in a neighboring bayou town. Lori was frequently recommended by other interview participants as someone who could lend insight into the struggles of trawlers. She had a
reputation for being an outspoken proponent for shrimp fishers’ rights, as she played an active role in the fight against Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs). Her roots in the industry were deep; her grandparents were full-time trawlers, but her parents were not; her father opted to work in the oil industry instead of trawling. Lori’s main connection to the industry came primarily from her husband Kirk, a third generation trawler. They had been married for twenty years, and had three sons and one daughter. Lori and Kirk trawled together before they had children, and continued to do so as their family expanded. In line with previous research on Cajun culture (Margavio et al. 1996; Bankston and Henry 2002), the interconnection between family and work was understood as an important part of their everyday life, and something that they sought to preserve.

Every summer we’d [trawl as a family]. It was nice, because there was no TV. Well, there’s television, but we got to spend a lot of family time together when we worked on the boat and did our thing. Inside the boat it’s like a house. I can bring you out on it. It’s like a house, it has everything except a washer and dryer on it but we just bring it home and wash it. But we’d go as a family.

Shrimp fishing always provided a very comfortable living for their family. Lori and Kirk lived in a large home that sat along the bayou-side, had three vehicles, and sent all four of their school-aged children to private schools. Additionally, they owned a hunting camp up north where Kirk took his sons every year during the off-season. Like other fishers, Lori and Kirk were caught off-guard by the sudden and dramatic collapse of the shrimp fishing industry.

All of a sudden, we got hit hard in the 2001 season. And we weren’t ready for what happened. To be honest with you, a lot of us panicked. I panicked. With our local government, we were trying to get things done, like where we could get our shrimp out there and make people understand what’s going on with the imports. And, there was just no help. [Lori, Innovator]
Given her experience in the political campaign against the TEDs regulations, Lori’s first inclination was to try to solve their problems through political channels. During the battle over TEDs, she regularly attended meetings sponsored by local shrimp fisher associations, where they discussed strategy and formulated their plans for how shrimp fishers would politically respond. She also traveled back and forth to Washington several times as part of an effort to draw attention to how TEDs would negatively impact shrimpers. Through all of this, she gained both the confidence and skills necessary to be on the frontlines of the struggle.

But with the TEDs defeat fresh in her mind, and the unresponsiveness of local government at the outset of the decline, she quickly drew the conclusion that trying to change anything through political channels was futile and unlikely to result in positive outcomes for fishers. Throughout the interview, she maintained high levels of doubt, distrust, and displeasure with governmental authority.

To be honest with you, when it comes to government, I think they’re the most pathetic part of America. Because they are no help. They don’t live like we live. And I mean like, middle class America. Or even those in poverty. These people have no idea what it’s like to live from check to check. Half of them have no idea what it is to run a business. Um, you know, to have these people in our country sickens me. And I’ve been up to DC, I’ve been at the local level, too. It’s all of them.

For Lori, depending upon government or elected officials for improvements in the industry was not an option. During the first few years following 2001, Lori and Kirk attempted to remain in the industry by doing things as they always had done: by selling their catch to the docks. In doing so, they were forced to deal with the docks’ low prices, and suffered much the same way as the persisters continue to today.
Charles, a third generation trawler, also experienced great hardship as a result of the shrimping crisis. Charles was in his mid-fifties, and had been trawling his entire life. His parents raised him on-board their shrimp boat from the time he was a toddler. And like many other trawlers of his generation, his parents pulled him out of school so that he could help them trawl year-round.

I went to about 9th grade, then my daddy took me out of school to help them trawl. I couldn’t tell you what year that was, but in ’77 I bought my first boat. I was around 21, 20. I been doing it ever since. [Charles, Innovator]

Literally trawling for his entire life, shrimp fishing was, as he stated, “all I know.” Only a few years after he dropped out of school, he purchased his own boat with the help of his parents. He trawled on that same boat until 1999, when he purchased the 60 foot boat he currently owned, named after his youngest daughter who at the time was sixteen years old. When he built the boat, he had no idea that it would be one of the last prosperous and relatively untroubled years for shrimp fishing. Although he had to go into debt to build the boat, he expected to be able to pay off his expenses relatively quickly, as he had done in the past.

When I built the boat, I wasn’t in debt. And, I had to put everything I had into it to build a boat. Mortgaged my house to build it. And everything happened, when I did this, not long after, a couple of years after, that’s when everything went downhill. It’s like, man, I’ve seen bad years when you don’t get no price for the shrimp. But I mean, we was able to make ends meet because everything was cheaper. But things was getting higher and higher and higher, and the price of shrimp going lower and lower and lower. [Charles, Innovative Adapter]

The shrimp crisis hit Charles particularly hard. Already deeply in debt from building his boat right before the crisis hit, he ran into a string of expensive mechanical
problems in 2003 that kept him from being able to trawl for over a month, including the opening of the May season, the most lucrative time to trawl. He could not afford to lose the time or the money that he was sinking into repairs. He tried to borrow more money from the bank, but was denied. Faced with few options, Charles began to make preparations to leave the industry. Fortunately, Charles had many years ago obtained a captain’s license in case he ever needed money in the off-season. He only worked on a tug boat once, for a few days; he did not like it and did not wish to return. But bills were mounting, and he feared that he would not be able to make it as a shrimper. Even though he did not want to leave the industry, he put his boat up for sale.

I was so fed up and disgusted, and I wanted to sell the boat. I had people to come and look at the boat. Me and my wife went and cleaned out the boat, I went and cleaned everything in the engine room, top to bottom. My heart was broken because I didn’t want to sell the boat. And uh, [begins to cry], I was really heartbroken because I didn’t want to sell the boat. And uh, [long pause] it makes me, anyway, I ended up not selling the boat. [long pause] I don’t like to talk about that. It’s just hard. We came so close to losing everything, that I went to sell what I worked my life for. You know? But uh, we still going, so far. [Charles, Innovative Adapter]

For Charles, nearly selling the boat was to hit rock bottom. There is a sentiment of shame Charles’ words here. When he remarked, “We came so close to losing everything, that I went to sell what I worked my life for,” there is disbelief in his voice, as if when thinking back, he has a hard time believing that he almost sold his boat. Like others, his boat is more than just a fishing vessel; it symbolizes a significant part of who he is, and the meanings he attaches to his life.

_Economic and Non-Economic Factors Combine to Produce Unique Outcomes_
The collapse of the shrimp fishing industry has had widespread, negative ramifications for those directly affected. Fortunately for shrimp fishers, there is an abundance of viable employment alternatives available in the burgeoning oil industry. As conditions continue to worsen, shrimp fishers and their families have been confronted with difficult choices regarding their futures. The outcomes of these difficult decisions are varied. In Chapter 3, I showed how some have chosen to follow the logic of the market and exit the industry for other employment, despite the non-market costs involved. But others, depicted in Chapter 4, have chosen to stay in and stick it out, despite the mounting economic struggles and hardships. These persisters have chosen to prioritize non-market factors – preserving meaningful cultural occupational identities – even though doing so has resulted in a variety of complications.

But the adapters have acted in a different way. In the face of occupational decline – and the hardships that accompany it – they chose not to exit the industry. At the same time, however, they also chose not to try to stick it out by persisting as they had always done. Instead, they have acted in a way that is distinct from exit, voice, or persisting: they decided to try to remain viable by changing their practices in order to adapt to the decline.

Like the persisters, adapters are motivated to preserve the meaningful occupational identities associated with their way of life. In the following statement, Lori acknowledges that if the financial need became too great, her husband would leave the industry in order to make ends meet.
If worse came to worst and he had to do something else, than that would be it. But I know that his heart is not into doing anything else. He would be miserable, and I’m talking miserable, doing something else. Because this is what he knows. It’s who he is. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

While she acknowledges the importance of financial obligations, she quickly follows up this statement by noting non-economic factors that act as a barrier to exit. Non-market considerations rest primarily on the family’s cultural connection to the industry, and the pride that accompanies being a small commodity producer.

People need to realize that shrimping and trawling are a way of life, not just a livelihood or a paycheck. This is something that has been handed down from generation to generation and is our tradition and heritage. We have all been raised to live off the land, and we take pride in being self sufficient and self motivated. We take pride in seeing our catch and running our vessel and knowing that it is all built with our own hands. Trawling is the heart and soul of our family, where we feel unity and get to be together. What we know is this: we would not want to trade this lifestyle for anything else. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

If economic considerations trumped all others, Kirk would have left the industry when the industry collapsed, as he stood to make a very profitable living working on tug boats or another oil related industry. But, as Lori noted, non-economic factors – “his heart” – kept him from exiting. Motivated by the desire to preserve the meaningful cultural and occupational identities provided by shrimp fishing, Lori and Kirk decided to change how they normally operated in order to maintain a decent standard of living.

Other adapters also sought to remain in shrimp fishing because of its significance to how they constructed personal and occupational identities. Because Charles had recently taken on such a high debt load to build his boat, we might assume that his economic investment in the industry was far too great for him to exit at that time. And
surely, other economic considerations factored into his decision-making. In addition to his debt, he had children at home that he was supporting: both a teenaged daughter and his oldest daughter’s four-year-old son. Charles and his wife were raising their grandson because their daughter was struggling with drug abuse and legal problems.

Economic considerations such as debt load and family support surely play an important role in decision making processes. But to fully understand the decisions that individuals make, we must look beyond economic factors alone. Charles explained how he knew that he could make a considerable amount of money if he left shrimp fishing, but he chose to remain despite this.

A lot of guys that I went to the school with and guys that, you know, I met when I was on the streets, like in the bar room you know, who I became friends with, they’re all running tug boats and they’re making tons of money, hell of a lot of money. I have a friend and he told me he’s making $500 a day. He told me that they paying $18,000 for the boat that he’s on. I said, it makes no sense. The people wonder why we paying so high for fuel. But it makes sense: they pay $18,000 a day for one boat. But I mean, it’s happening. Just like, [a friend who owns shrimp dock], I don’t see him very often, but I seen him the other day. And he told me that [he knew of a] crew boat that lost a job because of the captain. What happened, he didn’t tell me. But the captain made the boat lose the job. One of the crewmen told [his friend], “you know, that’s the best thing that ever happened to me.” And [his friend] said, “best thing that ever happened?” And [the crewman] said, “I got a job for another crew boat now, and they pay $1000 a day, which is more than what we was making before.” So, I started thinking, you know, when I came back home. That’s $30,000 in a month. $365,000 a year more that man is making. And he’s making it! … And other captains are probably making the same thing… But I’m not into that, you know, it’s not something I never did care to what to want to do. I always wanted to fish, and I love it. It’s been my livelihood. It’s who I am. I want to do it. [Charles, Innovator]

If economic considerations were the dominant factors in decision-making, Charles would have exited years ago. He acknowledged that he stood to earn a very comfortable living if
he exited and put his captain’s license to use. He could pay off his debt quite handily if he took a job as a tugboat captain. But knowing this, he chose not to leave behind the fishing industry. Shrimp fishing is tightly connected to how he understands himself, and the world around him.

In this sense, adapters are similar to the persisters, whose personal and cultural connections to the industry act as a barrier to exit. But at the same time, adapters recognized that struggling to stay afloat by continuing with business as usual was not working. Remaining in the industry only to reap the personal and cultural rewards was not enough. Charles did not want to merely stay the course if it meant scrimping and pinching to get by. He had gone fairly deeply into debt when he built his boat in 1999. When the crisis hit, he knew that if he failed to act, he would lose his boat and be forced out of the industry.

The year I put the freezer in, I almost lost everything I had. I came down to like 8 or 9 hundred dollars to my name. *Down to my name!* What happened was, I put the freezer, you know, I put everything I had into the boat when I built it. I put the freezer in 3 years ago, in 2003, in the winter. So the money was there to put a little aside. I put it into the freezer, ‘cause I saw what was happening. I saw that’s what we’d have to do. Try to go on our own to build it. I said, we gonna lose everything we have if we don’t. So I say, what’s the difference? I put everything I had, and I borrowed some more money to put in the freezer. If we lose, we lose everything now, or we lose everything later. There’s no difference. We might as well try it. So we did, and so far we’ve been successful with it. [Charles, Innovative Adapter]

Investing in the freezer technology was a final attempt for Charles to stay in the industry. Thus far, he’s experienced success as a result of this decision. The freezer allows Charles to completely bypass the processors (also referred to as factories) and to sell the shrimp himself. Once the frozen shrimp is unloaded from his boat, Charles has access to several
large freezers where he stores his shrimp. He described how he has several consistent
buyers for his shrimp, but remarked that as the price that processors continues to fall,
some of his buyers have been unwilling to pay the price that Charles asks, always at least
a dollar above what the docks offer.

Right now, I don’t sell to the factories, I got a freezer boat. I sell a lot
to the markets…[But] it’s just getting to the point where the people in
the markets are starting to pay like the factories. They check to see
what the factory’s got. They say, “but, the factories, they buying it for
this?” They only wanna give you 30, 40, 50 cents above [the factory
price], you know? And they want you to deliver it. But, with the price
of gas and stuff, it’s not worth my time. [Charles, Innovative
Adapter]

Charles expressed reluctance at using the internet. A lifelong trawler who dropped out of
school in the 9th grade to help his parents trawl he admitted that he knows little about
computers. But he has his regular markets and buyers both in town and in surrounding
communities, and manages to get by selling to those regular customers. Fortunately, in
the few years since he’s been selling his shrimp, he has compiled a list of consumers who
are interested in his product. Having options allows him to maximize his selling potential;
he goes through his list until he can find a buyer willing to pay the price that he sets.

But I’m fortunate enough, I got me two or three customers they
willing to pay. They like the product, and they willing to pay me. But
they’re not all I have. I have a book full of people, but out of them,
there are only 3 or 4 that’s willing to pay. And I got one of them, her
husband is a fisherman. She won’t buy nobody’s shrimp but mine.
She’ll buy it if I can’t provide, but if I can provide it, she’ll buy it
because she rathers my shrimp. I got a couple of customers like that,
not a whole bunch, they’ll pay. Another guy buys market. And I got
one guy, he’d buy everything that I’d catch, except the real small
shrimp. But he’s one of those that don’t wanna pay. He pays more
than what the other ones wanna pay. If I can’t sell to the people that I
get a good price for, if I got a bunch left, I dump it on him. I call him,
and he’ll come and pick it up. I got 2 of ‘em like that, they’re both,
uh. Well, the one pays a little bit more than the other one sometimes.
I guess it depends what’s going on at the time with them. I don’t know. [Charles, Innovative Adapter]

Out of the adapters with whom I spoke, Charles had the smallest-scale operation. He only sells the shrimp that his boat produces, and so his customer base is limited to what he can produce.

Jacob and Lori, the other two adapters, have developed more sophisticated operations. Both of them have invested in the freezer technology, but they invested further in the marketing and sales components of their operations. Jacob and Lori are both much younger than Charles, by nearly twenty years. There is variation in the years of education obtained by each: Lori has taken several courses on marketing at the local community college, but Jacob – like Charles – dropped out of school by the tenth grade to shrimp full time.

Neither Jacob nor Lori had innovated before the decline hit; both decided to change their operations as a direct response to the declining conditions. Desperate to find a way to remain in the industry, Lori took a proactive role in finding a way to remain viable that did not include exit or using voice, an option in which she did not fully believe.

[When the crisis hit], I went out and researched everything. And in doing that, in 2002 when prices were low, we did a lot of roadside sales. Then, we saved everything that we had and we poured it right back into our business. We have a freezer in the back of our house, we put a freezer on board our boat to where you can put it in the freezer as it comes in. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

The first step that Lori and her husband Kirk took toward changing their practices was small but significant. Instead of selling all of their shrimp to the docks or processors, Lori sold a portion of their fresh product through roadside sales, similar to fruit and vegetable
stands that often sit in front of family farms. It is not uncommon to see signs and stands along the road advertising fresh shrimp. In this instance, the shrimp is typically sold by family members of the shrimp fishers, and not the shrimp fishers themselves, who cannot afford to take the time away from catching shrimp. Thus, in order to be able to engage in this practice, a shrimp fisher must have friends or family members willing to do this. None of the persisters that I spoke with sold their own shrimp this way because they were either unwilling to invest the time away from being on the boat, or they did not have family members who were willing to sell the shrimp full time.

Instead of going out on the boat to help her husband trawl as she had in the past, Lori chose to stay on land and sell their own shrimp, a move that proved to be profitable enough to provide the capital necessary to build their own company through which they sell their product. In addition to investing freezer technology for their boat, they also eventually built their own seafood dock and mini-processing plant behind their house.

The dock is new, it’s brand new we just built that. After [Hurricane Katrina] we couldn’t unload. We didn’t have a place to go unload anything. And other boats didn’t have a place to unload. So, we just put it together as quickly as possible and started unloading for us and other boats. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

Their backyard facility includes a dock for unloading shrimp and small warehouse where they can sort, package, and store the frozen products. With their processing equipment, they are not limited to selling only that which they themselves produce. Rather, they are also able to purchase (usually unfrozen) shrimp from other shrimp fishers when there is a demand for more product than they can produce. They buy this shrimp from others at a higher price than what is paid by the dock. Their dock and warehouse have greatly
reduced their need to rely on the processors, but Lori noted that because of the large
volume of shrimp they produce, they still sell some of their shrimp to the seafood dock.

Yeah, we still [rely on the docks]. We still do. We’re working on not having to. But for right now, yeah. We have to. It’s just, it’s not an option, just because we catch a lot of shrimp. But, we do buy shrimp off of other boats. We hand out our cards and tell them this is what we’re looking for. So, this is what you have to provide. So, that’s worked from there. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

Like Lori, Jacob also produces more shrimp than he can process himself and so he purchases from other shrimp fishers to fulfill demand. Because of this, he still must deal with the docks. But Jacob is fortunate to have a close and trusting relationship with the dock with whom he deals. In fact, Jacob noted that his dock owner has helped him to build his sales business.

I do, I deal with the dock. I don’t deal with the processor. I deal with a dock that’s helped me to come where I’m at now. He’s worked with me for years, this guy…And, you know, without this guy working with me at the dock, I wouldn’t be where I’m at now. But he knows what I’m doing, you know, can ultimately help his business also. That’s what he’s looking for. He pays his fishermen 50 cents over the other docks for some quality shrimp, he freezes them, he has a CO2 [carbon dioxide] machine, he freezes them. And, you know, it’s a program where the fisherman has a little more incentive. He has a lot of boats that work for him, it’s a pretty good deal that he has going, but it’s not of the best quality, it’s not IQF. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

Jacob and Lori have built their businesses in part by using the internet to market their shrimp. Both have fully functioning websites through which they can ship their product nationwide. At the time of the interview, both individuals were working toward receiving certification so they could ship their products internationally. Jacob and Lori both acknowledged that part of their success is attributable to the organizations that they have partnered with. Both individuals also have also become involved with several
organizations founded to aid in the enhancement of the quality of shrimp, and promote
Louisiana seafood as a value-added product.

Jacob has perhaps enjoyed the highest degree of success of all of the adapters.
Through his partnerships with organizations like the LSPMB and White Boot Brigade, he
has made contacts with companies and restaurant businesses across the country that now
regularly purchase his product. He described on particular restaurant in California that he
made contact with when he visited the state as part of a promotional event for Louisiana
seafood with the White Boot Brigade.

I have this one restaurant that I’m selling shrimp to, it’s this
restaurant here [shows me a pamphlet]. We went and do a function
there at the restaurant, and I was selling those shrimp from $13-15 a
pound. And he’s selling it for $24 a pound. So, this is something that
can and will work. If you just make the time, and people who are
willing to support what you’re trying to do. It can work. [Jacob,
Innovative Adapter]

For the size of shrimp that Jacob was selling, most shrimp fishers would receive around
two to three dollars a pound from the dock or processor. Jacob was able to receive nearly
four to seven times the amount more by selling directly to the restaurant owner. In
addition to this restaurant, his shrimp have been featured in the catalog of a popular,
high-end consumer retail company. He was also in negotiations with Google when I last
spoke to him in September of 2007. Google was interested in purchasing his shrimp to
use in their cafeterias on their main campus in California. In addition to all of these new
markets, he also continued to supply one of the area’s local grocery store chains with a
regular supply of shrimp.

When I started doing this, I really didn’t extend myself. I just made
the shrimp to make the customer base happy. That’s a job in itself.
You know, right now, we’re selling probably, 10-15 thousand
pounds a month. Yeah, some months are more some are less, but the average is about 10,000 pounds a month. Selling shrimp. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

As Jacob’s business continues to grow, there is increased demand for his product. The demand for his product has far surpassed what his boat is capable of producing. As such, like Lori, he has begun to purchase shrimp from other fishers to meet this demand. And for that shrimp, he pays a higher price than what the fishers would receive at the dock. But he also noted that the shrimp he buys must be comparable in quality to the shrimp that his boat produces. As his own business expands, he sees an opportunity for other fishers who can produce IQF shrimp to make more money selling to him.

What could be done is that I could buy shrimp from fishermen, you know, done the same way that I do it and produce the same quality and I can pay these fishermen right from the start, I could pay them double what they dock’s paying them. Without any question, and still turn a profit. You know, just starting out, I could see this thing really starting off. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

Innovative adaptation need not require shrimp fishers to develop and operate the same type of marketing operation as Jacob and Lori. Indeed, because many shrimp fishers dropped out of school at an early age, many, like Charles, lack the skills necessary to develop such a sophisticated business model. However, by installing on-board freezers, shrimp fishers have a valuable opportunity to receive higher returns on their final products. Jacob and Lori both are proponents of helping shrimp fishers to be able to convert their boats to freezer boats as they recognize this opportunity for shrimp fishers to both earn a better living and preserve important cultural identities that are associated with shrimping.
Innovative adaptation: A Distinct Form Of Agency

The innovative adaptation described above is distinct from Hirschman’s concepts of exit and voice. Obviously, by adapting to the decline, adapters have not exited the industry. Instead, they have found a way to remain viable within the industry, and maintain their occupational identities as shrimp fishers. Some might argue that by changing the way they have always conducted business, adapters have, in a sense, exited from the traditional way of life as a shrimper. Shrimp fishers typically have not dealt with the marketing and sales aspects of the industry. The adapters have adapted to the decline by finding ways to reduce or eliminate their dependence on the seafood docks and shrimp processors. Marketing and selling their shrimp has been part of this process.

But even though innovative adapters invest more time in the sales component of shrimp fishing, all three adapters continue to be highly involved in the production process. Both Charles and Jacob regularly make trips out on their boats, although each has a crew (including a captain) that can run the boat for them if they need to be absent. Lori spends most of her time involved in the sales and marketing aspect of the family’s shrimp fishing business, but Kirk and their oldest son continue to trawl full-time. Even though Lori now rarely goes out on fishing trips with her family, she still considers herself a commercial fisher; shrimp fishing is, after all, the family’s business.

I started out as a fisherman, and adapted to become a dock, because I need to be a dock, and a retailer, and a wholesaler. I’ve adapted to all of those other things because if I didn’t we were gonna go down hard….But I’m still a fishermen, a fisher at heart. My husband has been doing it for 20 years. You know? That’s his thing. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]
While Lori and Jacob have transformed their shrimp fishing ventures into full-scale companies, innovative adaptation need not include developing such a company. Charles does not use the internet to market his shrimp, nor does he have a company through which he markets his shrimp. Instead he relies on word-of-mouth and several consistent buyers. Charles spends a considerable amount of time out on his boat with his crew.

Innovative adaptation is also clearly distinct from voice. Hirschman conceptualized voice as an active attempt to repair or improve the organization through communication to higher authorities for change. If voice is successful, change or restructuring would come from above. Indeed, some shrimp fishers, like Lori and Jacob, have attempted to appeal to governmental authorities for improvements, with little success. Both of them have in the past been involved with shrimp fishers organizations designed to fight against regulations (like TEDs) and fight for the industry. But by and large, these efforts were fruitless. Innovative adaptation is clearly distinct from voice because it involves taking personal initiative to find a solution. Innovative adaptation, therefore, represents restructuring and change that happens from below. Jacob illustrated this point when he discussed why he has not become involved in political struggles to fight decline. Instead, he has partnered with marketing and promotion organizations who want to help make American IQF Gulf shrimp a specialty product.

I don’t try to get too involved in the politics. I try to focus on what I know could make a difference. The last year I’ve been getting more and more involved with the Seafood Promotion Board, with this and that, and you know, doing this “Chefs Afield”, which I only got a couple hundred dollars to do. Like the Shell commercial, I mean, I shut my boat down, we was making 10,000 dollars a week when I shut my boat down. We painted it, cleaned it, did all kind of work and then did the commercial. And I got $2200 to do it, and it cost e about 10 grand. So I didn’t get nothing out the deal. But, I thought it
was something that needed to be done, and I did it. And it came out really good. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

Through his partnerships with various marketing and promotion organizations, Jacob and his shrimp have been featured on a local television show (“Chefs Afield”) and a commercial for Shell. These organizations do not fight through political channels for improvements; rather, they have been established to promote domestic seafood products. Innovative adaptation is therefore an additional way that actors can use agency in the face of decline.

It is true that not all individuals facing industrial decline may have the opportunity to change their practices to adapt. After all, shrimp fishers are uniquely situated as owners and operators of their own businesses. But by examining their response to declining occupational conditions, I uncover additional options that exist beyond exit or voice. Such an understanding can be applied to waged workers in declining industries.

When the steel industry collapsed in the 1970s, workers were not afforded the opportunity to change basic operations in order to remain competitive. Many workers acted according to Hirschman’s model: they either used voice in attempt to save the industry (Lynd 1982), or exited if they had other options.

But we would be remiss if we stopped there and looked no farther to understand steel workers’ responses to decline. In some instances, such as what happened with the Weirton Steel Corporation, workers collaborated to pull resources and buy closing plants, re-opening them under worker- or community-owned ventures (Lieber 1995). And research on the labor process has shown how in the past workers responded to deteriorating conditions by making the conditions of their work more manageable so that
they do not have to exit (Burawoy 1979). Innovative adaptation is in many ways analogous to how these workers in industrial settings have reshaped the labor process to invent new skills and rewrite rules to make conditions of work more tolerable. Applying Hirschman in this setting provides new insight back into the organizational setting.

**The Promising Returns of Innovative Adaptation**

The innovative adapters took risks by changing the way they both catch and market shrimp. And thus far, they have experienced promising returns on their investments. Two primary characteristics set them apart from the persisters, who have thus far failed to innovate. First, adapters have achieved a higher level of profitability than non-adapters. All of them proudly asserted how they have managed to remain viable in a declining occupation. But the other, and perhaps more considerable, feature that sets innovative adapters apart is their optimism regarding their futures in the industry. Their optimism is most perceptible through their attitudes toward their children’s (and grandchildren’s) futures within the industry.

Most of the persisting shrimpers expressed reluctance regarding their children’s futures and desires to carry on the tradition of shrimp fishing. For example, in discussing the likelihood that his son will continue the family legacy in trawling, Daniel remarked:

I’m trying to take care of my little boy, who’s five years old. He’s telling me he wants to work as a trawler. He says, “when I grow up I want to be a deckhand”. We’re trying to discourage him. He loves it, though. I think I’m gonna try to make him do some rough stuff so he’ll want to quit. But, I guess my dad did that to me, too. [Daniel, Persister]
J.T. responded in a similar way to the same question:

I’m a 3rd generation fisherman, my son would be the 4th generation. It’s stopping right here. I can guarantee that. He will be going to college. I’d drop dead tomorrow if he didn’t go to college. If he gets a college degree and wants to come back to fish, fine. But, you can’t take that degree away from him. [J.T., Persister]

J.T’s. reluctance – or even downright refusal – to permit his son to enter the industry without any solid back-up plan is indicative of persisters’ grim perception of shrimp fishing’s future.

Adapters, on the other hand, were both hopeful and optimistic regarding their children’s and grandchildren’s futures within the industry. Lori had five children. Her seventeen-year-old son already owned his own boat that he planned to fully operate when he graduated from high school the following year. When asked if she wanted her children to carry on the legacy of trawling, she replied:

Well, we have a 4th generation 17 year old, and a 5th generation going on two (years old)...My little girl wants to be a captain on one of the boats. Will she? I don’t know. You know? She said her husband is gonna be her deckhand, and her daddy’s gonna be her deckhand. You know? That’s her aspiration because she’s watched us and seen what we can do. But hopefully, she’ll take over my part of it. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

The fifth generation shrimp fisher that she refers to is her grandson, the son of her oldest daughter. Lori’s assumption that he will become a trawler demonstrates her belief in the continued viability of their shrimp fishing business. Similarly, Charles did not have any sons, but he did have a grandson, who was three-and-a-half at the time of the interview. Charles sometimes brought his grandson out on the boat with him, when he went out on shorter trips.
He likes to come on the boat. As far as to say if he’ll come, I don’t know. By the time he’ll be that old, maybe I’ll still be around. Maybe I’ll still be in business, maybe I won’t. I hope I am. [Charles, Adaptive Innovator]

For Charles to answer the question regarding his grandson’s future, he must look into the future about fifteen years. Charles was already in his late fifties, and hoped to still be in business when his grandson was old enough to trawl. His hopeful expectation that he’ll still be in business – and openness to his grandson’s involvement – sets him apart from most persisting trawlers.

Finally, Jacob has one son, who was 16 years old. He often brought his son out on trips with him when his son was younger. But over the past few years, his son had gotten into a bit of trouble, and recently dropped out of high school. As Jacob noted, “He wants to run the street with his buddies, and you know, hang out, drink, and do bad things that you do when you’re a teenager. He wants to do all of those things.” Although his son has not recently expressed the interest in getting into the business, Jacob hoped that in the future, when his son comes out of the rebellious teenage years, he would take up shrimp fishing. When I asked if his son were going to carry on the legacy, he remarked:

I would love it, I really would. Because I see a bright future in this. But, he’s got to want to do it, I can’t force him. And will he? I don’t know. He knows what it’s all about. He could probably run this boat, if he put his head to it. In six months he could be running this boat…But with the opportunities I’ve had, he’d be foolish not to get into it. By the time he’s twenty years old, I could get him making six figures. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]
Obstacles to Changing Course

So far, I have shown how by changing their practices, the adapters have managed to remain viable in a declining industry. I have also shown how in addition to their financial success in the industry, they have a greater sense of optimism regarding the future than persisters. Given these observations, several important questions follow: If innovating has led to success, why have so few shrimpers chosen to change their practices?

There are several explanations for the failure of persisters to adopt the methods of the innovative adapters. For starters, changing to adapt is expensive, and many are unable – or unwilling – to take on the financial burden of these practices. Installing the proper equipment to produce IQF shrimp can cost upwards of tens of thousands of dollars. In order to obtain this kind of capital, most shrimp fishers must go into debt. All of the adapters had to take on a greater debt burden in order to build their businesses. For example, recall Charles’ sentiment regarding taking on debt to attempt to remain viable (“I put everything I had, and I borrowed some more money to put in the freezer. If we lose, we lose everything now, or we lose everything later. There’s no difference. We might as well try it.”). Compare this statement to Daniel’s, the 4th generation persister, who wants to discourage his son from getting into the business:

Yeah, you gotta have at least $50 thousand or so to get set up to do that. I’d rather just keep the money where it’s at in my pocket. You know another thing I learned being in this business? I’m never gonna be rich because I’m too scared to borrow…When I owe somebody something, I can’t sleep at night. Let’s put it this way and all: it’s not that I can’t sleep, but I might lay down at night and think about it. You know, I don’t owe nobody nothing. I bought a truck last month. My other truck broke in half. A tire fell off and all that. Twenty thousand dollars, and I went and paid for it, right there. I don’t
wanna owe nobody nothing. That’s why I’ll never be no millionaire, or at least act like a millionaire. [Daniel, Persister]

For Daniel, the expense of upgrading on-board technology to produce the higher-quality IQF shrimp is cost-prohibitive. As discussed in Chapter 4, traditionally shrimp fishers have been able to earn enough money to pay off their debts, such as boat notes and mortgages, in a relatively short amount of time. Being indebted to others has typically been looked upon as unfavorable and risky. As a result, many persisters – like Daniel – are unwilling to take financial risks involved with transforming their practices. Jacob further recognized the financial barriers to innovating.

I have fellow fishermen that are ready right now, if they had money to invest in their boats, they would put a freezer on, they would sell me their products. I have fishermen that are really interested in what I’m doing and you know, what I’m doing is gonna help to make a difference. But it’s lack of money, it’s what it is. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

Jacob recognized that financial costs are prohibitive for many fishermen. And in the recent past, he has brought up these issues in formal and informal meetings of the various organizations with who he closely works with to try to develop demand for high-quality Louisiana shrimp. He hoped that bringing up these issues would eventually result in programs that are directed toward providing incentives for adopting adaptive techniques.

These fishermen have boat notes, they have operating costs. They need somebody to come and step in and give them matching grants, or something to give them incentive to get, you know, freezers on their boat, and you know, improve quality. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

At the same time, however, Jacob realizes that there are barriers that exist that go beyond the financial; there are social obstacles that exist as well. Jacob is one of the first trawlers that have taken the initiative to dramatically change the way he catches and
markets his shrimp. Jacob attributes the transformation of his operations to the
development of skepticism and jealousy among those who have not changed to adapt.

>[Innovative adaptation has] been helping, but there’s always people
there that knock you down because you’re doing something that’s
different. There’s so much jealousy and envy in this industry. .
.When we was putting this refrigeration on and doing all this work, it
was like, you know, others said, “well, the Seafood Promotion Board
is paying for his freezer.” And they said, “LSU was paying for it.” It
was a bunch of rumors that were going around. And I didn’t pay
attention, because I knew that in my heart I was the one who’s taking
all the bills. Retrofitting this boat is probably, just equipment
purchases and parts to put it together, it probably cost me around
$120,000. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

The skepticism that others harbored regarding Jacob’s change of business practices is
manifest in the distrust of the organizations that Jacob has partnered with that have
provided assistance with the transformation process. This skepticism and distrust of
organizations is consistent with shrimp fishers’ distrust of politicians and government.
Jacob has partnered with several organizations as part of his transformation of business
practice. For the most part, these organizations have been working toward developing a
demand for high quality, wild caught gulf shrimp. Several of these organizations are
made up of representatives from a variety of academic, agricultural, and governmental
agencies; one organization has attempted to bring shrimp fishers and processors together
to work toward creating higher quality shrimp. And, as discussed extensively in Chapter
3, many shrimp fishers are reluctant to become involved because of high levels of distrust
toward research institutions, federal agencies, and (especially) seafood processors.

In addition to fear of being taken advantage of by organizations, adapters also
remarked how fear of change has also contributed to the failure of many to jump on-
board with new ways of doing business. Over the past fifty years, there has been little
change in the way that shrimp fishers typically conducted their operations. Changing longstanding business practices is always accompanied by uncertainty and risk. In addition to financial risks, there are practical risks (“what if this doesn’t work”) and cultural risks (“how might changing practices impact how I view myself?”). For many, the insecurity regarding change may be insurmountable.

We are individual fishermen, and we all have the prerogative to go and do whatever we want, like all this shit that I did. You know, I’m doing it because I want to make a difference and change. It’s really, I mean, you roll the dice when you do this. A lot of people are afraid of change, they don’t want the change. But without change, you’re not gonna survive [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

Similarly, Lori mentioned people’s fear of change as a reason why innovative adaptation has failed to spread.

They’re gonna have to rely on themselves and get themselves out of this fix if they want to survive in this industry. Nobody wants to change. They don’t want to change, they’ve been doing it this way for ages and ages, and it’s hard to change. So, I think that’s the problem there. [Lori, Innovative Adapter]

Lori’s comments here are of multiple significances. First, she reinforces Jacob’s assertion that fear of change acts as a barrier to innovative adaptation. But also, with her words she draws a distinction between “us” (the adapters) and “them” (the non-adapters). By emphasizing how “they” have thus far failed to take initiative to change, she draws attention to how she and her family have – on their own – transformed their operations. Some might understand her words to be shaming of those who remain in without changing. To her, persisters are acting irrationally. However, with this, she ignores the economic barriers that exist for many that prevent them from changing their practices to the extent that her family was able.
It is important to note that these adaptive techniques to remain viable in a declining industry are fairly new. Right before I left the field, in the summer of 2007, I attended the inaugural meeting an organization called the Shrimp Task Force. The Shrimp Task Force is a special division of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board and was organized to focus specifically on Louisiana shrimp. At the meeting – attended by Jacob, Lori, and several processors – they outlined as a future goal bringing more shrimp fishers on board with enhancing the quality of their shrimp through IQF certification. They recognized that bringing more shrimp fishers on-board with their program will require an on-the-ground effort to educate and train them on how they can get a better price for their shrimp. And they further recognized that this will be no easy task. But, adapters believe that if they are going to survive in the industry, changing practices to produce and sell a value-added product is necessary. And Jacob sees plenty of room for everyone within this movement.

I see it as a lot bigger picture. Either you gonna stay the same or you’re gonna go farther. That’s how I see it. They gonna really make a difference, you can’t just keep going at it. I don’t want it just for me. I can’t do it just myself. I want to be able to bring these fishermen together and say, you know, let’s take pride in what we do. You know, let’s put out a really good, quality product and create a demand. That’s what I’m trying to do with why I changed my boat, is try to create this demand. [Jacob, Innovative Adapter]

This type of optimism is almost completely missing among the persisters. Because changing to adapt is a relatively recent phenomenon still in its nascent stages, future research will track the development and spread of these techniques.
Conclusion

As the shrimp fishing industry began to collapse, a handful of individuals have taken initiative to change the way they conduct business to adapt to the declining conditions. Instead of fully relying on the low prices offered by seafood docks and shrimp processors, these enterprising individuals have transformed their practices so that they can begin to bypass these low prices and sell directly to the consumer, at a higher price. They have also updated their production capabilities to include techniques that can yield a higher-quality product. This value-added shrimp can be sold as a premium product at a higher price.

Outside of exit or voice, Hirschman does not allow for other forms of agency in the face of decline. He therefore misses the possibility that individuals can change to adapt to deterioration. Innovative adaptation is unique from both exit and voice. Indeed, by finding ways to remain viable in a declining industry, individuals have found a way to avoid exit. But adapting is clearly distinct from voice as well; Innovative Adapters have not appealed to higher authorities to restore the industrial conditions to their pre-collapse conditions. This type of voice seeks change from above. Rather, by taking personal initiative to change, adapters have found a way to transform their operations to adjust to deteriorating conditions in profitable ways. This represents change occurring from below.

The case of Louisiana shrimp fishers also contributes to our knowledge on how local actors are affected by globalization processes. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of shipping and transportation technologies, these local actors are not only fighting against global forces,
they are using them in judo-like fashion to advance their own agenda. Both critics and
defenders of globalization agree that global forces sweep away traditional occupations --
but disagree about whether this is positive or negative. By closely studying how local
actors actually behave in the face of globalization, I find that the outcomes are not always
straightforward. Globalization may pose significant challenges to maintaining meaningful
occupational identities while at the same time create new and unexpected opportunities
for preserving and extending traditional ways of life.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

In this ethnographic case study of present and former shrimp fishers in southeast Louisiana, I examine how local actors respond when traditional ways of life are disrupted by globalization and occupational decline. Most theories of neoliberal globalization and restructuring focus primarily on the global forces that disrupt, dislocate, and destroy local worlds, neglecting or downplaying the agency of local actors. As a result, local actors and cultures are often viewed as passive victims of globalization’s tide. However, this research, based on two extended periods of fieldwork in a Gulf Coast community facing occupational decline, uncovers not victimization but agency at every turn. Local actors’ choices, I show, highlight the importance of understanding globalization as a process of complex interactions between global forces and local actors, rather than as a monolithic force that destroys everything in its path.

I use Hirschman’s exit, voice, and loyalty framework as my theoretical point of departure because Hirschman’s framework is actor-centered and thus places agency at the core of the analysis: people can respond to organizational decline by choosing exit in search of better conditions elsewhere; they can exercise voice, appealing to authorities for improvements that might make exit unnecessary; or they can remain loyal, patiently
waiting for circumstances to improve. My analysis, however, reformulates Hirschman by re-interpreting the meaning of his categories in three important ways.

I first focus on the “exiters”, or those who left shrimp fishing for other forms of employment. If we did not take a closer look at how these actors have struggled with both the decision to leave shrimping and the consequences of that decision, we might be tempted to consider them as triumphant victors over globalization’s storms: they have jumped the sinking ship of occupational decline for one that it much more safe and secure. In doing so, they appear to fit squarely into Hirschman’s model, following the logic of economic rationality right out the door for available and better opportunities. But by studying exit as a process rather than an outcome, I reveal several significant limitations in Hirschman’s theory.

I show how the decision to exit is not merely an outcome of a simple calculation of costs and benefits as Hirschman presumes. Shrimp fishers in my case study live nearby the oil industry that provides an ample number of viable employment alternatives. Hirschman’s model would predict that shrimp fishers would either exit for these better alternatives, or be engaged in some type of voice effort to restore the shrimp fishing industry to its pre-decline condition. And while some have exited, others – the “persisters” – have opted to instead stay in and stick it out without using voice or believing that conditions will improve. Why do some exit while others choose to remain? Economic factors alone do not account for the differences, as there is no real pattern that exists among current and ex-shrimpers’ economic situations. But there was a definitive pattern that exists among shrimpers’ family histories within the industry. I therefore
argue that we must look beyond economic factors when attempting to understand outcomes of globalization and occupational decline.

But just because exiters generally do not have the same historical ties to the industry as those who remain, does this mean that exit is an easy process? Absolutely not. By following up with exiters after they leave the industry, I uncover important non-economic costs of exit. I show that exiters did not readily arrive at the decision to leave. Rather, the decision-making process was marked with emotional struggle and even apprehension, even though they realized that they stood to gain economically upon exit. And although most ex-shrimpers are enjoying financial rewards of exit, their decisions have come with non-economic costs. Nonmarket costs have been generally underexplored by critics of globalization, who tend to focus on the more visible victims of globalization, such as unemployed and/or displaced factory workers. Globalization proponents, on the other hand, have also minimized non-economic costs, as they typically view the free movement of labor associated with globalization as a positive feature. By focusing on ex-shrimpers, my research adds the insight that non-economic costs of industrial decline and economic dislocation – that are part and parcel of globalization processes – can be as important to those affected as the economic costs.

After the exiters, I turn the spotlight toward those who appear to buck the logic of economic rationality. Instead of joining exiters on their journey to higher ground created by available employment alternatives, these persisters have chosen to remain aboard the ever-sinking ship that is the domestic shrimp fishing industry. And because they are neither actively engaged in any real voice effort to save the industry nor optimistic that
their situations will improve in the future, they fail to fit into Hirschman’s model. What explains their behavior?

I argue that persisting shrimpers should not be dismissed as irrational actors, acting against their own economic interest. Their actions demonstrate the authority that non-economic factors have in decision-making processes. To be sure, persisting shrimpers are motivated in part by economic considerations – such as debt load and spousal employment – but these alone do not explain their behavior. These individuals are motivated to preserve their meaningful occupational and cultural identities above all other factors, even economic considerations. Exploring on a deep level the loyalty of shrimpers, and the meanings they attach to their life-worlds, shows us that their stubborn resistance to globalization is not an irrational act, but is instead highly rational. It further highlights how local actors can be active participants in globalization processes, and are therefore key players in shaping outcomes. Theories of globalization - including critical theories - that strip local actors of their agency fail to understand the choices that they actually make, leaving us unable to understand why local actors so often obstinately refuse to acquiesce to the logic of the market.

In the last empirical chapter, I focus on shrimp fishers who both refuse to exit, but who also refuse to persist on, following the same untenable course. These individuals – the “innovative adapters” – have changed their practices in various ways in order to adapt to the declining dockside prices that have forced the industry into a steep decline. Innovative adaptation therefore represents an additional form of agency that Hirschman does not include in his model. But what motivated the adapters to transform their practices, instead of exiting for more certain employment, or staying the course and
trying to remain viable? Through in-depth interviews with adapters, I answer this question, and show how economic and non-economic forces do not operate separately in decision-making processes. Instead of being mutually exclusive, they can intertwine to produce unique outcomes.

Surely, the qualities of the commercial shrimp fishing industry – where shrimpers are small commodity producers akin to being owner-operators of their own productive facility – provide shrimpers with a unique opportunity to adapt. Not all individuals facing industrial decline have the opportunity to change their practices. But understanding their responses forces us to look at other options that exist beyond exit or voice. What is more, innovative adapters are using the very global forces that now threaten their industry – namely improvements in shipping and communication technologies – to successfully remain afloat in the declining industry. By using the internet to find new and lucrative markets for their high-quality catch, as well as taking advantage of transportation technologies, these local actors are not only fighting against global forces, they are using them in judo-like fashion to advance their own agenda.

Both critics and defenders of globalization agree that global forces sweep away traditional occupations -- but disagree about whether this is positive or negative. Through a detailed assessment of how local actors actually behave in the face of globalization, I find that the outcomes are not always straightforward. Globalization may pose significant challenges to maintaining meaningful occupational identities while at the same time create new and unexpected opportunities for preserving and extending traditional ways of life.
The case of Louisiana shrimp fishers offers insight into the responses of local actors to occupational decline. In this dissertation, I have shown how we can not take it for granted that people will always make decisions that maximize their best economic interests. If this were true, then most individuals would either be making plans to leave the industry, or be out of the industry already. But the value of this case study beyond the academic concerns of Hirschman, globalization, or rational choice theories. It can also tell us about the changing nature of food systems.

**Food Systems and the Production of Shrimp**

*Saltwater Feedlots: Shrimp Production in the Conventional Food System*

Food system is a term used to describe all of the processes involved with feeding a population, from growing and harvesting to marketing and consumption. Food systems are categorized by the methods of production that characterizes the span of how food originates to how it winds up on our plates. Most of the food we eat today – grains, meat, poultry, dairy, fish, and so on – is produced using the methods of industrial agriculture; this food system is known as the *conventional food system* (Parkins and Craig 2009). A conventional food system functions on economies of scale, or the desire to lower costs as a result of expanding operations. While lower costs and greater variety of food are beneficial outcomes of industrialized agriculture for the consumer, industrialized agriculture is associated with a host of ecological and social problems (Pollan 2006, Schlosser 2001; Nestle 2007).
One particularly problematic outcome of industrialized farming is the high rate of energy consumption. Fossil fuels are necessary not only to operate machinery and maintain basic farm operations, but also to manufacture the chemical fertilizers that are used in large-scale farming, and to process, package, and transport the food. Industrialized farms are also a leading source of pollution. In addition to greenhouse gases, farm run-off of fertilizers, manure, and other heavy metals contaminate water supplies. And it’s not just local water supplies that are being contaminated. Run-off from farms all over the Midwest spills into the Mississippi River, and eventually makes it down to the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, there is currently a dead zone in the Gulf that in 2006 was the size of New Jersey (Pollan 2006). Still other problems related to industrialized farming include a low-paid workforce with little protections.

The turn toward industrialized agriculture in the post-war period increased American consumers’ appetite for grain fed livestock, such as beef, chicken, and pork. And as our appetite for meat has continued to intensify, we have not only been feeding ourselves more meat and dairy, we have also been feeding the beast that has become industrialized agriculture. To meet growing demand, agribusiness has become much more highly intensive. The numbers of animals that now live on “farms” have become so concentrated that a new term has been developed to distinguish them from traditional farms: concentrated animal feeding operations (Pollan 2006).

The rise and growth of intensive aquaculture parallels that of industrialized agriculture. Before imported, farm-raised shrimp began to make its way into the U.S. market, shrimp was (for most) considered a luxury food that was eaten only on special occasions. This was largely because for most of the post-war period, the demand for
shrimp remained stronger than supply. Domestic shrimp trawlers could yearly produce only so much shrimp, and imported shrimp harvested through trawling helped to make up the difference in demand versus supply. Unlike beef, poultry, or corn producers, shrimp fishers could not turn toward more intensive means to produce more shrimp; there was no way to invest more capital or technology (like using hormones or chemicals or finding ways to cram more animals or plants together in the same amount of space) to make the shrimp themselves more abundant.

But the growing demand for shrimp did not go unnoticed by overseas shrimp farmers, who had been experimenting with shrimp farming techniques since the early 1970s. Many U.S.-based agribusinesses – such as ConAgra, Purina, and Monsanto – also recognized the potential for shrimp farms to meet growing demand. Shrimp farmers and eager agribusiness investors began to pour capital into these aquaculture enterprises. What has resulted from these investments and technological advances bear a strong resemblance to the products of industrialized agriculture. On the one hand, shrimp lovers can now purchase shrimp at a much cheaper price; shrimp has now become more of a staple than a luxury food. But on the other hand, these low prices have not come without costs.

The costs of large-scale, intensive shrimp farming have thus far been nearly identical to those of industrialized farming in the U.S. Many shrimp farms have been referred to as “saltwater feed lots” (Carrier 2009), as shrimp, like cows or chickens, are commonly grown in unnaturally close quarters. To prevent disease outbreaks that occur as a result of this, antibiotics and other chemicals are commonly used. These chemicals – some proven harmful to human health and outlawed in the U.S. – not only contaminate
the shrimp themselves (and thus the humans who eat them), but they also pollute water supplies. Runoff of manure and other farm inputs further contaminate supply. Shrimp farms are also constructed along wetlands and coastal areas, often destroying mangrove forests that are valuable ecological resources for preventing erosion and fighting storm surge. And like industrialized agriculture, shrimp farming has been criticized for its disrupting social relations in and around the communities where they are developed. In some countries, especially China and Vietnam, violence has erupted when coastal residents were dislocated for the purpose of constructing shrimp ponds (Stonich and Vendergeest 2001; Siregar 2001).

Industrialized aquaculture thus fits squarely into the mode of the conventional food system. Like beef, pork, and chicken, most of the shrimp that we eat today is a product of industrialized aquaculture. So what does the future hold for Louisiana shrimp fishers? Given the ever-increasing demand for shrimp among American consumers – who have come to expect all-you-can-eat shrimp buffets and cheap fast-food shrimp purchased at the drive-thru speaker – it is unlikely that the pink tsunami of farm-raised imported shrimp that is crashing into U.S. shorelines will subside anytime in the near future. As such, U.S. shrimp fishers who must rely on the dock or processor to unload their shrimp must deal with the low dockside prices that have resulted from the glut of imports. For shrimp fishers, low dockside prices are likely to remain, and may plunge even further down in the future. Unlike farmers who participate in the conventional food system of industrialized agriculture and aquaculture, shrimp fishers lack the capacity to expand or intensify production in the way that overseas shrimp farms have. Do domestic shrimp fishers have any options if they want to remain viable?
Innovative Adaptation: The Promise of Alternative Food Systems

The future for the U.S. shrimp fishing industry is best glimpsed by taking a closer look at the innovative adapters. As I showed in Chapter 4, this (as of yet) small but enterprising group of shrimpers has responded to the plunge in dockside prices by transforming their practices to minimize – with the goal to eventually eliminate – their reliance on seafood docks and processors. One significant component of their transformation is the installation of freezers on-board their boats that take the place of the traditionally-used ice hole. Through the individual quick freeze (IQF) process, the freezers enable shrimpers to produce a higher-quality, value-added product that can in turn be sold at a higher price. And while freezer technology – and the subsequent increase in quality – has been an important function of adaptation, this alone does not account for the adapters’ success in remaining viable.

Perhaps the lion’s share of innovative adapters’ success thus far is explained by their foray into alternative food systems. An alternative food system\(^{18}\) refers to methods of production that lie outside of the conventional system, to include local, organic, and/or cooperative food systems. As a direct response to the rise of agri-businesses – with their high yields and low prices – some smaller-scale farmers turned to other ways of both producing and marketing their products (Andretta 2006). Some turned to organic methods of production, others began to market their products directly to the public through roadside stands, U-pick businesses, and Community Supported Agriculture\(^{19}\) (CSA).

\(^{18}\) Also referred to as “alternative food networks”.

\(^{19}\) In a CSA, a farmer is pre-paid in the winter or spring months for food that the consumer will later receive when the produce comes into season (DeLind 1999).
arrangements, and still others have combined organic farming practices with direct marketing to the public (Lyson and Guptill 2004). The advantage, according to Parkins and Craig (2009:79), is that alternative food networks have qualities that agri-business simply cannot effectively exploit: “Here there is a valuing of local food production because of its contribution to the local economy and a regional food culture, the ecological benefits associated with short supply chains and particular production methods, and the possibility of reestablishing direct connections between producers and consumers that yield relations of trust, social regard and pleasure.”

Alternative food systems offer a way for some farmers to remain viable in a market where government subsidies keep prices for grain and livestock artificially low and thus privilege large scale agri-businesses (Pollan 2006). But the success and continuance of alternative food systems rests upon a solid base of consumers who are willing to participate. And the more that consumers learn about the problems associated with industrialized agriculture, the more willing they have been to seek out alternatives. The growth and wild success of chain grocery stores like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s only attest to the willingness of consumers to pay more for what they perceive to be a more just and/or sustainable product. Indeed, over the past decade, shopping has become more tightly linked to social and environmental causes. And the movement is not solely comprised of better-educated and more affluent individuals (although organic, local produce is surely a luxury for many); recent research has shown that lower income and more vulnerable households also recognize the benefits of participating in alternative food networks (see Andretta, Rhyne and Deary 2008).
What explains the success that adaptive innovators have enjoyed? Their use of on-board freezers and IQF technology enable them to produce a higher-quality product, which certainly confers them some advantage. However, high quality alone is hardly the sole factor that keeps customers coming back for more. To understand why consumers are willing to pay more for Louisiana shrimp, we must look at the cultural meaning and significance that innovative adapters attach to their shrimp through the marketing process. In doing so, it is apparent that engagement in alternative food networks is a key component of their success.

With the help of organizations such as the White Boot Brigade and the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, some shrimp fishers have found new markets for their shrimp that go far beyond the docks of the seafood sheds and processors. Jacob, for example, regularly sells his shrimp to several high-end restaurants in San Francisco and Chicago, where he receives as much as $15 a pound for his shrimp. Lori was attempting to get the proper certification to ship her shrimp internationally, as several restaurant owners around Europe were interested in purchasing her product. Supermarkets around town and in New Orleans regularly purchase adapters’ products, advertising it as (and charging a higher price for) its local character. And while buyers would be unlikely to purchase the shrimp if they were not high-quality, both the shrimp fishers and the purchases exploit the cultural significance and the short supply chain aspect of the shrimp.

In addition to the cultural and local significance of the shrimp, innovative adapters – and the organizations they partner with – actively work to position Gulf shrimp as a healthier alternative to farm-raised, imported shrimp. They even have begun
to use the moniker “free range” to describe their product as a way to extract a higher price. But are wild-caught and thus “free range” shrimp comparable to their free-range chicken or pig counterparts? The answer to that likely depends upon who you ask, but so far, consumers are biting on the notion. Slow Food USA, an organization founded to promote and preserve local cuisine, regularly promotes U.S. gulf shrimp in their catalog, touting it as free-range: “The wild gulf coast shrimp are wild-caught--or free-range—from the Gulf Coast of the US, where they naturally exist” (Slow Food USA 2009).

But for all of the talk about wild caught, “free range” shrimp, it would be careless and dishonest to not recognize the negative environmental impacts associated with bottom-trawling for shrimp. In this sense, shrimp fishers diverge from alternative food network counterparts like organic and sustainable farmers. The biggest ecological problem associated with trawling is the by-catch produced when non-target marine species are ensnared within the nets as they are dragged across the ocean floor. Indeed, by-catch rates are in some cases alarmingly high: it is estimated that in the U.S., the by-catch to catch ratio ranges from 3:1 up to 15:1 (Hall 2000). The federal mandates requiring the use of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) and bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) are the results of pressure exerted by environmental groups – along with the commercial and sport fishing lobbies – to protect aquatic life incidentally trapped, and often killed, in trawl nets.

But the negative environmental impacts of trawling are not lost on the adaptive innovators. Quite the opposite, Lori and Jacob both readily recognize the ecological problems associated with trawling. Even more significant, both understand that the by-catch issue is a major sticking point to successfully positioning their products as fully
sustainable alternatives to foreign, farm-raised shrimp. And as a result, both individuals are actively engaged in finding ways to reduce their impact on the environment. Included in the promotional materials for Lori’s shrimp marketing company is a list of actions that they are taking to find solutions. The following passage is an excerpt from this material:

We believe that is extremely important to maintain the balance of the Gulf of Mexico where we shrimp. Our goal is to make sure there is a future for the generations to come to partake in the shrimping industry. We have taught our children the importance of preserving our way of life and the gulf. Our children have attended and still attend meetings in which much of the environmental and shrimping sectors have to reach some kind of compromise on what is to take place in our future. We do much of this work by allowing observers aboard our vessel from the National Marine Fisheries Service and The Gulf and Atlantic Fisheries Foundation…We feel it's important to teach the younger generation how to work with the different agencies within our realm.

Lori’s willingness to partner with federal agencies is quite a departure from shrimp fishers’ aversion to the same organizations during the TEDs debacle, as described in Chapter 1. But this new-found willingness to comply is a testament to the changes that shrimp fishers must undergo if they are to remain viable. While Lori and her family surely recognize the importance of preserving valuable ecosystems and species, they also recognize that their ability to participate in alternative food systems requires that they conform to the core principles out of which these food systems have developed.

Before closing, I raise two final questions, the answers to which only the future can tell us. First, the initial success of adaptive innovators indicates that if there is to be a future for domestic shrimp fishers, participation in alternative food systems may be the only solution. What can be done to encourage more shrimp fishers to follow their lead? As discussed in Chapter 4, this is a fairly nascent movement for shrimp fishers, still in its
beginning stages. Transforming practices to increase the quality of shrimp and market shrimp in an alternative way is a daunting, expensive, and risky undertaking. The existing innovative adapters and the organizations through which they partner recognize these difficulties.

Indeed, many persisters expressed reservations with changing because of the high costs involved and the uncertainty that comes along with change. If the survival of the domestic shrimp fishery depends upon changing to adapt, perhaps the best way to bring them on-board is to incentivize change through government grants, loans and/or subsidies. Providing assistance to change will not only benefit the Louisiana shrimp fishery – which contributes significantly to state and local economies – but it also serves to bring shrimp fishers more in-line with regulations and policies directed toward greater environmental protection. Innovative adapters are more willing to work with state and federal agencies in reducing by-catch and fuel consumption in large part because they recognize that their sales are contingent upon their compliance with the norms guiding alternative food systems. Jacob remarked, “The fishermen don’t really need a hand out, they need a hand up. They need a hand up to upgrade. We got something here that works, why not help the fishermen?”

Finally, if shrimp fishers are to be successful participants in an alternative food system, there must be a base of consumers willing and eager to purchase their higher-priced product. Is the market for wild-caught, Louisiana shrimp large enough to include any and all shrimp fishers who wish to participate in this movement? To phrase this question another way: Are there enough consumers out there who are willing and able to purchase wild caught Louisiana shrimp if it means paying a higher price? Based upon
their initial success, shrimpers like Jacob and Lori seem to think that the market is large enough to fit all who would like to participate. Their goal is not only to be able to continue earning a living as shrimp fishers – just as their parents and grandparents had done – but also for the shrimp fishing industry to continue to be a thriving part of their landscape and local economies. Future research will track the efforts and outcomes of the movements to bring persisting shrimp fishers on-board with the “new” ways of producing and marketing shrimp.
METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The primary goal of this study was to reveal how local actors respond when their livelihoods and cultural identities come under siege by globalization processes. The principal method I use for this sociological analysis is the ethnographic interview. Ethnography is the systematic and immersive study of human cultures. Ethnographic interviews consist primarily of in-depth, unstructured, and semi-formal conversations. This interviewing technique departs from a more “traditional” interview in that researchers typically immerse themselves in the life-world of the research subject in order to best attain a deep understanding of the nuances and complexities that characterize human culture and societies. While other types of interviewing tend to be comprised of a more rigidly-structured, formal interview schedule with a pre-determined list of questions, ethnographic interviews more resemble a conversation, where questions and responses flow naturally as both the interviewer and respondent see fit. Although ethnographic interviewers ultimately guide the conversation, they must be willing (and able) to deviate from the order and content of their original interview questionnaire as the conversation unfolds.

Ethnographic interviews served my research purposes for a several reasons. Although my primary research objective was to uncover local actors’ responses to globalization processes, this was far from the singular research objective. If that were the
case, than I might have saved myself the time, money, and frustrations that are inherent to
field research and instead mailed closed-ended surveys to all current and ex-shrimp
fishers that required them to mark the box that best indicates their future plans and
outlooks. The survey method is common to sociological analysis because it can provide a
bird’s eye view of social phenomena, allowing us to see how large populations of
individuals generally act or feel at a given point in time. However, a mailed-out survey
would have been woefully inadequate for my empirical interests.

In addition to focusing on responses, I also sought to uncover the cultural
meanings and significance that shrimp fishers attach to their occupation. Such an
understanding is essential to being able to fully comprehend the outcomes of
occupational decline. Why do some remain in the declining occupation, but other exit?
What motivates some to change? Ethnographic analysis takes as a starting point the
notion that what people do conveys much about the meanings they attach to various
facets of their social worlds. But examining actions is not always adequate, as behaviors
are not always accurate reflections of how one really thinks. Ethnographic interviews
provide a forum for individuals to articulate how they make sense of the world around
them, and how they negotiate the complexity of the social world.

To put it simply, the goal of ethnographic interviews is to get people to talk about
what they know, and to discover how that knowledge affects behavior. Ethnographic
interviews seek to uncover *tacit* knowledge in addition to the *explicit* knowledge that
more traditional interviews or questionnaires can reveal. But tacit knowledge is not easily
revealed, and is likely drawn out only after a rapport has been established between
researcher and research participant. My previous year-long experience with living and
working in Bayou Crevette provided me with a foundation upon which rapport could be more easily built. To be sure, I do not claim that by living in the community for a year before my actual fieldwork, I was instantly bestowed an insider status that other researchers lacking my experience would be denied. But my previous experience would prove to be advantages in a variety of ways.

Over the course of that year, I became familiar with many of the cultural norms and customs make up the community. As part of the training we received with AmeriCorps, we attended a variety of workshops and cultural events designed to provide members with an understanding of not only the community’s natural environment, but also its rich cultural heritage. Many of these trainings were held in the various cultural centers that were located in the town or surrounding communities. Other trainings were held on the campus of the community college that was about forty-five minutes outside of the town. We also attended a host of cultural events, such as Cajun dances and food celebrations held periodically throughout the year. Taken together, these experiences facilitated an appreciation for the community’s unique and rich cultural qualities.

But perhaps the best training we received was not any kind of formal training or workshop at all. Rather, working alongside a variety of community members – from educators to oil workers to those sentenced to perform community service – provided valuable opportunities to gain insight into the everyday lives of those living in Bayou Crevette. The environmental non-profit that I worked for was the only one of its kind in the community. As such, it attracted many community members who desired to volunteer for the community projects that the organization hosted, such as beach cleanings and marsh grass plantings. Several of these individuals were high-ranking members of the
community, like Parish Council and School Board members, whose connections would later prove to be immensely useful in helping me to find and build rapport with research participants.

During the five years separating my AmeriCorps and fieldwork experiences, I re-visited the bayou two times. And although both visits were for a relatively short time (a week or less), they were instrumental to the development of this research project. It was during these trips back that I learned about the sudden and unexpected downturn the shrimp fishing industry had taken. If I had not gone back to the bayou, at some point I surely would have read about the decline in the newspaper or heard a story about it on the national news. But hearing firsthand about the deterioration of the industry as it was happening was a much more poignant and accurate to reach an understanding of just how painful the collapse of the shrimp fishing industry was for Louisiana shrimpers and the larger community. These short visits back to the bayou also helped to keep fresh my connections to the community and several of its key members.

In 2006, I decided to pursue my interest in the collapse of the shrimp fishing industry for my dissertation research. I wanted to understand exactly how the decline had impacted shrimp fishers and the community, how shrimp fishers were making sense of the decline, and what their plans were for a future that might very well exclude the shrimp fishing industry. To answer these questions, I knew that I must return to the bayou. Part of the reason why I needed to return was logistic. Although I had a few connections to shrimp fishers, most of the connections I had were with non-shrimp fishing members of the community. These individuals would be instrumental to helping me find current and former shrimp fishers who were willing to participate in my study.
Many of these shrimp fishers helped me to further grow my snowball sample upon which this study was based.

But there were other more pressing reasons why I had to go back to the bayou. I had to re-immersel myself back into the community in order to get a better-developed sense of what the community was going through, and how it had changed since I had lived there five years previous. An ethnographic approach requires that researchers step out of their familiar surroundings and into the life-worlds of those who they seek to better understand. Ethnographers strive to understand humans in their fullest possible contexts, and this includes the places where they live and the spaces they regularly inhabit. I simply could not have attained the same level of detail from the respondents (and from the field notes that I took) if I had conducted interviews by phone or through a written questionnaire. I needed to be there.

Because I was a graduate student who earned a living working for the university during the academic calendar year, my opportunity to travel to the bayou was limited to summer quarters. Thus, most of the ethnographic research used in this dissertation was collected during the summers of 2006 and 2007. Each summer, I spent around eight weeks in the field. I stayed in the spare bedroom of two generous individuals – a married couple named June and Herbert – whom I had met during my AmeriCorps days. June and Herbert were in their seventies, and were well-known people in the community. One of their five children was a member of the parish school board, another one ran the local civic center where most of the cultural and community events in the town were held, and still another was a tugboat captain. Each of these individuals lived within walking
distance of June and Herbert, and would often pop in to see how I was doing, or invite me to have dinner with them.

My connection to June, Herbert, and their family was beneficial for several reasons. First, because they were a well-regarded family in the community, my affiliation helped with building trust and rapport with shrimp fishers and other individuals who otherwise did not know me. But of equal importance was the feedback I would receive from them through the daily conversations we had at the beginning and end of each day. Most of my days began with sharing breakfast with June and Herbert, where I would talk about my strategy and what I hoped to accomplish for the day. Most nights, before bed, we’d sit around the same table with a glass of wine (or two), and I would fill them in on what I did, who I talked with, and how I felt about what I had learned that day. They were patient and gracious listeners, but they were not shy when they disagreed with something I said, or thought I was being incomplete with my views on a particular issue. Sometimes they challenged my assumptions or ideas, while other times they added insight to the questions or problems that I would raise. It was through this experience that many of my ideas began to solidify and take shape, and so with them I was always sure to have a pen and paper nearby so as to be sure to document their suggestions and insights.

My previous experience living in the town, and my affiliations with a well-regarded family and non-profit organization proved quite useful in helping me to find willing interview participants. And because it was not easy to locate participants (especially former shrimpers), I needed all the help I could get. In 2006, I focused my attention on finding current shrimp fishers. This was my first stab at collecting data for my dissertation, and at that time, I was unaware of how important ex-shrimpers would be
to the final project. Current shrimp fishers are a visible presence in the town: their boats are docked along the bayou-side, and they can often be found out on working on their boats, getting them ready for the next trip out.

When I returned to Ohio that fall, I struggled to make sense of what I had found that summer: despite the deterioration and ensuing hardships, most shrimp fishers were adamant about remaining in the industry, even though they had other, better employment alternatives. This flew in the face of economic rationality; what could explain this? During this time, I was preparing for my upcoming comprehensive examinations for my graduate program. My academic advisor, Steve Lopez, worked closely with me to construct a reading list directed toward my dissertation questions, and it was this time that I became familiar with Hirschman’s theory of exit, voice, and loyalty. I found that many shrimp fishers were not exiting as Hirschman predicted. But what about those who did exit? Why did they decide to leave, while others chose to stay? And what can this tell us about the nature of occupational decline.

To answer these questions, I had to return to the bayou to track down ex-shrimpers. And so this became the major goal of my 2007 fieldwork. But finding ex-shrimpers was a much more difficult task. I spent a great deal more time beating the streets, and trying to compile a list of potential interview participants. Because many ex-shrimpers go into the tug boat or oil industries, I visited those businesses, and talked to whoever was willing. Another tactic I used was writing down phone numbers on the boats that were up for sale. And I followed up with current shrimp fishers that I spoke with the year before, many of whom provided me with relevant names that I later looked up in the phone book.
During both years, to get a more complete sense of the current state of the shrimp fishing industry and community, and to find participants, I also participated in many aspects of daily life. I attended numerous community events such as local festivals and dances, seafood boils, and shrimping-related community meetings. By the end of the second summer, I had conducted fifty tape-recorded, in-depth interviews with 19 current shrimpers, 17 former shrimpers, and 14 individuals connected to the shrimp industry, like at net shops, seafood docks, and tug boat companies.

While generally community members have a reputation for being friendly, hospitable, and quite open, many shrimp fishers also have a high degree of distrust of researchers, a sentiment that was more fully developed in Chapter 2. But I learned that soon after I identified myself as “one of the AmeriCorps kids” who was now back in the community and living with June and Herbert, individuals’ initial misgivings and skepticism seemed to dissipate: “You’re not from the government, are you?” often quickly turned to “Oh, you know Herbert! He’s a good guy, and has a beautiful boat.” And while I can not be fully certain that all of these individuals fully trusted me – or trusted me at all – upon learning about my history with the community, many invited me on-board their boats or into their houses (and often extended an invitation to dinner). Interviews lasted anywhere from between thirty minutes to three hours long. The number of individuals who provided me with contact information so that I can follow up with them in the future is also indicative of some level of trust.

One of the core standards of ethnographic interviewing is to eventually achieve a sense of empirical saturation, or the point when participants offer similar or consistent responses to the same question. Usually at this point, a researcher can feel more confident
that it is time to leave the field. By the end of the second summer of fieldwork, I had reached this point of saturation.

After I left the field in 2007, I had over 150 hours of audio files that needed to be transcribed. My first instinct was to find out how much it was going to cost me to have them professionally transcribed. But my advisor had other ideas: he thought it would be better if I transcribed all of the interviews myself. Farming them out, he argued, would impede my ability to be fully immersed in the data, and to recognize the subtleties and nuance that characterizes ethnographic interviews. And as much as I was resistant to the prospect of transcribing all of the interviews myself, I could not disagree with these assertions. I got to work right away transcribing, and did so for months and months.

While I transcribed, I kept a journal where I recorded my thoughts and observations as they unfolded. These field notes were immensely useful for both advancing my theoretical objectives and for the coding that I did later on. After all of the interviews were transcribed, my coding scheme was fairly straightforward, if not archaic. I used the highlight function in the Microsoft Word program to color-code themes that emerged in each interview. I poured over the transcripts time and again, and eventually I recognized the patterns that characterize my data.

Ethnographic interviewing, supplemented by a little field work, provided me with the valuable opportunity to gain insight into how shrimp fishers thought or felt about the decline of the industry, and the subsequent decisions that they have made as a result. However, relying mostly on ethnographic interviewing for data collection surely has its limitations. Regretfully, one important facet of shrimp fishers’ lives that I did not participate in during my fieldwork was going out on a shrimp boat to experience the
fishing process firsthand. There are both practical and cultural reasons for this. Practically, my propensity toward seasickness prevented the few shrimp fishers who offered to take me out on the boat from actually following through. “You get seasick?” was the question that without fail followed the offers. Shrimp fishing is an incredibly expensive endeavor, especially after fuel prices went through the roof around 2005. I feared that once I would get out there, I would become too sick to make it worthwhile, and would force the shrimp fisher to waste fuel to take me back to land. Being someone who becomes seasick from gently swinging on porch swing, I did not want to take that risk.

Culturally, many shrimp fishers expressed reservations to take an unfamiliar woman out on the boat. Some shrimpers told me that they would take me out with them, but that their wives might become upset or think it was strange. Bayou Crevette is a relatively small community, where most of the people know (or know of) each other. And like many small, rural communities, gossip is a pastime. Many shrimpers expressed the desire to keep their names out of the gossip circuit, and feared that by taking an unknown woman out on an hours-long fishing trip, they would be opening themselves up to the gossip circle. By not going out on the boat, I surely missed out on a valuable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding into the process of shrimp fishing.

My primary research interest was to understand how local actors respond to change that disrupts and threatens local worlds. But interviews alone disallow me from understanding change as a process. My data is thus limited to understanding outcomes of change and the meanings that shrimp fishers attach to them at that specific point in time. To best study change as a process, a researcher would have to enter (and not just visit) the
social worlds of individuals for an extended period of time – for years, and not just a few months. This ethnographic method is called participant observation. Participant observation requires that the researcher becomes a part of the life-world of the research subjects. Through sustained interactions with the same individuals over an extended period of time, a more accurate and detailed understanding of change processes would be revealed. Ethnographic interviewing revealed shrimpers’ accounts of struggle and hardship, but participant observation would have allowed me to witness their struggles and hardships in real time, as they unfold. With interviews, there is always the risk that respondents may – intentionally or unintentionally – provide answers and explanations that do not accurately match up with what had really happened. Participant observation, especially when used in tandem with interviewing, reduces the likelihood of validity problems.
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