



Impossible meals? The food and meal situation of flight attendants in Scandinavia – A qualitative interview study



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ABSTRACT

The working conditions of flight attendants (FAs) often involve extended and irregular working hours, short rest periods, difficulties in planning for breaks and high demands of service provision. Moreover, work schedules including early check-in, shifts during circadian low and time-zone transitions imply constant exposure to alterations in circadian systems and related health risks. The aim of this explorative study was to investigate how the organisation of work, time and place influence the food and meal situation of FAs when at work, focusing on patterns, form and social context of meals. The research questions posed were how food and meals at work were characterised and perceived among the FAs, and what strategies were adopted to manage the food and meal situation. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen FAs working in Scandinavia. The results indicated that the organisation of work, time and place have a major influence on the meal situation at work, and how food and meals are perceived and managed by FAs. The work was defined as fragmented and inconsistent regarding time and place resulting in scattered meals and a more snack-based form of eating. The meal situation was characterised by irregularity as well as unpredictability. Eating took place when food was available and when there was enough time to eat, rather than being guided by hunger or social context. Various strategies such as eating in prevention, using emergency food, avoiding certain food and drinks or eating little or nothing at all were used to manage the unpredictability of the meal situation as well as the gap between organisational and individual times. The findings demonstrated the individual responsibility to solve the meal at work, e.g. to solve organisational times.

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1. Introduction

In this explorative study, we examine how the organisation of work, time and place influence the food and meal situation of flight attendants (FAs) in Scandinavia, and how they perceive and manage food and meals at work during both short and long-haul flights. The working conditions of FAs often involve extended and irregular working hours, time-zone transitions, short rest periods, difficulties in planning for breaks and high demands of service provision (Amné & Rydén, 2001, p. 4; Whitelegg, 2007; Banks, Avers, Nesthus, & Hauck, 2012; Shalla, 2004). The work has been characterised on the one hand by routines and on the other hand by high demands for flexibility and being able to manage

unpredictable situations (Amné & Rydén, 2001, p. 4; Shalla, 2004). In addition, the FAs service provision involves a high level of emotional demands (Hochschild, 1983; Sonnentag & Natter, 2004). Food is often provided for the FAs by their employer after a certain number of hours of work, however due to changed flight schedules or delays, but also difficulties in planning for regular meals at work, food intake might be quite irregular. The FAs themselves might also purchase food to take on board the aircraft. However, due to lack of space as well as limited possibilities to either heat food or keep it cool, this may not be perceived as a satisfactory solution. At the same time, FAs are responsible for safety and service on board the aircraft and are expected to perform in front of the passengers during various times, both day and night. Irregular working hours, insufficient sleep and less intake of nutritious food, in combination with a lack of recovery and rest during working hours have been associated with increased health risks and a higher risk of accidents due to fatigue (Hunter & Wu, 2016; Nea, Kearney, Livingstone, Pourshahidi, & Corish, 2015; Tucker, 2003).

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In general, there is limited knowledge concerning how the organisation of work, time and place influence the food and meal situation in a workplace context, and more specifically for FAs in airline companies. Previous research on FAs has mainly focused on health aspects related to working conditions and work environment, where larger quantitative research studies have been conducted (e.g. Wahlstedt, Lindgren, Norbäck, Wieslander, & Runeson, 2010). Moreover, research focusing on food and meals at work has not included this occupational group. However, during recent years evidence has accumulated suggesting that the *timing* of meals, and not only the quantity and quality of meals, can affect performance, alertness, metabolism and a variety of physiological processes (Asher & Sassone-Corsi, 2015). These are all aspects that are important in relation to the work of the FAs who are responsible for safety in the cabin on board the aircraft. Few studies have attempted to integrate the complexity of the meal situation at work, including organisational and cultural aspects, with a chronobiological approach in order to capture the impact of varying times and rhythms. In this study, we contribute to this field of knowledge by qualitatively approaching the food and meal situation at work among FAs to increase the understanding of food and meals in relation to the shifting times and rhythms of today's working life. However, since this is an explorative, qualitative study the purpose is not to generalise the results to a larger population. Instead, the focus is on gaining a deeper understanding of FAs experiences and perceptions where we try to further explore the interconnectedness between people as biological and cultural human beings, time, place and food. In this study, the overall aim was to examine how the organisation of work, time and place influence the food and meal situation at work among FA's in Scandinavia, focusing on patterns, i.e. times, timing and rhythms of eating, forms, i.e. composition and complexity of the meals, as well as social and physical contexts of eating (Holm et al., 2012; Mäkelä, 1991). The specific research questions in the study concerned how food and meals were characterised and perceived by the FAs, and what strategies were adopted in order to manage the food and meal situation at work.

1.1. Previous research – food at work and the work of flight attendants

From a nutritional and public health perspective, food at work has been investigated in relation to dietary interventions with the purpose of promoting healthy eating habits (Geaney et al., 2013; Lassen et al., 2011; Poulsen & Jørgensen, 2011; Thorsen, Lassen, Tetens & Mikkelsen, 2010) and identifying barriers to healthy eating (Faugier, Lancaster, Pickles, & Dobson, 2001). Eating lunch at a staff canteen has, for example, been associated with better nutritional quality of the diet (Roos, Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, & Lallukka, 2004). Relatively few studies have addressed eating behaviour in relation to *shift work* and nutritional status (Lennernäs, Abrahamsson, Hambræus, & Åkerstedt, 1994; Lennernäs, Hambræus, & Åkerstedt, 1995; Lowden, Moreno, Holmbäck, Lennernäs, & Tucker, 2010) or highlighted the chronobiological dimensions of eating at work (Ekmekcioglu & Touitou, 2010, a review). Food and meals at work have been explored from a social science perspective, focusing on food choice and food choice strategies (Devine et al., 2009; Sobal & Bisogni, 2009; Sobal, Bisogni, Devine, & Jastran, 2006) as well as on food and organisational culture, meal patterns, norms and values (Lindén & Nyberg, 2009; Svederberg, Sjöberg & Nyberg, 2010; Nyberg, 2009; Wandel & Roos, 2005; Kristensen & Holm, 2006). For example, extended work pressure in combination with an organisational culture that fosters high workloads may result in workers not taking lunch

(Devine, Nelson, Chin, Dozier, & Fernandez, 2007; Pridgeon & Whitehead, 2009).

As a regularly occurring and socially shared event (Holm, 2001; Murcott, 1982; Mäkelä, 2000), which includes the intake of energy and various nutrients, the meal is challenged in a working life that does not follow times and rhythms, foster regular meal patterns or prioritise the meal as an event. Most of our daily meals still take place at home and in the workplace, at least from a Nordic perspective (Holm et al., 2016). However, *regular* meals, still the most frequent meal pattern in society (Lund & Gronow, 2014), are challenged by the way work, time and place are organised in the workplace. An increasing amount of shift work, defined as work conducted primarily outside of daytime and where the working shifts are either permanent or rotating (Esquirol et al., 2011), affects overall food and meal structures, as well as health and well-being (Costa, 1996; Knutsson, 2003). Previous studies on FAs have addressed health and circadian disruption (Grajewski, Nguyen, Whelan, Cole, & Hein, 2003) in relation to working hours, as well as gastrointestinal symptoms (Sveinsdottir, Gunnarsdottir, & Fridriksdottir, 2007; Wahlstedt et al., 2010) and overall fatigue and sleep disorders (Lindgren & Norbäck, 2005; McNeely et al., 2014). However, no studies can be found that focus specifically on food and the ambience of meals in flight cabin crew.

People that work around the clock are vulnerable from a nutritional perspective since it appears that not only what we eat but also the time of eating, that is day versus night, has dramatic effects on health, obesity and other metabolic pathologies (Asher & Sassone-Corsi, 2015). During recent decades, the airline industry has changed dramatically, which includes an increased deregulation and enhanced competitiveness as a result of globalisation (McNeely et al., 2014; Ng, Simbasivan, & Zubaidah, 2011; Shalla, 2004; Whitelegg, 2007). In addition, there is greater pressure on the individual to adapt to various working hours and tight working schedules. Grignon (1996) earlier noted that the rhythm of eating in today's society could be seen as a compromise between various interests and that strong economic drives seem “to encourage the chronological deregulation of social life” (Kristensen & Holm, 2006, p. 153), for example what to do, when to do it, and with whom. Kristensen and Holm further emphasise how the work arrangements in today's society have resulted in the need “to plan and organise our social life around ever more complex structures of time and space” (2006, p. 151) due to constantly shifting temporal structures. However, there are limits to how far our body's flexibility regarding, for example, the timing of eating, sleep and restitution can be pushed before negative health consequences, reduced performance and increased accident risk appear.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were ten female and four male FAs, 25–54 years old, working for an airline company in Scandinavia. They were either native Danish or Swedish and had worked as FAs for 6–32 years. Their current work time arrangements included both short- and long-haul flights (defined as short/long). Short-haul flights took place within Scandinavia and Europe, while long-haul flights were intercontinental flights, involving travels across several time zones. Both flight arrangements could imply one or more stays in hotels. Prior to the study, contact was established with the FA union which enabled us to inform the FAs about the study through their internal website. The participants were recruited from one Scandinavian airline company, however many of the participants had previously worked for other airline companies,

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