



# The Cabin Crew Blues

## Middle-aged Cabin Attendants and Their Working Conditions

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how an airline company uses the labor of a group of middle-aged cabin attendants in an industry increasingly characterized by deregulation and competitiveness. The study was based on in-depth interviews with seven women, all with between 24 and 30 years of work experience as cabin attendants. The article focuses on the women's working conditions and well-being and the analysis reveals three key aspects—intensification of work, vulnerability, and aging—that affect the cabin attendants' experiences and emotions in relation to the work. It is at the intersection of these three aspects that the cabin attendants' concerns must be understood. The study's findings indicated that positive emotions such as job satisfaction and commitment have diminished because of exploitative and otherwise poor working conditions. Taking the cabin attendants' concerns as its point of departure, the article shows that there is a need to move away from a discussion about emotional labor toward a discussion of working conditions.

### KEY WORDS

*Aging / cabin attendants / exploitation / intensification / vulnerability / working conditions*

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## Introduction

In developed Western countries, there is an ongoing trend in services and production industries to employ as few people as possible to do as much as possible. Besides this “less is more” principle and the intensification of work, other trends include increasing demands of employee flexibility to meet variations in the employer's needs and growing job insecurity. All of these manifestations can be understood as being generated by an economic system that aims to make profits. By using the concept of “flexploitation,” Ross (2009) argues that the combination of corporate-driven globalization, deregulation, subcontracting, and outsourcing leads to an increase in the number of hours worked and flexible work hours, and a decline in job security and worker autonomy in a broad range of occupations and professions. In this article, we examine how

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employees in a particular occupation are experiencing a transformation in their work that has taken place over a relatively short time. Through interviews with long-serving middle-aged cabin attendants employed by Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), the study explored how the employees experienced and encountered their present work situation by relating it to both memories and experiences of the past and to assumptions about what it would probably be like in the future. The study reveals how the transformation of their good working conditions into poor ones made their work become a source of frustration, disappointment, and insecurity about the future. The results show that the cabin attendants who had been satisfied, loyal, and committed went from having a positive attitude toward work to a negative one. The data indicate that the cabin attendants' main concern was not the demands emanating from the emotional labor, but their working conditions in terms of work intensification and vulnerability, and their aging in relation to their wellbeing and future. This finding calls for further exploration of service work—such as that of cabin attendants—beyond Hochschild's influential theoretical framework.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We begin with a description of the changes in the industry and the consequences for the cabin attendants, followed by a brief discussion about research in the field. Thereafter, we discuss the study's methodology, data, and then there are three sections that are a combination of results and analysis. We conclude with a summarizing discussion and some concluding remarks.

## From jet set to mass transportation

Safety and service are the main tasks to be carried out for cabin attendants, irrespective of the airline company is a low-cost carrier or not. Although much of the work carried out in aircraft cabins today is the same as it was in the early days of air travel, the working conditions have changed dramatically. Until the late 1960s, air travel was a luxury form of transportation for people belonging to privileged, high-status groups. Accordingly, the “jet set” defined international high society during the 1960s (Nilsson, 2011). Today, aviation is no longer only a luxury experience for the privileged few and has instead become a form of mass transportation with other characteristics turning to a passenger group that is more heterogeneous, including businesspeople, casual travelers, holiday-makers, and commuters with other requirements. Accordingly, the role of the cabin attendant has changed in line with these new conditions. In addition to new technology facilitating bigger and faster aircraft, the rapid development of aviation into mass transportation has also been fueled by an increasingly competitive global market due to deregulation (Barry, 2007).

Although not everything that happens on the labor market can be explained by increasing deregulation and competition, a lot can. In the case of aviation, the effects of the large-scale deregulation of the US airline market reached Europe in the 1990s. In 1997, European Union deregulations made it possible for any commercial company to serve any destination at any price within the EU (Boyd & Baine, 1998; Unionen 2014). The competitiveness of low-cost carriers had major consequences, and cost reductions and measures to increase productivity have now been implemented among most commercial airlines. Further, national airlines have been partly or wholly sold to owners in other countries, resulting in new ownership constellations across borders. Additionally,

new forms of cost-cutting business models have evolved, in which an airline can be registered in one country—often where labor law is weak—hire its employees from another country—often one where wages are low—and operate in yet other countries. Wet-lease is another strategy, whereby a company hires aircrafts, including crew, to operate routes on the hiring airlines behalf. The purpose is to keep costs as low as possible and this is made possible by today's regulation. In other words, as Dobruszkes (2006) argued, airline companies are caught in a machine in which one wheel is driven by cost reduction and the other by increased revenue.

## Cabin attendants under pressure

As mentioned above, the transformation of commercial aviation has had major consequences for cabin attendants. Although some still consider the job a dream occupation (Cortzen, 2000:126), its status has diminished dramatically. In the early days, female cabin attendants “came to represent a combination of a traditional female qualities associated with nursing and hospitableness, and cosmopolitan glamour” (Nilsson, 2011:11). Bergman (2015) shows that while these characteristics remain to some extent, the job's status has dropped as working conditions have changed. Along with lower fares, fewer frills, bigger planes, more passengers, less crew, and an overall changed image of airline travel, the cabin attendant's role is now more one of a full-fledged salesperson on a mass transportation carrier. The requirement regarding safety is still there, so is the demand to be a service provider, although the time allocated to provide this service has decreased.

Studies of cabin attendants have paid a great deal of attention to the service relation. Researchers have examined the specific relation between cabin attendants and passengers both in terms of service quality and as an example of emotional work (Heuven & Bakker, 2003; Williams, 2003). Hochschild's (1983) influential theory on emotional labor is often used when studying cabin attendants, since it takes both service quality and emotional labor into account. By using cabin attendants as an example, Hochschild showed how emotions, femininity, and work are linked to the capitalist labor process by instrumentally motivated feeling rules and emotional labor. She described how cabin attendants manipulate their own feelings in different ways in order to manipulate passengers so that they can meet the company's demands and control upon them. Thus, exploitive work and profit are related both to high-quality service and customer satisfaction “where the customer is king” (1983:86). Thus, Hochschild draws a comparison between the emotional labor process and the physical labor process. She viewed the deregulation that emerged in the American airline industry in the late 1970s as an important factor behind the changes in cabin crew working conditions, which in turn feeds a more exploitive form of emotional labor.

Although Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* is one of the most influential books in the area, it has been criticized. For example, Bolton (2005) argued that emotional labor does not necessarily produce a bad result or victimization for employees. Bolton and Boyd's (2003) study of cabin crews showed that attendants are using their emotions in ways that are manifestations of their skills rather than solely a result of their employers' demands and control. Taylor and Moore (2015) emphasized the need to incorporate working conditions into the analysis of emotional labor among cabin crew in order to understand why forms of resistance, such as communities of coping—that



is, informal ways in which emotional workers support each other—become a collective position of strength among cabin attendants when the demands on them are increasing. Hence, caution must be taken when addressing cabin attendants, emotional work, and emotions as such. The presence of emotions within this group is not only manifested as labor. According to Vallerand and Houliort (2003:177), emotions, such as satisfaction and commitment, as well as disappointment and anger, can also be understood as active forces for people's actions. Accordingly, a worker's positive emotion for his or her occupation and/or colleagues can be an active force in, for example, creating various forms of communities of coping or other strategies to handle a specific situation (Taylor & Moore, 2015). Also, when workers share bad experiences of their work, strong emotions can be an "important collective element to the (emotional) labor process" by strengthening the attachment in the group (Korczynski, 2007:578).

Although emotional labor is an important aspect of cabin attendants' experiences of their work situation, we depart in the present study from Hochschild's tradition. Instead of focusing on the cabin attendants' emotional labor in relation to the passengers, we examine their working conditions and their work situation in a broader perspective. We are inspired by Taylor and Moore (2015), who recognized a number of aspects linking the rationalization process within the occupation with both the emotional tensions and the increasing demands on cabin attendants. Taylor and Moore (2015:94) pointed out that "the apparently contradictory imperatives of cost cutting and mobilizing emotional labor through service excellence have imposed a double burden on cabin crew." This burden cannot be reduced solely to the service relation. Cabin attendant's work is demanding, both physically and emotionally, and the present article looks into these demands as the cabin attendants themselves experience them.

### **Methodology: A narrative inductive approach focusing on concerns**

The approach in this study is qualitative and the empirical material is based on seven in-depth interviews with women ranging in age from 50 to 55. The targeted age group is selected because they have experienced the changes in commercial aviation. All interviewees had worked as cabin crew for between 24 and 30 years, beginning during the expansive and golden 1980s. Although not all of the interviewees had worked for the same company during their careers, they had all spent at least the last 15 years working for SAS, which is their present employer and the flagship carrier of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. All the interviewees were based in Stockholm. Most of them had families and children, although some were divorced or otherwise single. The women all came from lower middle-class backgrounds. We selected the interviewees through snowball sampling, starting with some cabin attendants that one of the authors knew when she worked as a cabin attendant between 1985 and 1988.

We considered "cabin attendant" to be a catch-all term for the positions of purser, steward, and airline host/hostess. Each has a different main task onboard, but all work together to serve the passengers in the cabin. Interviewees included one purser (the lead position in the cabin), one steward (responsible for food), and five airline hostesses (service provider to the passengers).

One of the authors conducted the interviews during the autumn and winter of 2013. Interviews were unstructured, informal conversations about each individual cabin

attendant's situation and experiences at work, both past and present. The interviews also discussed the future, as this was something that all of the interviewed cabin attendants were concerned about. With this inductive approach, we sought to capture the cabin attendants' concerns (cf. Archer, 2003). Thus, our analysis was grounded in their experiences, which meant the conceptual and theoretical work was empirically driven. Five of the interviews were conducted at the respective interviewees' homes, one in a hotel room, and another in a restaurant. The interviews took the form of a dialogue. The main purpose was to capture what the interviewed cabin attendants considered to be issues of concern in their current work situation. Therefore, the cabin attendants and their understanding guided the conversation. In the empirical results, we have tried to keep as close to their stories as possible presenting the data in a narrative form. When talking about cabin attendants in plural this does only include the interviewees and not cabin attendants at SAS in general.

Nevertheless, the cabin attendants commented that they believed the views among this group of middle-aged cabin attendants were very homogeneous. One cabin attendant said, "What I'm going to tell you during our conversation consist of things that we talk about all the time at work. We're so damned upset." Another prefaced her remarks with "You've probably already been told about this." All of them also often talked with a collective voice, using "we" to indicate a shared experience. During the interviews, and analysis, these statements about a shared experience proved to be true. This could be a result of asking a group of long-serving cabin attendants in the same age group about their concerns in relation to their job. It is also most certainly a consequence of the fact that cabin attendants, according to Williams (1986), are an occupational community in which the members socialize mainly with others from the same occupation rather than from a diverse range of occupations.

The small number of interviewees may raise the question of how common their shared experience may be. Nevertheless, this study did not focus on how widespread certain perceptions were among cabin crew as a whole or in a specific sector of the labor market. While we do not claim to make empirical generalizations of any kind, we do believe that the analysis is useful in a more general discussion about contemporary work. We believe these middle-aged women with lengthy experience as cabin attendants can offer insights into the changes in the airline industry. In contrast, interviews with cabin attendants who are younger and have shorter tenures may yield an understanding of the new culture developing within the occupation. In addition, interviews with male cabin attendants could constitute another area of interest for a deeper gender analysis. Other groups such as management, union representatives, and passengers could provide fruitful empirical material for understanding the new situation and role of the cabin crew.

Each interview included a recorded portion of approximately 90–120 minutes, and an unrecorded portion that lasted between 1 and 2 hours. One of the reasons for the long off-the-record conversation was that the author who had worked with some of the interviewees had not seen most of them for some time, and there were quite a few things to discuss. Although the cabin attendants were very frank during the recorded conversation, their frustration, anger, and sadness was more evident when the recorder was turned off. In most cases, quotations used in this article are from the recorded interviews; however, notes were taken during the unrecorded portions and were used to provide details as needed. The unrecorded portions entirely concerned the cabin attendants'

working conditions, their employer, and the union and did not involve anything about the emotional work toward passengers. We interpreted this finding as an indication of their main concern. Passengers were mentioned in the recorded part, but, again, this area did not stand out as a concern. In fact, we found we had to ask the interviewees to specifically say something about passengers and the service relation. All participants gave their informed consent, and have read and approved publications of these data, including this article. We translated quotations into English and in some cases idiomatically modified the language.

The data were analyzed by listening to each recorded interview five times in order to become familiar with the specific narrative and sense the moods and feelings of each person. The categories chosen for this article were concerns expressed by the cabin attendants in a way that revealed the strong emotions involved. The analytical categories that emerged as main concerns were related to their experiences of their working conditions and their age. The categories developed in this article are work intensification, vulnerability, and aging. We present these categories in the following three sections, each of which is a combination of analytical and theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence. Although each category is empirically emanated, we introduce each section with theoretical considerations.

## Work intensification

Work intensification is a trend in the European labor market that, according to Burchell (2002), exaggerates the effort employees must put into their jobs during work hours. Work intensification can now take on many forms other than just speeding up the work process (Adam, 2004). Other examples related to time are extending working hours through shift work or imposing longer working hours per person. Intensification is also manifested in the form of extended demands on employees' temporal and spatial availability whereby their time and energy can be used when and where they are wanted in relation to the employers' needs. Moreover, intensification strategies include adding more tasks to the same time unit through technology, organizing the order of tasks, or removing unproductive elements from the work process.

Green (2001) advocates that work intensification needs to be understood both as the amount of time spent at work, that is "extensive" effort, and as physical and mental input, that is "intensive" effort. Green (2004) further argues that work intensification can be explained in several ways: The increasing flexibilization of working life has led to increased pressure and intensification; the use of high-commitment policies has contributed to increasingly complex tasks; and the decline of collective bargaining has reduced employees' ability to formulate counter-strategies. Last but not least, intensification is also a result of technological changes, as he states that:

an important source of modern work intensification lies in the nature of technological changes introduced in recent decades. A reading of the case study literature suggest, on the one hand, that many technical innovations and new forms of work organization have been associated with greater managerial control over the labor process and that this improved control is likely to bring higher effort levels. On the other hand, the improvements in technical efficiency that innovations and new forms of work organization have introduced

often have tended to be effort-biased. By enhancing the ability to deliver work to the worker, these technological changes enable what Marx termed the “porosity of the working day” to be reduced (Green, 2004:737).

Green’s arguments about the factors behind the work intensification and his description of the consequences of intensification emerged as fruitful for understanding the cabin attendants’ stories. The processes and experiences that were made visible can be understood as a consequence of the exploitative character of work intensification.

The intensification that cabin attendants experienced was both extensive (longer working hours) and intensive (higher energy level required during work). Before the latest union agreement came into force in March 2013, cabin attendants were allowed to work 10.5 hours a day over a period of 7 days. After the agreement, they were allowed to work up to 13 hours a day, and a maximum 15 hours a day is accepted under certain unforeseen circumstances, such as during flight delays. The agreement allows cabin attendants to work up to 47.5 hours over a 7-day period, which can legally be extended up to a maximum 60 hours due to unforeseen circumstances. The Swedish Working Hours Act only regulates parts of the working time for cabin attendants, since it makes an exception for certain groups of flight personnel. Instead, the working hours are regulated by the European Aviation Security Agency, which allows up to 60 hours a week and 190 hours a month.

Work schedules are generated by a computer program designed to optimize the schedules to maximize the work hours for each cabin attendant. One cabin attendant (CA)<sup>1</sup> said, “The computer schedules us in a way that isn’t humane. We’re treated like machines.” Schedule optimization is done in relation to the company’s demands for labor, and the parameters used during the calculations maximize utilization of cabin attendants, subject to legal requirements, such as minimum rests. For employees, these conditions produce both extensive and intensive intensification. As one CA said, “Sometimes it does not feel as a real job because our workload is so unreal. It is absurd that a job, where security is priority number one, is carried out by a crew that is totally shattered.” Since staff are often scheduled close to their maximum hours, it is easy to encounter unforeseen circumstances that would cause them to exceed their maximum working hours. The cabin attendants themselves are responsible for keeping track of working hours and for reporting if they are “unfit for flight.” However, they are rather reluctant to do that since it is a long process where they have to write a report. Besides, they find it hard to actually claim they are not “fit for flight.” One CA described it as follows: “If the captain asks us whether we’re capable of flying and we’re standing there with a loaded plane, there won’t be many who’ll say no even though we’ve been working for 13 hours and have slept badly the night before.”

The cabin attendants described the new agreement regarding working time regulations as vague and too complicated for them to understand. Under the previous agreement, they knew and understood the rules regarding working time, recovery periods, meal breaks, and so on. Now, they are forced to repeatedly call the scheduling office to find out if their schedules meet safety and working time regulations. One CA said, “When looking at our schedules, we ask ourselves, is this really possible? Then we ask the planning officers, and they always say: Yes! We have a Facebook page where we ask questions about our schedules since everyone is so confused!”

The optimized schedule affects the attendants’ ability to rest and recover at home between shifts, as well as on the job during a shift. “Before, we could use the time we



had at our overnight stop to recover, sleep and rest, to re-charge, do everyday errands, exercise, or whatever. Today, this is often impossible since we only have time to sleep.” According to the cabin attendants’ stories, their stopovers used to be a time to recover and to do things of personal interest. However, with time for recovery at a minimum and workload at a maximum, the attendants find little time left for things other than to recover. Fatigue and lack of sleep and recovery were among the main concerns. One CA said: “Imagine, flying Arlanda–New York five times in a month, and you lose one night every time. I have been so tired I just had to sleep whenever I could, in the car park, on the bus, at the kitchen table.” Also, social activities with the rest of the cabin crew are abandoned in favor of rest. “Usually, we’re so tired that we don’t even go out and eat dinner when we have a stopover. We just grab something and take it back with us to the hotel room and then just crash into bed.”

Another change in recent years is the elimination of meal breaks on the ground as cabin attendants must spend more time aboard the plane or going from one plane to another. “We can work 12 to 14 hours a day for several days, only eating in-flight food sitting on a crew seat outside the toilet with a food box on the knee.” Time spent out of the aircraft for reasons other than rushing to another aircraft is now considered a luxury, as are fresh air, decent food served at a table, or the opportunity to tend to personal needs. “We survive on nuts and fruit while in the air. Going to the toilet when needed is a luxury.”

Extensive work intensification also manifests itself in indeterminate and irregular work schedules, as the company strives for flexibility and having staff ready to change the schedule at a short notice (e.g., Allvin & Aronsson, 2013). All the cabin attendants have variable schedules, which mean that they cannot foresee when and where they will be working until they get their monthly schedules 2 weeks in advance. This unpredictability, together with the prolonged working hours, intensifies work by colonizing more and more of the attendants’ everyday lives. It also generates stress and feelings of inadequacy, especially for cabin attendants with a family and children. One CA stated, “I can’t understand how those with small children manage to work like this. On the other hand, they don’t. So many colleagues are getting divorced.” The cabin attendants reported that they find it hard to live a normal life, in which it is possible to plan things with friends and family. Their odd work hours make social life harder, and intensive work drains them of energy. All mentioned a preference for a lifestyle with some level of variation and unpredictability, but they also said that their situation had gone too far. Previously, they had been able to work a set schedule in which they knew when they were working, which made it much easier to combine their work and personal lives. “Things were much easier when you knew a long time in advance when you were working, or not, so that you could plan according to that.” The cabin attendants said they were totally in the hands of uncertainty and a scheduling machine set to maximize use of labor.

Cabin attendants working on trans-Atlantic flights said they were scheduled without taking into account how their shift related to the time of day. Therefore, they could work late at night for a few days and then work consecutive early mornings, since the regulated time to rest can be scheduled to daytime. One cabin attendant described how she could be working for 2 days flying within Europe, getting up at 3:30 a.m. and working two 10–12-hour shifts, and then just reversing her day/night rhythm by starting late in the afternoon on a trans-Atlantic flight to North America. “After these shifts, you can be sure of nose bleeds and your stomach being in a mess,” she said sarcastically. Many

cabin attendants mentioned that 1 hour of working at a high altitude cannot be equated with 1 hour on the ground. One CA said, “I was on a course where we learned that working for one hour at high altitude was the same as one and a half on the ground. I wonder why they let us work 14 hours knowing that!” The large number of takeoffs and landings (up to six of each) also affects crew members’ bodies and health, as do irregular shifts in which they must constantly change their diurnal and nocturnal rhythms. “Tired and dehydrated—that’s my middle name!” declared one CA with a laugh.

Regarding the intensive effort on board the aircraft, all cabin attendants said they needed to work harder for several reasons: First, they often work with only the minimum number of crew on board. Second, with turnaround time between flights reduced to a minimum, they are constantly under pressure to make up time. Other reasons are that flights are usually full; passengers are more demanding; more hand luggage is being carried onboard; passengers are more frequently using electronic devices on board, which must be handled at take-off and landing; and the company are asking cabin attendants to sell more goods. In addition, the company’s policy of offering free coffee or tea means a lot of pouring and extra garbage. “Stressful flights are shorter flights between Gothenburg, London, Copenhagen, and Stockholm. They are always full of people with loads of hand luggage who refuse to turn off their electrical equipment. All this takes extra time and energy to deal with.”

To conclude, the increased on-board workload, the extended working hours, and the increased demands due to variable schedules set at short notice increase work demands and stress and also reduce the opportunity to recover during shifts, breaks, stopovers, and between shifts. In other words, the “porosity of the working day” is substantially reduced (cf. Green, 2004:737) and the intensification of work impinges upon cabin attendants’ everyday lives.

## Vulnerability

Vulnerability and the lack of resources and capacities among certain groups to withstand adverse impacts and/or exposure are often seen as the result of a lack of power and a precarious situation (cf. Burchell, 2002; Standing, 2011). As stated in the introduction of this article, in reference to Ross (2009) and the concept of flexploitation, deregulation has led to a decline in job security, employee autonomy, and high demands of flexibility and an increased work load. Thus, one can note that vulnerability, like intensification, is linked to the interests of global capital. Bourdieu (1988:85) referred to the concept of flexploitation as “a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation.” These conditions are often more common among specific groups and in specific segments of the labor market, such as low-wage and non-unionized workers (Pollert & Charlwood, 2009), but they also are increasingly present in other segments (cf., Kelchtermans, 2005). According to Pollert and Charlwood (2009:355), vulnerable positions are typically characterized by a power imbalance, both over work and in work, which is a result of weaker unions and influence, and increased managerial power and control through use of technology and performance measures. Thus, vulnerability has a structural and objective dimension and a subjective and active dimension where it is experienced and understood.



The cabin attendants' vulnerability was expressed in terms of receiving little social support from both the company and the union, which resulted, among other things, in collective agreements that include longer working hours, less pay, lower pension payments, and a constant threat of redundancy. The cabin attendants stressed their feelings of being powerless and unimportant: "The company doesn't care about us at all. They don't listen to us either, which makes us feel totally worthless." Under threat of company closure, the union signed agreements eliminating previously acquired rights. The cabin attendants expressed disappointment and irritation in the way the union dealt with the situation, its weak performance vis-à-vis the employer, its acceptance of bad agreements, and its lack of knowledge regarding the attendants' situations.

The cabin attendants mentioned that the latest collective agreement to change the retirement age from 60 to 65 and the demanding working conditions have brought despair, frustration, increased stress-related absences, and efforts to find new jobs. "Many of us older ones had less than 10 years left and expected to be able to manage that, but five more years working like this will totally destroy us," said one CA. Another described her reaction to the agreement that extended working hours and postponed retirement: "I remember coming home from work finding my new schedule. When I realized what it meant, I just started to shake and couldn't think straight and then I got a stress reaction and breakdown." At the time of our interviews, Swedish newspapers reported that 20% of cabin attendants at SAS in Sweden were on sick leave (Dagens Nyheter, 2013). The company itself was reluctant to confirm these figures to the press, but the interviewees confirmed the situation. Also in a report from the Union (2014), one can read that during the autumn 2013, the union-elected worker safety representatives made three requests for legal enforcement according to the Swedish Work Environment Act due to high sick leave numbers to SAS. These were followed by two inspections by the Swedish Work Environment Authority that, in turn, resulted in an injunction of penalty if SAS did not investigate and resolve the sick-leave situation.

The cabin attendants' vulnerability was also expressed in their concerns for their job security, based on recurring warnings about redundancies. The threat of job loss had hung over the cabin attendants for the last 15 years, driven by continuous cost reductions and speculation regarding a sell-out or a shutdown. "We've been worrying about the future of our company for so many years now, and I think we've assumed a huge amount of responsibility and been too loyal." Management's rhetoric and media coverage describing the company as being in crisis served to continuously remind the attendants of their insecure future. One CA said, "You read about us and our wages being the problem in the newspapers, and management repeatedly tells us this." Yet, over the years, the company demanded employees' loyalty and efforts to save the company: "Management says there's a crisis and that we need to agree on certain conditions, otherwise this will be the end of the company. The problem is they keep on saying this again and again." The cabin attendants also said they were uncertain about their chances of finding another job, a concern that impacted what they were willing to accept from the airline. One cabin attendant said, "Uncertainty about losing my job made me appreciate it even though my working conditions started to get worse. I had my family and kids to think of as well." In other words, their perceived poor chances in the labor market strengthened their feeling of vulnerability. All cabin attendants were trying in various ways to leave the company, but they shared the feeling of having poor prospects in the labor market because of their age, their being accustomed to an irregular lifestyle, and

their fairly high salary expectations. Still, they talked about how they had begun to accept the idea of another job with a lower salary.

Thus, there was a shared understanding among this group of older cabin attendants that they were a burden. The cabin attendants repeatedly returned to the company's contention that their wages were the main reason the company was struggling to survive in a competitive market. "We cost too much since we were recruited in the times when our work was still valued!" According to the cabin attendants, the company was looking for younger, cheaper workers with fewer demands and who will stay in the occupation for only a couple of years.

The cabin attendants expressed feelings of being exploited and felt that their company treated labor as a commodity, using statements like: "We're treated like slaves." "They make use of us in an inhumane way." "You are always giving away a part of you, but there is a limit to it." The occupation has been in a process of proletarianization for decades, and now there are strong indications that the cabin attendants, also in flagship companies such as SAS, are turned into a full-fledged service proletariat facing a greedier form of exploitation than before. Alongside the drawbacks regarding working conditions, there has also been a significant status drop for the occupation in general—but also for this specific group—due to the erosion of earlier status fundamentals (Bergman, 2015). Mechanisms behind this process include the company's strivings for cost reductions and revenue increases, but also neo-liberal management and labor relations ideas, combined with a weaker union. The intensification of work, in conjunction with an increasing powerlessness over working conditions and an obvious lack of recognition, has in a tangible way increased emotional distress and psychosocial problems such as burn-outs.

## Aging

Aging is a natural state and something that a person does from birth; it is a condition for living. Strehler (1962) points out that although all members of a species display effects of aging, the effects increase with time. In a work-life context, aging can be seen as a structuring and organizing principle and an embodied experience (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In contemporary work life, the matter of an aging workforce is manifested by an increase in the number of older workers who are active in most types of occupations. Related to aging is ageism, a term first used by Butler (1969:243) who defines it as "systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender." Current employment patterns of elderly worker research show that there are differences between older and prime-aged or younger workers; for example, it is more difficult for older unemployed workers to find new jobs (Dixon, 2003); the Swedish labor market is no exception (cf., Ahmed et al., 2012). Research also shows that aging makes a person more vulnerable and more likely to be targeted for redundancy. Such older people might be considered to be unwilling and inflexible to do the job in a different way and to learn new skills, and reluctant to adapt to changed demands of the modern organization (e.g., Riach, 2011). Someone who is regarded as an elderly worker risks being seen as a less compliant worker and as someone who more easily gives voice to criticism about their employer than a younger person; this is something that Zanoni (2011)

argues is making the employment status of these older workers precarious. The work organization seldom adapt to aging, as work demands and working environments are often the same for aging and young workers, using a young healthy body as the norm (cf., Katz, 2000). In line with this, one can note that there is a lack of recognition of the fact that older shift workers are more likely than their younger counterparts to have disrupted sleep, and that they are less able to cope with sudden changes in sleep timing caused by irregular shift work (Åkerstedt & Torsvall, 1981; Kecklund, Ingre, & Åkerstedt, 2010).

In the present study, aging has emerged as a central concern among the cabin attendants. It captures the life phase of the middle age and is directly related to their embodied experience and ways of handling work intensification and vulnerability. Aging is also relevant in relation to the cabin attendants' long experience of their work, which adds a critical comparative element to how they experience their present work situation. The past and the future tend to have different meanings and practical consequences for how younger and older people handle their present situation.

Looking back in time, the cabin attendants said that they had experienced a continuity of job satisfaction for many years, and said the positive aspects had by far outnumbered the negative. All of the women said they had enjoyed their jobs, which they described as satisfying and something that gave them joy and dignity. Some talked about a time when they had been proud of their jobs and their company and felt that the company showed them appreciation and respect. Others remembered the company as a very good place to work. "I have really liked my job and I love this way of life. I've adapted to a sort of lifestyle that has been just perfect." said one CA. Another said, "The work itself was fun, my colleagues were fun, and the non-routine lifestyle I adopted was fun, as was the traveling." The cabin attendants expressed a shared sense of surprise that they have been working in their occupation so long. When they first entered the field, they thought the job would be temporary, for a couple of years, and then they would do something different. But they said they stayed because of their job satisfaction, the working conditions, the lifestyle, and their colleagues.

The cabin attendants expressed an understanding of the company's current competitive situation and of passengers' desire to find the cheapest travel fares. Although they were critical of the company's cost-cutting strategies, they could understand them to some extent. They described themselves as a loyal group who had taken a great deal of responsibility on behalf of the company, while at the same time concerned about losing their jobs. As time passed, they said their work satisfaction had been violated by changed conditions at the same time as they were entering another life phase. As they age, they said they find the demanding work hours and the cabin equipment more challenging. The cabin attendants need to be fit and able to handle emergencies of various kinds and, as in other occupations, older workers can be seen as problematic and a risk. However, they also mentioned that those who have stayed on the job have found ways to handle the demands. Most of them exercise, rest whenever they can, and watch what they eat and drink. Recovery and a fit body are prerequisites for coping with this work: "You need to be strong and fit to work like we do; otherwise your body won't last." When they reflected upon age, the cabin attendants said that the working conditions aboard the aircraft generate problems for all ages: "The thing is that the younger ones can't manage the working conditions either. I believe they're on sick leave more than us." The woman noted that one strategy for handling their work situation was to reduce their working

hours. No one of the interviewed cabin attendants was working full-time at present as they could no longer manage the workload.

All the cabin attendants had fewer than 10 years left until retirement at the age of 60 under the previous collective agreement, but could not envision themselves continuing to work until they were 65 under the current conditions. “I’d be able to work until 60, but working to 65 is impossible under these circumstances,” said one CA. As mentioned earlier, all cabin attendants were trying to leave the company, but felt that their age was a barrier to finding other work. They stressed that they believed that the company’s strategy was to replace older attendants with younger ones. Younger workers would not only be cheaper, but might also be healthier and less demanding for management to handle. The cabin attendants expressed concerns and uncertainty regarding the future of the company, their jobs, their health, and their alternative employment possibilities. They found support from each other as they tried to cope with the situation, talking face to face, on the phone or on the Internet. Common statements were: “We talk and talk about our shitty situation and how to get away from it, it’s a way of coping with it” or “Right now, we’re very tightly knit – we only have each other and are so loyal towards each other.” Another said, “It is *much* better than going to a shrink!” Expressing disappointment, one CA said, “You know, it is like we have stayed way too long in something that has turned into a bad destructive relationship.” They all know the tune and the words to, what one could depict as, *The Cabin Crew Blues*.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

Although we have studied cabin attendants and paid attention to the emotional dimension, we have not looked at emotional labor in a Hochschild-inspired sense, solely in relation to passengers. Instead, we have focused on emotions, expressed as concerns, among cabin attendants in an inductive way. This approach reduces the importance of the relation to the passenger and highlights the importance of working conditions and employment relations. Encouraged by Taylor and Moore’s (2015) discussion of the double burden, our analysis of the interviews showed how a deregulated, competitive market has generated working conditions characterized by intensification of work, which combined with the employees’ vulnerable position reveals the exploitative conditions under which the aging and experienced cabin attendants work.

Our analysis indicated intensification, both as increased extensive efforts manifested as longer working hours and intensive effort manifested as a work situation draining the cabin attendants of energy while at work (Green, 2001). The cabin attendants experienced the double burden that occurs when high-quality service must be delivered within circumstances of increasing scarcity (cf., Taylor & Moore, 2015). The combination of work intensification, vulnerability, and aging boosted pressure on them and fueled both health problems and negative emotions toward work. Consequently, cabin attendants’ attitudes of satisfaction and commitment gradually changed to frustration. Job satisfaction and trust in management and the union both diminished drastically and loyalty waned (cf., Zeytinoglu et al., 2007).

The cabin attendants were loyal to the company and adapted to its needs during recent crises. They accepted setback after setback, persuading themselves that matters could be worse and that the advantages of the job, such as wages and colleagues,



outweighed the disadvantages. This strategy of falsifying experience and suppressing frustration, humiliation, and disappointment worked for a time (cf., Bailey, 1983:13). The change in attitude can be understood as a consequence of increased exploitation, which led to a transformation from satisfaction to a collective awareness of unveiled exploitation. Hence, their concerns and frustration were largely a result of a changed work situation that had previously been very satisfactory (cf., Bailey, 1983:29). The cabin attendants' view of what constitutes a good job no longer matched their current work situation. In addition, they felt helpless to stop further deterioration in their work situation.

The cabin attendants' collective awareness about their situation, their common will to support each other, and their search for ways to exit can be understood as communities of coping. Korczynski (2007:578) argues that customers' abuse of frontline (emotional) workers creates informal collective communities of coping as employees seek to support each other in difficult situations. However, the present study indicates that communities of coping may also arise from an employer's exploitative working conditions when employees have a shared experience of what a good job *can* be like. Our study also shows that despite the exploitative conditions, the cabin attendants were not a group of alienated workers. Instead, they were a group of conscious but vulnerable employees, working under demanding working conditions. The cabin attendants did not have an indifferent attitude toward their work; instead, they expressed strong emotions.

Although they have, objectively, been in the same exploitative relationship during their entire employment at the company, the situation had been manageable due to labor regulations and good working conditions. These shields against exploitative forces are now gone, however, allowing more aggressive form of exploitation to emerge. The findings featured in this article indicate a normalization of flexexploitative work in the cabin. Today, this trend can be found not only in low-cost carriers but also in commercial aviation in general. Future cabin attendants will be recruited into positions in which these working conditions are the norm.

Thus, our findings align with those of Allvin et al. (2013), Ross (2009), and Bourdieu (1998), who argued that the increased use of flexible working models in the industrialized and deregulated world has resulted in deteriorating working conditions emerging from intensification, insecurity, and increased job pressures. Hence, we understand the attendants' experiences and emotions as outcomes of changing structural conditions. The pursuit of profitability and cost reductions fueled pressure on SAS, which in turn created pressure on the cabin attendants. Put another way, we found cabin attendants who need income, a company that needs profit, and an economic system that needs growth (cf., McKnight, 1977:74). Therefore, our results can be seen in the light of Ross (2009), but even more so in Bourdieu's (1988) thoughts about flexexploitation as a new mode of domination that is pushing workers to capitulate and accept exploitation.

The concept of exploitation is contested, and we do not intend to engage in that specific debate here (cf., Karlsson, 2015). However, in relation to our findings, we refer to Edwards (1986, Ch. 2), who regard exploitation as an outcome of a structured antagonism between dominating and subordinate groups in exploitative modes of production, such as for capitalism. Edwards also argues that exploitation exists at three autonomous but intertwined levels: (1) the structural level, in which the exploitative and asymmetrical power relationship is between the dominating and dominated groups; (2) the level at which the general principles for organizing work for efficiency and profitability are

formed; and (3) the level where the concrete labor process is manifest at actual workplaces. All three levels generate conditions, actual outcomes, and individual and collective experiences. However, the data in the present article are, however, not sufficient to determine how exploitation on different levels interacts. The empirical material is primarily subjective stories that illustrate the exploitative consequences of the changing working conditions. However, we hope that our study shows that exploitation and its consequences cannot be fully understood without taking the employees' experiences and concerns into account.

*To conclude*, we have highlighted three key aspects of the cabin attendants working conditions. First, their working conditions are characterized by an intensification that minimizes “the porosity of the working day.” Second, the work is characterized by an increased vulnerability when the power of the unions erodes and the employment conditions deteriorate. The third aspect is about aging and the cabin attendants' concerns about their own health and well-being and of being replaced by younger employees. Younger workers would not only be cheaper, but could possibly be healthier and less demanding for management to handle. The primary aim of this article has been to highlight a number of stories that exposes working conditions and individual experiences of cabin attendants working at SAS. The three described aspects have emerged from the empirical material. We have discussed the issue of intensification in relation to a number of theoretical positions taken from previous research. Vulnerability, and especially the issue of aging, however, has been treated in a more parsimonious way. More and deeper empirical studies are required to understand the importance and influence of these two aspects. In particular, it will need more thorough analysis of the relationship between work intensification, vulnerability, and aging. In this article, we have tried to take a first step toward such an analysis.

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## End note

- <sup>1</sup> The abbreviation CA is used when quoting the cabin attendants, otherwise the full term is used.