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.
"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
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