

A pain in the neck: passenger abuse, flight attendants and emotional labour

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An OHS perspective is used to analyse how Australian domestic and international flight attendants deal with unsavoury passenger behaviour. Organisational variables (for example, how airline companies and managements acknowledge workplace issues) and health and safety are the salient indicators which affect relations with difficult passengers and the strategies to deal with them. Angry passengers are a problem for male and female flight attendants, but they are slightly more of a problem for women because of the injunctions of patriarchal femininity which are still embedded in the emotional labour that they are required to do. Thus, emotional labour in this indifferent organisational and abusive environment can be a health hazard — literally a pain in the neck and in other parts of the body as well.

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Introduction

Recently there has been publicity about the rowdiness of passengers in airline cabins (for example, the behaviour of the *Screaming Jets* (an Australian rock band) on the inaugural Impulse Airlines flight in late August 2000).

Some idea of the dimension of inappropriate harassment and bullying from the customers of service workers can be gleaned from Scandinavian researchers who have carried out the most systematic work.¹ Although the research suggests that about 15% of customers and clients engage in inappropriate abuse, this is likely to be an underestimate of the extent of the problem on airlines because flying is the most salient of all phobias and cabin crew have to deal with such fear regularly.

Using a 1994 survey of Australian-based flight attendants (1,027 men; 1,837 women), this article seeks to examine the relationship between OHS and the handling of angry passengers — with some reference to emotional labour. Emotional labour is a concept which Hochschild pioneered using a case study of flight attendants.² She defined emotional labour as the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display which produces a comfortable state of mind in others. When this involved “deep” acting, that is, “psyched-up but quasi-genuine reassuring warmth”, feelings became a commodity.³ Thus, flight attendants became vulnerable to the airline companies making claims to the private territory of the “self”.

Hochschild also argued that the flight attendant's job was different depending on whether the incumbent was a man or a woman. She pointed out that women flight attendants were presented as distillations of feminine heterosexuality.⁴ They were less protected from passenger misbehaviour because this work identity made them more open to passengers' frustration and anger. Overall, women flight attendants were more exposed to rude, surly speech and tirades about the service and the airline than male flight attendants.⁵

This analysis can be extended into the realm of the workplace bullying and harassment literature. Workplace harassment involves the inability of employees for one reason or another to be able to defend themselves, and this leads to victimisation.⁶ Here, it involves a recurrent pattern of behaviour by individual passengers or customers. It is argued here that, when confronted with angry passengers, lack of free expression is integral to emotional labour and creates the potential for victimisation in the context of particular managerial policies, including: “the customer is always right” ethos; a failure to acknowledge that emotional labour is a legitimate skill; and a failure to acknowledge that it can be arduous and difficult at times.⁷ Within the constrained organisational context that has been created by airline managements, flight attendants may think that they have no option but to tolerate the abuse.

Methodology

In 1994 a survey of the membership of the Flight Attendants' Association of Australia (which has comprehensive union coverage) was undertaken by the author of this article; 2,912 members answered, giving a 60% response rate. The survey was carried out at a time of almost complete union membership and so a considerable number of flight attendants were reached (there were also healthy numbers for each of the main airline groups, age groups and length of service). During the survey, flight attendants were encouraged to write about their feelings on the survey form.

Quantitative findings

Flight attendants were asked how often they had to deal with angry passengers. The overseas flight attendants and those in charge of the cabin, such as pursers or flight service directors, had to handle such passengers most frequently. It was a major issue for flight service directors flying overseas, where 73% of the men and 79% of the women dealt with them frequently, compared with 37% of the pursers on

domestic airlines. About half of the basic-level flight attendants dealt with angry passengers "sometimes" and 28% "frequently".

Using the frequency of having to deal with angry passengers as the dependent variable, a series of other variables was entered into a univariate log linear regression. These were divided into groups, such as those concerned with gender and OHS (for example, backache, neck pain and fatigue). There were also organisational variables, such as management, workload, speed and pressure, and position in the company, and personal variables, such as age and length of service.

At a univariate level of analysis, the OHS and organisational variables — and not gender — were most strongly associated with angry passengers. For example, taking those flight attendants who did not have backache as a result of their work as a referent category, those who did have "a great deal" of back pain were three times more likely to have to deal with angry passengers (Table 1). Those flight attendants with substantial amounts of neck pain and those with recurring digestive upsets as a result of their work were twice as likely to perceive themselves as handling such passengers.

This close link between physical pain and increased abuse was even stronger with the organisational variables. Those who thought that management ignored their problems — even when it knew about them — were six times more likely to perceive themselves as dealing with angry passengers than those who thought that management acknowledged their problems. Those who thought that their workload had increased "a lot" and "a great deal" were also six times more likely to regard themselves as dealing with angry passengers. This was also the case for those who thought that they were working quickly and under pressure.

Such findings are suggestive and further research will tease out the complex pattern of causation (that is, disgruntled passengers are likely to cause digestive upsets in the flight attendants that they are attacking, and it is possible that flight attendants will stiffen their bodies during such attacks, thus exacerbating

the potential for neck and back injuries. An alternative explanation is that those with existing neck and back injuries may notice angry passengers more).

This type of difficult passenger could be regarded as another form of noxious work demand. Furthermore, emotional harassment has been found to be a cause of job stress.⁷ Management's ambivalent valuation of flight attendants contributes to an illegitimacy which surrounds their work. This makes their work ambiguous. The latter has also been associated with job stress in academic discussions.⁸ Peterson, in reviewing the global occupational stress literature, regards lack of control over the labour process and conditions in which work is carried out as major causes of job stress.⁹

Qualitative findings

The qualitative data (written on the survey) have provided an insight into what occurs on overseas flights where, as noted before, the problem often has to be confronted.

As one flight service director wrote:

"It all comes back to me. The pax (passengers) who want to fight are a source of dread." (37-year-old man, married, with two children)

Another man (a basic-level flight attendant on overseas flights) said that he averaged one angry passenger per sector.

Some flight attendants described such incidents as "usually forgotten once the pax (passenger) leaves", or they tried to keep such incidents in context. One woman flight attendant made it clear that she did not experience emotional labour in the way Hochschild has described (including when handling angry passengers). Her work made no claims to the private territory of her "self":

"It is easy to react as per the situation. It does not cause any stress. It is part of the job and separate from my real feelings, that is, like water off a duck's back!" (32-year-old woman, single, flying for two years with a small domestic airline)

TABLE 1
Results of simple logistic regression: dealing with angry passengers

<i>OHS variables</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Overall p-value</i>
Extent employment as flight attendant (FA) led to backache:			
Not at all	1.00		.000
Very little	1.66	1.25-2.20	
Fair amount	1.70	1.29-2.24	
A lot	2.57	1.86-3.54	
A great deal	3.01	2.16-4.21	
Extent employment as FA led to neck pain:			
Not at all	1.00		.000
Very little	1.37	1.08-1.75	
Fair amount	1.57	1.20-2.05	
A lot	2.10	1.52-2.91	
A great deal	2.57	1.82-3.63	
Extent employment as FA led to digestive upsets:			
Not at all	1.00		.000
Very little	1.55	1.22-1.98	
Fair amount	1.94	1.48-2.53	
A lot	2.18	1.58-3.01	
A great deal	2.52	1.75-3.64	
Extent employment as FA led to fatigue:			
Not at all	1.00		.000
Very little	1.31	.67-2.55	
Fair amount	1.83	.99-3.38	
A lot	3.06	1.65-5.64	
A great deal	4.91	2.69-8.96	
<i>Organisational variables</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Overall p-value</i>
Extent management ignores problems even when told about them:			
Never	1.00		.000
Occasionally	2.16	1.44-3.25	
Half the time	3.61	2.36-5.51	
More often than not	5.06	3.37-7.60	
Always	6.47	3.68-11.39	
Extent work under speed and pressure:			
Not at all	1.00		.000
Very little	1.96	.75-5.08	
A fair amount	3.78	1.48-9.63	
A lot	5.11	1.99-13.13	
A great deal	6.61	2.54-17.22	
Extent workload on aircraft increased over recent years:			
Not at all increased	1.00		.000
Very little increase	1.97	1.03-3.77	
Some increase	2.50	1.44-4.32	
A reasonable amount of increase	3.69	2.17-6.25	
A great deal of increase	6.36	3.72-10.87	

However, other respondents described how they consciously worked at protecting themselves. A 30-year-old woman who had been flying for nine years with a large domestic airline said that she tried not to "stew" on negative confrontations but that "this is a conditioning that has taken me some years to obtain". One woman domestic flight attendant said, "luckily, I don't seem to attract angry passengers"; another said that she thought "angry pax seem to have increased recently". A 28-year-old woman who had only been flying for 14 months with a large domestic airline was clearly distressed in the face of aggressive passengers:

"I feel as though 'they' see me coming and take their anger out on me."

She then went on:

"I feel they think we are there to do absolutely everything for them, including wiping their a---s. They don't realise or care that we too are human, have feelings, have bad days, have sad days but we still have to smile and 'take it' when they treat us like dirt. I don't think we should have to put up with being treated like a caged animal. That's the part of the job that really stresses me. Thank you for reading this."

Similarly, a woman who had been working for the same airline for eight years wrote, "sometimes I'll wait till I get home, then have a good cry!".

Strategies

The surveyed flight attendants used a range of strategies to handle their feelings. Most commonly they shared their feelings with sympathetic co-workers (38% "always" did this, and 59% did it "some of the time"). Also, 63% of the flight attendants replied assertively and directly to passengers "some of the time", while 42% chose not to reply to passengers "some of the time". Others (41%) admitted that they sometimes took their feelings out on family and friends.

A commonly held view among the flight attendants was that many passengers were "cranky before arriving at the door". A 38-year-old woman flight

attendant who worked for a large domestic airline explained how reactions depended on the situation. However, she regarded some encounters as examples of victimisation.

"If the complaint is specific it is easy to be assertive and try to rectify the situation. If a pax gets on board angry (because he has had a fight with his wife/boss or someone else) and wants to take out his aggression on someone, he then chooses which flight attendant he wants to victimise. Most people get angry when they are being victimised. This is a situation where it is hard to cover your feelings.

For single operational flight attendants, there aren't sympathetic co-workers. Anger and frustration are usually taken home with you. I'm frustrated at the lack of company support." (24-year-old woman, single, flying for one and a half years with a regional airline)

Basic-level flight attendants are more likely to defuse their feelings by not replying to passengers "some of the time". Women respondents made it clear that while they might not reply assertively to angry passengers, this was not passive acquiescence or subordination. They were actively positioning themselves in terms of their own subjectivities within the limits that the airline companies prescribed in terms of conforming to a model of patriarchal femininity. It was common to practise a form of anger where the "surface" acting part of their emotional labour skills was used. In terms of their own subjectivities, they were actually replying to passengers but non-verbally:

"Kill the passenger with kindness. Be sickeningly sweet." (28-year-old woman, married, flying for six years with a domestic airline)

"If pax are grumpy and it is beyond my control, as it usually is, I try to 'kill them with kindness' and make them feel an inch high." (25-year-old woman, married, flying for over three years with a domestic airline)

It was in relation to men and women pursers on domestic airlines where the gender differences

emerged, that is, 40% of women pursers did not reply to aggressive passengers "some of the time", compared with 27% of male pursers. This provides some evidence to support Hochschild that men in charge of the domestic airline cabins have more authority and status than women and will thus reply more assertively to passengers. However, for both the men and the women who chose the strategy of not replying to passenger rudeness, higher levels of fatigue from the job were experienced. Even direct assertion itself was not always effective, as a 35-year-old woman flying with a domestic airline for over 13 years explained that the angry passenger could continue to heighten the stress of the rest of the flight attendants:

"To reply assertively does not always defuse the problem. Pax still angry is very common [it is common for the passenger to stay angry] as some requests cannot be met. This stresses all the other flight attendants on top of it for the whole duration of the flight, not just for one minute, and that's only one pax."

The majority of the men (68%) said that they would never take their feelings out on family and friends, whereas the women were evenly divided into two groups (47% said that they did this "some of the time", and 48% said that they would "never" do this). It was found that women flight attendants shared their experiences with co-workers more than the male flight attendants as a way of coping with their emotions after dealing with difficult passengers. Social support is known to mitigate stress reactions. New flight attendants used this as a coping strategy but the longer they had been flying the more obvious the gender difference (with 51% of women who had been flying for six to 10 years using this strategy compared with 25% of men, and 40% of women who had been flying for 10 years compared with 23% of men).

"It depends on the situation, you work out which response will succeed. I try not to bottle emotions up, going to a rear galley, release your frustration and go back out there.

My reaction would depend on the nature of the conflict. A personal insult, I may bottle up, and not share with crew but speak assertively to the pax. An impossible pax, I may sometimes not reply to (if they are unreasonable) and alert the crew." (36-year-old woman, single, flying for eight years with an international airline)

Most flight attendants (83%) did not take time off work as a result of passenger abuse. One woman said that if her off days coincided with such incidents, it helped immeasurably:

"I don't take or use a sick day for this purpose, but feel like using sick leave for this purpose, even though I'm not physically ill." (emphasis in original)(flying for 19 years with a large domestic airline)

For most people (57%), the main impact in terms of their work performance was that they felt distracted from doing their job properly. However, 41% of flight attendants felt that they were more affected in the long term and built up a sense of discomfort or dread about similar incidents. Also, about a quarter of them were left questioning their career choice.

The flight attendants themselves drew attention to the lack of management appreciation of this difficult aspect of their job. They pointed to the way that "the customer is always right" attitude was invariably encouraged. One woman's worries about the issue were specifically "due to the lack of back-up from management". Again, women pursers were more deeply affected than male pursers with regard to this issue (47% were uneasy about similar incidents occurring compared with only 33% of men). Interestingly, this was not the case for women flight service directors who flew overseas. This small group of women — who have entered an occupation which has traditionally been dominated by male stewards — reacted in the same way as their male counterparts.

Conclusion and discussion

The findings of the survey point to the significance of abuse by parties other than managers or co-workers,

that is, by the clients of the service worker. The study highlights the little-understood OHS needs of service workers.

There is a statistically significant relationship between the OHS variables and dealing with recurring situations which involve abusive passengers. Indeed, the ratios were even higher in relation to the organisational variables. Those who worked quickly and under pressure and who thought that management ignored their problems — even when it knew about them — were six times more likely to be aware of dealing with angry passengers frequently than those not under pressure and without negative views of management. This suggests a failure of management to acknowledge and deal with this unpleasant aspect of the service work function.

The qualitative data and the descriptive statistics suggest that women flight attendants are less likely to reply assertively to abusive passengers than men. Women also suffer more afterwards. They tend to use more passive strategies than men when confronted with angry passengers, suggesting that the emotional labour which is required in order to conform to the distillations of an old-fashioned, agreeable femininity does provide a pathway to victimisation. As such, women flight attendants are more likely to smile while they are being "treated like dirt" and either ventilate their feelings in the galley with co-workers or take the anger and frustration home. At the same time, this provides them with an avenue for resistance: women employees can contest and negotiate these crude attempts to control their subjectivity.¹⁰

A recurring theme throughout the survey was the perceived lack of adequate management support; it

was felt that management either misunderstood the emotional labour aspects of the job, or failed to provide sufficient back-up in the face of disruptive passengers. It would seem that there is a need for management to better understand the significance of its duty of care in terms of OHS for flight attendants and service workers.

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