

**Women on the Move: Flight attendants, Space and Mobility**

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### Introduction: from flexibility to mobility

Flying from Atlanta to Detroit, two days after the re-election of George W. Bush, I got into a conversation with two flight attendants relaxing at the back of the plane. One, Mary, had flown for twenty-seven years; the other, Susan, for seven. As is often the case with working flight attendants, the two had never met before that day's trip. However, they were soon agreeing upon the job's benefits. "It's the flexibility," said Mary, a mother of two adult children. Susan agreed: "I like to fly weekends because there is nothing good on TV."

Flexibility is a leitmotif for our age. Flexible capital and labor underpin flexible production and accumulation strategies (Harvey, 1989). People invest in flexible savings accounts, or take out flexible mortgages, while postmodernists debate the prevalence of flexible identities. Meanwhile, academics and lobbyists coalesce around flextime and its potential benefits for modern American families. "Our goal is to move workplace flexibility toward far greater visibility," says Kathleen Christensen, Program Director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (Christensen, no date). During the 2004 presidential election, Bush achieved this goal when telling an Ohio crowd, "I think the government ought to allow employers to say to an employee, 'If you want some time off, and work different hours, you're allowed to do so,'" (Hook and Wallsten, 2004).

As George Lakoff has argued, we need to be careful about the language we use (Butler, 2004). With its connotations of freedom, choice and autonomy, "flexibility" is an example of what he calls "framing", the construction of a concept around a word or phrase whose good-natured fuzziness makes it difficult to oppose. Yet flexibility's etymology suggests a tenuous connection with autonomy. From the French *flexibilité* or Latin *flexibilis*, flexibility, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "ability to be bent, pliancy" or "readiness to yield to influence or persuasion; pliancy of mind or disposition." When applied dialectically to labor, workers aren't doing much bending here: they are the ones being bent. As AFL-CIO President John Sweeney (2004) suggested:

President Bush's proposal serves corporations' needs—not those of working families—by allowing corporations to work their employees more than forty hours in a week, without any cost to the employer. Though he dresses up this proposal in family-friendly "flexibility" garb, the reality is that employers will—once again—be the big winners under this proposal, while workers will end up working more for less.

Of course, one can argue that Bush has merely hijacked the terminology and this should not mean throwing out the flexible baby with the bathwater. But even so, I think we need to think beyond flextime and flexibility. Elsewhere I have argued that in its use of "juggling" to encapsulate the modern work/family dilemma much of the current

literature employs the wrong image (Whitelegg, 2004). Here I am suggesting that in stressing flexibility they have also hit upon the wrong word. Its use belies tacit ideological assumptions (always the most dangerous ones). But it also leads the argument up a blind alley where the debate becomes solely reduced to time, time management, time binds and time crunches and where workers' lives become reduced to a crude binary of "time on/time off." In the real world, for instance, is a mother thinking about tomorrow's presentation while bathing the kids "at work"? Not at work? Equally, lunch breaks, downtime, and even the work itself, do not take place "at home" yet provide extraneous social capital and reproductive benefits unrelated to the production of surplus value. Are these examples time on or time off? The "time bind" does not accurately define the human condition but a lack of academic imagination. In a pastiche of the situationist mantra from the 1960s, where the clocks were to be literally and metaphorically smashed, sort out time, the argument goes, and all will be hunky dory.

In fact, alongside time, we need to engage with space. This is no arcane point. On the one hand, frenzied families – perhaps unwittingly – turn to spatial solutions to calm things down a bit. They agglomerate activities into defined spaces such as the family life center or its secular equivalent, the shopping mall; or they assemble in the functional space of the automobile/family carrier or around the dinner table. But a second reason for a spatial focus is that it provides us with a more useful word than flexibility: mobility. Returning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find the origins of "mobility" in the Latin *mobilis* and the French *movere*, denoting movement: "Ability to move or be moved; ease or freedom of movement." In short, this is a dialectical word, in which the mover is both subject and object.

Unlike flexibility, mobility is also a delightfully rebellious noun. One definition – now sadly rare – posits it as meaning "the mob; the ordinary people", in a play on "nobility". In Latin, *mobile* meant "the excitable crowd." As Doreen Massey (1994) has argued, mobility involves contingencies of power, filtered through gender, race and class. In fighting for social justice, workers want mobility, not flexibility. Flexitime isn't much help if your bus to work only runs once every two hours and you spend two hours getting home.

For women, in particular, mobility is inherently subversive. A highly gendered landscape designed by men for men has restricted their mobility through confinement to the domestic, the static and the private. All sorts of opprobrium are reserved for women who are "fast" or "get around" or who are "of the street". But of course women do get out and about. As the Iranian Nobel Literature prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, puts it, "when a woman steps out on the street, she cannot be a traditional woman any more" (*Guardian Weekly*, October 16-22, 2003). It is in this sense that, as Massey (1994: 11) suggests, "the mobility of women does indeed seem to pose a threat to the specific moral order...one gender-disturbing message might be – in terms of both identity and space – keep moving!"

This paper uses mobility as a theoretical construct to explore the flight attendant profession's evolution in the US. Flight attendants are particularly interesting as they have a job in which "flexibility" plays a significant role: the rate with which the word is used in interviews would be music to the ears of flextime advocates. It is a job which blurs the boundaries of time on/time off, in which "home" is often reproduced away from home, in the vicarious family of fellow workers and in the spaces produced by flight attendants in hotel layovers (Whitelegg, 2003; 2005). Moreover, the job involves a good deal of emotional switching on and off, at the beginning and end of the day, but also during the workday as well. Flight attendants switch in and out of character at the drop of a hat: but they don't clock in and out every time they do so.

Historically, flight attendants both *consumed* and *produced* mobility – in the form of space – and, moreover, the profession's development moved from one to the other. In consuming mobility, they capitalized on an unparalleled geographical freedom that satisfied wanderlust and stretched physical and psychological horizons. In producing mobility, flight attendants constructed flexible lifestyles in and outside the workplace, displaying enviable spatial autonomy over where they were going to be and when. According to Marx (1976 [1867]), any good or commodity contains both "use" value and "exchange" value – a mixture of what it is worth intrinsically, and what it is worth as a medium of exchange for something else. Under capitalism, the ratio of the two mutates inexorably in favor of the latter, so that all human relationships (reified in commodity form) become measured purely in exchange terms.

The development of the flight attendant profession mirrors this process, whereby the attraction of the job shifted from the job per se to its externalities and consumption of mobility was displaced by its production. Without doubt, the crucial factor here was the banning of discriminatory practices under Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s, which enabled flight attendants to stay in the job once the thrill of wanderlust had worn off. A more permanent workforce, of course, went hand in hand with greater union solidarity. In the US, as they moved up the seniority scale, workers could produce mobility and autonomy as compensation for an intense and often disorientating lifestyle. Though it had always been important, seniority became a key factor in worker autonomy and the carrot dangled in front of flight attendants while they were going through the "stick" of reserve status. Workers selected trips to fly and were allocated them according to how long they had worked at a particular airline. This system acted as a rudimentary form of flextime, as once a worker had graduated from reserve status, she or he could effectively control where they flew and when. It also gave workers a feeling of control.

Seniority's importance cannot be underestimated and to emphasize this point, I compare US flight attendants with their cabin crew counterparts in the UK, where seniority is not used. Using the UK as a comparison allows seniority to act as a crude independent variable, since in most other aspects – including, of course, linguistically – the airline industries in the two nations are nowadays fairly similar. The main service providers are private companies (unlike some European airlines), operating in a largely deregulated market. Both countries have anti-gender discrimination laws in place. Not

least, industry labor relations in both countries have historically oscillated between Fordist pacts and sporadic bouts of intense militancy.

Flight attendants produce mobility, therefore, but they do so in conditions not of their own choosing. This paper should be regarded as a preliminary study and a pointer to further research, not a fully developed treatise. The main research behind it lay in interviews with UK and US flight attendants (both working and retired) conducted during 2003 and 2004. For logistical reasons, the number of US interviews (over fifty) far outweighs those in the UK (six). However, I did conduct previous research in the UK, in 2000, interviewing three cabin crew managers from three scheduled airlines, along with trade union officials. Nevertheless, the small UK data set – not to mention the volatile state of the industry – prevents anything other than tentative suggestions at this stage.

### Consuming Mobility

US and UK women entered the flight attendant profession in differing social climates. In the US, United Airlines first hired women crew in 1930. As trained nurses, women flight attendants (or stewardesses as they were then called) provided comfort to nervous, mostly male passengers. Their mere presence also helped convey an image of flight safety: if a diminutive woman was not afraid to fly, then why should Joe Public be? During World War II, with nurses required elsewhere, US carriers relaxed entry requirements and more women joined the profession. By the war's end, the job was almost exclusively female, with the iconic "stewardess" already becoming a staple of airline advertisements (Omelia and Waldock, 2003).

By contrast, the UK's main carriers (both then state-owned), British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) and British European Airways (BEA), were reluctant to hire women flight attendants until commercial pressures forced them to in 1946. Even when they did begin to hire women, UK airlines emphasized that these were "stewards" and not Americanized "glamour hostesses" (Mills, 1998). BEA went as far as claiming to have "de-sexed" their female stewards by removing any hint of glamour: uniforms followed strict male, military-style appearances, while company literature promoted their steward's "professionalism".

During the 1930s, flying had captured women's imagination through the exploits of aeronauts, such as Amelia Earhardt and Amy Johnson, and heroines in a new genre popular fiction (Brodigan, 2003). For Birdie Bomar, one of Delta's first stewardesses, growing up in Vernon, Alabama (pop. 900), "underneath it all there was something like an itch you can't get rid of. That itch was to fly and it wouldn't go away" (Bomar, 2002: 123). More prosaically, during WWII, middle-class women got a taste of working outside the home and were often reluctant to go back to it, for all the exhortations of post-war governments.

UK women living in the tough immediate post-war climate found the job alluring and exotic. "I was looking for adventure," recalled one British South American Airways flyer in the late 1940s. "I was looking for something to get away from the austerity we'd

all been through during the war” (*Fly Me*, 2000). One US interviewee who joined the airlines in 1950 stated:

It’s something I always wanted to do. In fact, I went to my class reunion this past Saturday and one of the girls that was there she wrote the prophecy, that’s not the right word, of every girl in our class of what they would be doing, what they would do and she said I would become a stewardess for Eastern Airlines. That was back when I was in high school. So it did come to pass and I did start to fly, but I told her, I said you were right about everything except I flew for Delta and not for Eastern.

Another US flyer who joined in the mid 1950s recalled:

When I went to [airline name] for my interview I was so excited and everything, and I promptly went out and got on the wrong plane. The agent got me and put me on the right flight. That was my first flight. We were the type of women we were, the type of girls I guess, we were fresh out of college, the whole world was our oyster but we were so innocent. You know, that was strictly back in the total family era. Mother, daddy, church, home. Entertainment at home. Stuff like that. And so that was our personality. That was our – the way we were. So innocent and to this brand new world that was exciting and glamorous and scary. Brand new career. I’m sure we were talked about and thought badly of by the public that didn’t know anything about the job. And I’m sure jealous friends.

In a tightly regulated industry, airlines were largely forbidden to compete over prices and by the 1960s their increasingly sexualized flight attendants became an alternative form of competition. Braniff’s gaudy colors and BOAC’s paper dresses were all part of a “coffee, tea or me?” image conflating flying and sex (Taylor, 1999). Flight attendants were clearly objectified and commodified yet worked in a profession that was simultaneously highly controlling *and* highly liberating. On the one hand, airlines imposed strict regulations. When in uniform, BEA flyers – presumably having been “re-sexed” – were reminded to be “very feminine”. Interviewers inspected hopeful recruits’ bodily parts, checking elbows for saggy skin (BOAC) or legs (United). BEA stressed deportment in training; Delta and United carried out girdle checks. Flight attendants were also not allowed to be married or to have children, and most were forced to retire in their early thirties. Weight checks were regular: beyond the 1980s they could be dismissed if deemed “overweight”. Moreover, as Hochschild (1983) has suggested, airlines sought to control and to exploit their very emotions, tying in a set of pre-scripted codes of behavior and responses to a marketable image and identity of individual carriers.

On the other hand, such physical and emotional constraints were balanced by an often unprecedented geographical mobility, spelt out by an international flyer for BOAC between 1966 and 1970:

You had your clothes made in Hong Kong or Singapore. You brought back pineapple and avocados from West Africa and East Africa. You shopped at

various markets and it wasn't like today when you buy something in Bangkok and you find it in the market the next day. It was unusual stuff, so, it was pay that was quite reasonable, plus the kind of lifestyle you were leading. (*Fly Me, 2000*)

Pay that was "quite reasonable" enabled a colleague to buy her own flat, not exactly a common occurrence for UK women in the 1960s. "I got a mortgage and I had a very nice flat. And also, I had a very nice car" (*Fly Me, 2000*). One US flyer who started in the late 1960s observed:

Well, I became a flight attendant – I was a schoolteacher. I taught school for a year and then started flying. I made, my first year of teaching school, \$6,400 and I tripled that flying international. So that was the main reason. The money was good and, you know, a little girl from a little home town, for me there was no other airline but Pan Am because I knew that once I got on an airplane I would be in another country, so that was the draw for me. And then of course there are a lot of perks. You get good benefits, your family flies free.

Another US interviewee, who started in 1969, claimed:

Growing up as a child, I've always been interested in seeing the world, and world history was one of my favorite subjects when I was in high school, and it was just very interesting to me to see what the other part of the world was like and people and their culture...So I decided to get a job with the airlines where I'd have the flexibility of traveling more than a vacation once a year. So I decided I would get a job with the airlines so I could afford to travel and go to the exotic places that I've always wanted to travel to, and be introduced to a different culture and different people. So I've always loved working with people. I know this is like quote-quote one of the things people always say that they enjoy, but I do. I've always enjoyed working with people and I guess I just like to communicate to people to see what their thoughts are. So I was never one just to stay in an office 9-5.

Post-colonial analysis has uncovered a substantial body of travel literature in which women's geographical explorations act as a conduit to self-discovery (Mills, 1991). "Many feminists," suggest Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt, "have narrated a process of uncovering multiple layers of social identity by departing from their home base" (Hanson and Pratt, 1995: 20). Flight attendants combined wanderlust with a sense of escape. "I taught at school," said one US worker, "and went to college and did some grad school work. I'm from South Carolina and I thought, 'I've got to get out of here.'" "I started very young at the airlines," echoed another US worker:

One of the things that interested me was getting out of my hometown. I grew up in a small hometown and wanted to experience more of the world. I knew that there was a lot more out there than what was in my hometown. I wanted to travel.

"It was an escape route for me and I know a lot of us did that," said another:

It was also a way to travel which a lot of us did and it was also a way to be totally independent which a lot of us were but didn't know it. And I would venture to say that most of us were so sheltered, so small town, so dependent... dependent, dependent on our parents. And on society and on men and on everything and then when we went out into the real world, which really being a flight attendant is the epitome of the real world, you found that you like it. And there you are independent. It was either a grand discovery or it was horrible. And for me it was a grand discovery.

In interviews, the consumption of mobility appeared to be a universal factor that cut across both nations and airlines. UK charter cabin crew, for instance, spoke as much about the freedom of travel as their counterparts in scheduled US carriers. Indeed, with the vast majority of UK flights involving international travel, this was perhaps even more of an attraction than in the US. Clichéd as it may sound, many women became flight attendants because they wanted to see the world or at least get away from the strictures of small-town life (few of my interviewees grew up in large metropolitan areas).

Up to the 1970s, airline hiring structures encouraged women to conceptualize the job in terms of its use value. Airlines knew that a law of diminishing returns would inevitably operate and that those women who had not been forced out of the industry by marriage, children or age regulations, would most likely leave as they had reached satiation point. There is only so much mobility to consume, after all. Rich (1972) notes a turnover rate in the late 1960s of up to 75% every two years. Volpe (1984: 14), in her study of flight attendant subcultures, argues “during the first year or so, flight attendants are quite excited about their work and their new way of life. Sometime during the second and third years, however, flight attendants start feeling negative.”

Writing in the early 1980s, Volpe notes how, despite this emotional slump, most flight attendants re-committed to the profession. Of course, the salient point here is that unlike their counterparts in the 1960s, they were now in a profession that allowed them (and even encouraged them to do so). In their re-commitment, flight attendants moved from consuming mobility to producing it.

### Producing Mobility

Anti-discrimination legislation underpinned greater flight attendant autonomy. The job moved from one involving “getting wanderlust out of your system”, as one interviewee termed it, to a potentially full-time career, with important ramifications. First, as labor turnover went down, flight attendant union power increased, culminating in the formation of the Association of Flight Attendants and a host of smaller independent unions in the 1970s. These unions formed the vanguard of a specifically feminist agenda (Barry, 1999; Cobble, 1999), and became unusually resilient bodies during the turbulent deregulation period after 1978. During the 1980s, for instance, flight attendants were the only group to increase union expenditures significantly, demonstrating a reluctance to give up their newly found autonomy (Johnson, 1995). The profession as a whole took on a new gravitas and greater sense of permanence.

A second consequence was flight attendants could actualize the benefits of seniority to a far greater degree and could view reserve as akin to an apprenticeship. Those having doubts “re-committed to the profession,” as Volpe put it, because the autonomy lurking at the end of the rainbow was so attractive. In this way the job became an incremental career, with flight attendants that joined “only for a few years” (i.e. consuming mobility) – as nearly every interviewee claimed – finding the lifestyle addictive (i.e. producing mobility).

In producing mobility, flight attendants emphasized the job’s exchange value (the autonomy that it provided) as opposed to its use value (all those free trips to Hawaii). Many flight attendants’ desire to continue working was based upon what they were able to do with their lives *incidentally* to work. Of course, this is a fundamental capitalist equation: workers exchange their labor power for wages to buy the things they want/need. But flight attendants lives are peculiarly bifurcated, in the sense that they exchange both physical *and* emotional labor power when at work (Hochschild, 1983). Many told me about being “two people” (one UK worker even claimed to have “three lives”). Flight attendants seem prepared to exchange their emotional labor and act out prescribed company roles because of the spaces that they can create in their “other” lives.

“Other” lives were sometimes physically separated from the job. A good number took on alternative employment: teaching, real estate, restaurant work, beauty therapy, antique dealing, and political campaigning were all mentioned. Mothers with school-age children frequently became heavily involved with PTA or similar groups. One commented that she spent so much time at her son’s school that other parents expressed surprise on discovering she had a proper job. Flight attendants painted a picture of themselves as extremely busy people, though as Ehrenreich (1989) notes, middle class complaints about “busy-ness” are often, essentially, boasts. Equally, part of their commitment to school activities is a reflection of overcompensation and guilt at being away so much in the first place.

However, flight attendants also lived “other” lives that were coterminous with their job. Many continue working for non-fiduciary reasons, with the job providing psychological and recreational benefits that override concerns about pay. Creating spaces away from the domestic home became an important part of the production of mobility. Some of these spaces were physical. The hotel room, for instance, became a site where workers – especially mothers – created space and time for themselves. As one US ex-worker told me:

When I was [flying] back in Atlanta, we had great layovers and you would have, you know, at least one out of the two nights, you would have an eighteen or nineteen hour layover. So you could, you know, go back in your room if you didn’t want to go out to dinner. You know, I think I told you, they are called the “slam clickers” and sometimes you would just go in your room, lock it shut and sometimes you wouldn’t see anyone until pick-up the next day and you would order room service, paint your toenails, give yourself a facial, you know. When

you're at home you're not on vacation. When you're on vacation, you don't have laundry, you don't have to clean the house, you don't have to worry about that stuff, you don't have cooking, you're not going shopping, you're not doing bills, so for eighteen hours, you have eighteen hours of, basically, free time.

"It got to the point when I liked time for myself," suggested another. "I like people – I would get away and it was an opportunity to not only be a housewife and a mom. I liked having our time when I didn't feel like a wife and mom. The hotel alone time was great." In the UK, "slam clickers" are referred to as Delsey Diners (a reference to a brand of luggage in which they would bring their own food).

Psychological spaces also exist. Flight attendants form a very close-knit group, an occupational community, according to Clare Williams (1988), whereby workers in an industry only fraternize with others in the same industry. This leads to unusually close ties, evidence of which can be found in internet websites, chat rooms, informal support systems and solidarity across carriers during industrial action. Jump Seat Therapy, impromptu counseling on the jump seat, also provided space for workers to unload their domestic problems on each other, often sharing highly intimate details with fellow workers that they have only just met on the flight. "There is a therapeutic element to being a flight attendant," one US interviewee remarked. "A loyal bond that comes out in things like Jump Seat Therapy. No one else can understand you."

While "at work", flight attendants therefore actively produced mobility and space, as extraneous compensation for doing the job. However, after September 11, 2001, it is their capacity to do so that down-sizing carriers have threatened. US airlines have, through various measures, begun to chip away at seniority's value: bases have been closed, forcing older workers to commute long distances; pensions have been changed, reducing the incentive to stay in the job; bidding systems have been revised, requiring older workers to fly more hours to make the same money. The overall effect has been a squeezing of flight attendant autonomy, often sparking more resentment than cuts in pay and benefits (Whitelegg, 2004). To unpack seniority's importance let us look briefly at the situation in the UK, where it played no role in the bidding system.

### Seniority and control

Like their US counterparts, UK workers produced mobility. One UK worker, who joined a charter airline in 1973 "albeit quite reluctantly", soon "got hooked" on the mobile lifestyle on offer:

Well, I think one of the reasons – first of all regular hours. Not having to go in 9:00 to 5:00, going against the traffic, you know, not any worries about getting into work. Having weekdays free, and working weekends when everybody's off and I don't want to get involved when everybody's off - certainly in this country. Can't go anywhere, can't do anything. And that was it. I started all those years ago.

Equally, UK workers engaged in Jump Seat Therapy and created other psychological spaces. As one charter cabin crew member commented:

Most people when they've left, if you go back to those people and say 'Do you miss it?' They say they don't miss the job but they miss the people...and working through the nights. But they miss the team and the people. They do have a laugh.

UK cabin crew also seemed to run the gamut of other jobs and "busy" lives. However, when it came to talking about job control and autonomy, a different picture emerged. All the UK workers I interviewed that were still flying had at least fifteen years of service, yet when it came to job control they spoke in terms similar to junior reserve flyers in the US. "I have no control," responded one charter airline worker when I asked her about where she flew. Another charter flyer had "very little" control, recalling an illustrative example:

I remember it wasn't due to child care, it was a wedding I had coming up. So I knew that for my base on a Saturday there was an early and a late [flight]. So in order for me to be able to go to the wedding I said, look, I know I'll probably be working that day, if I have to work can you please roster me the early so I can go to my friend's wedding afterwards and I get a letter back saying this is not allowed. You shouldn't even be requesting a flight. And what did they roster me? The afternoon! And I couldn't work it for love nor money. So I missed the wedding.

A colleague echoed this:

We are in the hands of "them". Very much. I think, going back to rostering, very much and they control your life. From a work point of view, they are in control of you. Even if you, sometimes if you phone up, say if you're on your – you stay in a hotel and you phone them up and say look I need to get back a bit earlier, can you send my taxi. Oh no. Can't do that. Have to have 24 hours notice.

The "24 hours notice" response could come from a US crew scheduler. However, in the US system, a worker with fifteen year's seniority could almost certainly bid her trips in a way that would allow her to attend a wedding if it was a high priority. One division of a major airline uses a points system, where workers weight their priorities in advance. However, in other parts of the airline, no bidding is allowed, and swapping trips (in which flight attendants trade with each other – a common occurrence among US carriers) was either banned or greatly discouraged (and effectively impossible to do).<sup>1</sup>

US workers of comparable seniority therefore appear to feel more in control of their work. One UK worker summed up the difference:

When [our UK crew] are dealing with their roster, they're not dealing with a computer, they're dealing with a scheduler on the phone and they were quite often feeling that they were personally being discriminated against, whereas when they deal with a computer, or [as in the US] a bid line, they know that the bid line is going on seniority. They know that the system goes through. It doesn't know who they are from Adam, because you're number one, number two, number three,

number four. Whereas our system, if you can't get what you want, you have to phone up somebody who is on the end of the phone and try to beg 'em for it. And of course their feeling is if they don't give it to me because they don't like me, or because last time I phoned up I wouldn't do what they wanted. It becomes all very personal and the system appears to be totally inflexible, whereas the crew are constantly, there is a demand on them to be flexible, not only in their work life, but in their personal life. I have to tell my son, no, I can't go to school today, no, I won't be there for the school play or I have to think, well, I will be there for the school play, I can't miss it, ..... what am I going to do with it, how am I going to go and see it? Am I going to try and wangle something else?

Again, this is a worker with over twenty year's experience. With that length of service, a US flight attendant would make the school play.

Lack of control has two further consequences. UK crew often have no clue how much money they will be earning from month to month, with a variation of several thousand pounds possible (factoring in per diems, overnight pay etc). US crew of comparable status can achieve far more precision. Secondly, autonomy is in itself an enabling phenomenon. In actual fact, a number of US flight attendants have observed to me that the legendary "control" of the job is overstated, if one factors in the power relationship between company and worker. That may be true, but, as "locus of control" literature in psychology suggests, feelings of being in control can be a positive thing, and the reverse, being out of control, extremely negative (Phares, 1976). Real or not, US flight attendants *feel* more in control.

But here's the rub. Feelings of control in the US are rapidly eroding. The production of mobility and autonomous spaces has been under threat since the post-September 11, 2001 industry cutbacks. Flight attendant anger at industry turmoil and new carrier regulations has revolved, significantly, around autonomy and personal mobility, around issues of space as much as time. In both the UK and US, absenteeism at major airlines has been well above the national average. Sick days have been "abused" and taken strategically when workers felt they had no alternative, especially for mothers faced with parenting issues. A large number of elder workers retired, figuring that the trade-off between strenuous and disorienting job and space to pursue their own endeavors was becoming increasingly skewed in favor of the company. In other words, the capacity to produce mobility has been significantly reduced. The externalities provided by the job, as much spatial as they were temporal, are being eradicated.

### Conclusion

Space is as important a structuring agent in our lives as time (Soja, 1989). This paper has explored the way one group of workers, flight attendants, have both consumed and produced mobility – the negotiation of space – as part of their jobs. Mobility – the ability to move or be moved – as opposed to flexibility – the ability to be bent – is a more useful framework within which to think about work/life balance. In a famous 1925 essay, the Chicago School author, Ernest Burgess (2002 [1925]: 249), argued about mobility's importance.

Mobility, it is evident, involves change, new experience, stimulation. Stimulation induces a response of the person to those objects in his [or her] environment which afford expression for his [or her] wishes. For the person, as for the physical organism, stimulation is essential to growth.

In a profession as gendered as flight attendants, mobility acted subversively. First, in consuming it, flight attendants moved into the public arena as single women, much in the same way that they took to the automobile (O Connell, 1998). Then, in actively producing it, flight attendants created physical and psychological spaces at work, where they found, in Burgess' terms, stimulation, and experienced personal growth and development. Flight attendants were not unique in this regard, as women created such spaces in other gendered occupations. However, the seniority system provided flight attendants with a sense of autonomy and the capacity to produce mobility. As the comparison with UK workers shows, US flight attendants *felt* more in control of their lives, even if this control was effectively over-stated.

Being able to produce mobility, then, was perhaps the major attraction of the job. Though, given seniority, US flight attendants were able to control their time, they equally controlled their space. Concentrating solely on time – and on “flextime” – leads to the conclusion that time is all that matters. In fact, space is as important to this group of workers. Though they may complain about having to work more hours, they also complain about losing layovers, as companies reduce expenditure on hotels, and about increased loneliness on the job, as planes get smaller and the number of flight attendants on board shrinks.

In the profession's long-term development, just as it shifted from consumption to production of mobility, so it appears to be reverting to consumption again. Low-cost carriers implicitly attract workers with wanderlust, hoping that once they've “got it out of their system,” they will leave. Though bans on marriage, age and children remain, reduced pay scales, less attractive pensions, and the absence of autonomy (and hence the ability to produce mobility) will render the job less appealing as a long-term proposition. Flight attendants may have control of their time, but without control of their space, little will stop them from sliding into the whirlpool of contingency.

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<sup>i</sup> I have yet to establish a satisfactory explanation for the difference in bidding cultures in the US and the UK.