

## POSTDOC WRITING BOOK ON FAMILY LIVES OF FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

**Drew Whitelegg, who recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the MARIAL Center, is writing a book about his research on the family lives of flight attendants. *Working the Skies* will be published by New York University Press. “It will be an academic book that has crossover appeal,” said Whitelegg, who has studied airlines and flight attendants for five years. “The theoretical side to it will be implicit rather than explicit.”**

Whitelegg, a native of Britain, relies heavily on the words and experiences of more than 100 flight attendants who talked to him in direct interviews, focus groups, and while they were on break on the planes he was traveling on during the past several years. The book includes the history of flight attendants, who were first hired as nurses in the 1930s, when air travel was fairly turbulent and dangerous. “They were actually on board to help the passengers who got airsick,” he said.

Three-quarters of the flight attendants he interviewed were from Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines. He also spoke to workers from nearly all the major U.S. carriers as well as some from the United Kingdom.

The book partly will examine the conflict between work and home, “which is felt more sharply by women,” Whitelegg said. Given that 80 percent of flight attendants are women and most have dependents at home, that tension is always present. Dependents are either children or elderly parents, he added. Their working schedules often keep flight attendants away from home for several days at a time, separated from their families by several states, countries, and even time zones.

Many aspects of the job are intriguing, especially the way flight attendants create their work schedules, how they prepare to go to work, and how they carefully plan for every moment of the day. “They live in little chunks of time, where every moment is planned,” Whitelegg said. “At the same time, they have to be very flexible because all their careful planning can be thrown off at a moment’s notice by the weather or mechanical delays.” Flight attendants with seniority have the most control over their schedules, but even this advantage can change at a moment’s notice, when airlines consolidate, lay off employees, or close bases. Flight attendants who are just starting careers have the least control over their schedules, most often flying “on reserve,” which means whenever the airline needs them.

Those with dependents candidly told Whitelegg that they spend half their time worrying about them and half their time enjoying being away from them. Preparing for work—during which they may be away from home for several days—involves making meals, leaving to-do lists for their spouse or partner, and arranging car pools. “This is not unlike many other working women, whose jobs may take them on the road, away from home for several days,” Whitelegg said. “The difference is that when the flight attendant comes home, she is probably exhausted from the flight, the turnaround, the different time zones. More than likely, she hasn’t slept well. And she already has in mind when her next trip is. And this is what happens every time she goes to work.”

The book elaborates on “flight attendant mode,” when they “become another person” just before starting their work shift, Whitelegg said.

“This is absolutely essential in situations where they are in charge of the safety of passengers,” he said. “They are trained not to display fear. They can’t be frightened if there is an emergency on the plane. They have to act with authority and clarity. They have to exude calmness and confidence.”

These job duties conflict with the popular image of flight attendants as adornment or merely hostesses in the sky who serve drinks and snacks. “People don’t expect them to be calm and not show fear, because they are women,” Whitelegg said. But the terror attacks of 9/11 provided a vivid example of “flight attendant mode” when an American Airlines flight attendant used her cell phone to report calmly what was happening on the plane after hijackers commandeered it. The 9/11 attacks traumatized the flying public, and the resulting economic downslide affected airline employees, who worried about job security, safety considerations, and control over their



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working schedules. As airlines faced bankruptcy, many flight attendants lost their jobs, and those who took early retirement worried about whether promised pensions would disappear.

Whitelegg also explores the exploitation of flight attendants as sex objects in marketing campaigns and how flight attendants have fought against sexual discrimination since the 1960s. Some of the retired flight attendants he interviewed recalled the days when they had to wear high heels and girdles as well as meet weight requirements. And they had to be single. If they got married, they had to quit.

In time, female flight attendants “made these jobs their own” and began to enjoy the autonomy that helped them create “finely tuned family lives,” where their work schedules meshed with their duties at home. Today, with the rise of low-cost airlines that require flight attendants to sign contracts that limit them to five years of work or less, it is more of a job and less of a career. And with less control over their schedules, it is harder to spend much time at home. ■