

SAA CABIN ATTENDANT'S EXPERIENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Naude and Joanie Henning, whose continuous encouragement and unconditional love has made this study possible.

**Something is happening here, but
you don't know what it is, do you
Mr Jones?**

Bob Dylan, "Ballad of a thin man"

**"This we know.
All things are connected
Like the blood
Which unites one family**

**Whatever befalls the earth,
Befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.
Man did not weave the web of life;
He is merely a strand in it.**

**Whatever he does to the web,
He does to himself"**

Ted Perry, inspired by Chief Seattle

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SUMMARY

Airline cabin attendants serve a critical role during onboard operations. They are at the frontline of passenger safety and services under a variety of circumstances, including flight illnesses and emergencies, decompressions, hijacks and other survivable incidents. In order to provide a world-class service to passengers, it is crucial that cabin attendants are in an optimal state of physical and psychological wellbeing.

I joined the South African Airways in March 1990 as a cabin attendant, all bushy-tailed and bright eyed to "go the extra mile" for the customer. I enjoyed every moment of expanding my horizons, but soon realised that "a good time was not always had by all". From an early stage in my flying career, I was intensely conscious of the adversities that some cabin attendants seemed to endure. Disturbed social relationships, loneliness, substance abuse, chronic fatigue, depression, low morale, propensity to leave and absence without leave are problems often reported by cabin attendants. It seemed to me that my colleagues were facing a number of tribulations that the rest of the world was not even aware of. I was profoundly aware of the conflict between the environmental cues cabin attendants were exposed to, as well as of the consequent disruption of internal circadian rhythms. During the exciting and often exhausting eight years of flying, eccentric talk and behaviour frequently flustered me. What did it mean to "boil eggs" in your hotel room and why would you want to do it? What was a Dora pram" and who were Nora, Hilda and Chriselda? These questions motivated me to do an in-depth study of the SAA cabin attendant's experience of environmental stressors.

A systems theoretical perspective formed the framework of the study. This approach provided a comprehensive description of the person-environment transactions. The result of the study indicated that the stressors cabin attendants experience are all related to the disruption of personal meaningful "regularities" or patterns. It seems that as humans, we have a need for a certain amount of regularity, predictability or stated differently, a certain amount of "lawfulness" in our world. The migratory lifestyle of airline cabin attendants seems to introduce disrupted circadian rhythms, -interpersonal relationships and -cultural patterns. From a systems theoretical approach, it can be stated that it is not solely the stressors in the working environment of cabin attendants that "cause" certain thoughts, behaviour or illnesses. The environmental stressors induce and facilitate certain responses that are already inherent in a person's unique emotional and physiological composition. In sum, the working experiences of cabin attendants involve various contexts that continuously interact with one another, creating an ever-changing kaleidoscope of different thoughts and behaviour.

This study does not present the reader with an explanation for the experiences or behaviour of cabin attendants. Instead, the study aims to provide an in-depth description of the different transacting contexts in the lived world of cabin attendants at SAA.

Furthermore, the proposed study will endeavour to:

- Render a long term contribution to the In-Flight Services of South African Airways, and
- Generate information for future research in this area.

Keywords:

Flight attendant

Cabin attendant

Airline cabin crew

Work schedule stress

Environmental stressor

South African Airways

Inflight services

Aviation industry

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

1.	Introduction	1
1.1	Motivation for this study	2
1.2	Overview of the study	3
1.3	"The patterns which connect"	4

Chapter 2

Principles of the systems theoretical approach

2.1	Introduction	6
2.2	Motivation for using a systemic approach	6
2.3	Definition of epistemology	9
2.4	Fundamental systemic principles	11
2.4.1	System	11
2.4.2	Subsystem	12
2.4.2.1	The interpsychic system	13
2.4.2.2	The intrapsychic system	13
2.5	Cybernetics	15
2.5.1	Definition of cybernetics	15
2.5.2	Negative feedback loop	16
2.5.3	Positive feedback loop	16
2.5.4	Adaptability	17

2.5.5	Flexibility: "the uncommitted potentiality for change"	18
2.5.5.1	A budget of flexibility"	19
2.6	Second Order Cybernetics	20
2.6.1	Construction of reality	20
2.6.2	The self as an observing system	21
2.6.2.1	"Vincent's room in Arles, 1889"	22
2.7	Conclusion	24

Chapter 3

Literature review

3.1	The research context	25
3.1.1	The physical environment	25
3.1.2	The socio-cultural environment	27
3.2	Environmental stress	28
3.2.1	Definition of environmental stress	28
3.2.2	The physiological response to stress	29
3.2.2.1	The physiological systems involved in the stress reaction	29
3.2.2.2	The Flight of Flight reaction: the adrenal medulla	31
3.2.2.3	The General Adaptation Syndrome: the adrenal medulla	33
3.3	Dimensions of environmental stressors	37
3.3.1	Perceptual salience	37
3.3.2	Type of adjustment required	37
3.3.3	Predictability of stressors	37

3.3.4	Duration and periodicity of environmental stressors	38
3.4	Work schedule stress	38
3.5	Circadian rhythms: "The cycle of life"	39
3.5.1	The discipline of chronobiology	39
3.5.2	Cabin attendants and the circadian clock	40
3.6	Conclusion	41

Chapter 4

The research process

4.1	Introduction	42
4.2	Motivation for the selection of the subject of research	42
4.3	Motivation for the use of interviews as a research method	42
4.4	The seven stages of interview research	45
4.4.1	Thematizing the interview	45
4.4.2	Designing the interview	45
4.4.2.1	Pre-design for interview guide	46
4.4.2.2	Sampling design	46
4.4.2.3	Sample size	47
4.4.3	Generating data	48
4.4.4	Transcribing	49
4.4.5	Analysing	49
4.4.5.1	First-level analysis	50
4.4.5.2	The second-level analysis: Establishing and labelling of pattern categories	52

4.4.5.3 The third-level analysis: Conceptual discussion	54
4.4.6 Verifying of analysis results	54
4.4.6.1 Reliability of coding categories	55
4.4.7 Reporting	56
4.5 Concluding remarks	57

Chapter 5

Results and discussion of the first-level analysis

5.1 Introduction	58
5.2 Discussion of coding categories	58
5.2.1 Absence from home on special days	58
5.2.2 Loneliness	60
5.2.3 Impersonal working environment	61
5.2.4 Separation anxiety before flight departure	62
5.2.5 The hotel room	63
5.2.6 Depression	64
5.2.7 The influence of flying on meaningful relationships	65
5.2.8 Poor physical health	66
5.2.9 Shopping experiences	67
5.2.10 Feelings of hostility towards the passengers	68
5.2.11 Crew eccentricities	69
5.2.12 Accusations of incompetent colleagues	70

5.2.13	Temporary friendships with colleagues	71
5.2.14	Coming home after an overseas flight	72
5.2.15	Suicidal tendencies	73
5.2.16	Substance abuse	73
5.2.17	Religion	75
5.2.18	Physical exercise	75
5.3	Conclusion	76

Chapter 6

Second-level analysis: Presentation of pattern categories and third-level analysis: conceptual discussion.

6.1	Introduction	77
6.2	Presentation of pattern categories	79
6.2.1	Cabin attendant	79
6.2.2	Context: Home	80
6.2.3	Transactions with context: Home	81
6.2.4	Context: Destinations	82
6.2.5	Transactions with context: Destinations	82
6.2.6	Context: SAA working environment	83
6.2.7	Transactions with context: SAA working environment	83
6.2.8	Metacontext	84
6.3	Third order analysis: Conceptual discussion	85
6.3.1	Positive and negative feedback loops	85

6.3.2	Matching of flexibility of interacting systems	87
6.3.3	"Whatever is received, is received according to the manner of the receiver"	87
6.3.4	Disrupted personal meaningful patterns	88
6.3.4.1	Disrupted circadian rhythms	89
6.3.4.2	Disrupted interpersonal relationships	89
6.3.4.3	Disrupted cultural patterns	89
6.4	Conclusion	90

Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1	Introduction	91
7.2	Summary of results	91
7.3	Recommendations	92
7.3.1	Psycho-educational workshop	92
7.3.2	Limited years of flying	93
7.3.3	Recommendations for future research	93
7.4	"That reminds me of a story"	94
7.5	Conclusion	96

Figures in text

Figure 1:	The Flight or fight response	34
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Figure 2: The General Adaptation syndrome	36
Figure 3: A schematic representation of the different transacting contexts in the lives of cabin attendants	78
Appendix A	97
Appendix B	98
References	99