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The Manic Culture of the Post-9/11 Airline Industry in America

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Abstract

This paper examines the US aviation industry, analysing how profit-seeking has trumped safety in post-9/11 airline operations. Adopting a critical approach that questions the wisdom of accepting managerial decisions as unbiased and the pursuit of profits above all else as unproblematic, this article draws on psychoanalysis and the ethnographic study of airline pilots to evaluate the study's three hypotheses. The article finds that after a twenty-three year incubation period a "culture of mania" emerged at US airlines, precipitated by 9/11, and followed by a decade of increased cost-cutting and escalating risks, with troubling implications for air safety.

Key words: psychoanalysis, manic culture, profit-seeking, airlines, 9/11.

INTRODUCTION

The study of aviation management typically focuses on the scientific improvement of managerial practices in an effort to enhance an airline's financial bottom line. In this model, managers are depicted as rational actors, motivated to make decisions for the organisation's greater good with close ties to profitability because, in the competitive US aviation industry, airlines that fail to make money do not survive. Just consider the demise of mainstays like Eastern Air Lines, Pan American World Airways (Pan Am), and Trans World Airlines (TWA) to find examples of the industry's inherent financial risk. As a result "management is considered to be a socially valuable technical function, normally acting in the general interest of workers, employers, customers and citizens alike" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 1). And through this definition, airline managers' fixation on profit-seeking appears warranted particularly in the challenging post-September 11th 2001 (9/11) market.

In contrast, this article adopts a critical approach that questions the wisdom of accepting the virtue of management as self-evident or unproblematic, and managers' singular pursuit of profits above all

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else as justifiable, particularly in high-risk fields such as aviation, offshore oil, and nuclear power. One only need examine the interrelated corporate and regulatory failures associated with the 2001 in-flight break-up of American Airlines Flight 587 in New York, 2010 British Petroleum *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown in Japan, to find recent examples of how collusive ties between regulators and operators led to weak industry oversight, a failure to ensure adequate safety, and, ultimately, fatalities.

It is in risky professions like these that sociologist Mayer Zald (2002) observed critical theory could have its greatest potential impact. Because these fields "are situated in a larger systemic context" that is "shaped by explicit mechanisms of power and doxa", they share a focus on how "professional norms and institutions regulate, discipline, and shape interaction and behavior in their respective domains" (p. 377). In particular, Zald suggested, critical theory could be fruitful examining "issues of worker-management integration" and the "responsibility of management and the corporation to society and the community" (p. 380). Similarly, Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer (1989) identified white-collar employees like managers, supervisors, and regulators, as the social group that merited most urgent critical examination.

Instead of seeing management failures as a result of poor behaviour by individual managers, a critical approach draws our attention to how a particular interrelated system of government, business, and regulation can create opportunities for managerial abuse. For instance, critically oriented scholars argued that as long as the market is the dominant mechanism for allocating resources, employee and community needs will be subservient, further intensifying executives' focus on financial bottom lines and stockholder interests (Froud, Johal, Leaver, & Williams, 2006; Lazonick & O'Sullivan, 2000). This article tracks and explains the development of such dangerous dynamics in the post-9/11 airline industry.

A managerial reprioritisation has been occurring in US commercial aviation. In the decade after 9/11, airlines increasingly furloughed employees and reduced workers' compensation while charging passengers fees for everything from soft drinks and pillows to ticket changes and checked baggage. Meanwhile, in the third quarter of 2010 alone, major US air carriers reported the highest profit margin since the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2010, p. 1) began issuing quarterly airline financial reports. A key contributor to this record profit was untaxed ancillary revenues totalling $2.15 billion, which included baggage, reservation change, and other newly instituted passenger fees.

Consider United Airlines for example, an international air carrier which spent nearly three years in bankruptcy protection, a luxury not available to their foreign-based competitors. When United emerged from bankruptcy in 2006, executives dealt 400 managers in for ten million shares or 8% of the total company, worth an estimated $115 million on top of their annual salaries. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Glenn Tilton received a total compensation package of $23.8 million for 2006 alone (Bailey, 2007; Morgenson, 2006). All this occurred while employees were furloughed, wage and benefits were slashed, and consumers were increasingly denied the most basic of flight amenities.

A United spokesperson defended this compensation as "appropriate to enable United to attract and retain top performers. It's in everyone's interest for management to have this component of management compensation tied to future performance of United's stock price" (Morgenson, 2006, B1). Others were not so convinced. Morgenson (2006) noted some of the underlying factors are: key "players don't seem to discipline themselves"; "external forces aren't executing any braking power"; and bankruptcy "courts don't seem to hold people as accountable as they should". How do we resolve these competing perspectives? A critical approach that considers the impact of a particular system of airline management, government regulation, work culture, employee job performance, and consumer safety can help sort this conundrum out.

Taking up Zald's (2002) challenge, this article examines the airline worker–management relationship and the ethical responsibility of airlines, managers, government, and regulators to the community through air safety. The paper begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework, a description of the research design, and an introduction of three hypothesises. Next, integrating data from aviation history and in-depth interviews with airline pilots, the paper describes and analyses industry developments, employee–management relationships, changing airline business models, and devolving attitudes about air safety. Finally, the conclusion demonstrates why the resultant manic culture and taken for granted managerial cost-cutting strategies should become safety concerns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is not the first to use a critical perspective to examine airline organisational culture in the post-9/11 period. Fraher (2004a) considered organisational defences activated after 9/11 and argued that pilots' fear, guilt, anxiety, and overwhelming sense of responsibility for elements outside their control led some to feel compelled to carry a weapon at work as a way to regain power, prestige, and a sense of security and control. Ashcraft (2005) investigated how pilots perceived and responded to gendered identity threats, in particular, exploring shifting power dynamics and resistance to social change within the airline culture. Durepos, Mills, and Mills (2008) used a critical hermeneutical exploration of Pan Am's corporate history to analyse how "myths" can be used to manipulate perceptions and re-contextualise a preferred organisational image. And Mills and Mills (2006) used a feminist post-structuralist perspective to examine men and women's roles in Air Canada's corporate history and how disparities became ingrained within the airline culture. A commonality between this research and the present critical study is the identification of systemic factors and environmental variables that shifted power dynamics, directly impacting airline operations and corporate culture.

To explore this point further, this paper includes the combination of a systems psychodynamics analysis of the aviation industry using a socio-economic framework, and an interpretive narrative analysis of pilot interview data. A systems psychodynamics approach applies psychoanalytic thinking, integrating individual psychology, group study, and systemic examination as a way to uncover collective emotions and psychological behaviour within organisations (Fraher, 2004b, p. 65). Systems psychodynamics has been used effectively by a growing number of researchers to access organisational anxieties and understand social dynamics within the wider system (French & Vince, 1999; Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001; Hirshhorn, 1988). Adopting a systems psychodynamics approach for this study is consistent with the critical theory tradition because the field has always encouraged creative borrowing from diverse disciplines (Horkheimer, 1989).

However, there have been criticisms of applying systems psychodynamics to the study of social and organisational dynamics. Jacques (1952), an early proponent of applied psychoanalytic study, ultimately abandoned the approach, calling it dysfunctional. Others noted how these methods can be suspect because they are not open to empirical validation. Nevertheless, precedents for a psycho-dynamically informed analysis of organisational dysfunction are numerous. They include studies of such organisations as Enron (Stein, 2007a), Long Term Capital Management (Stein, 2003), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Feldman, 2004; Schwartz, 1987, 1989), and the National Health Service (Fraher, 2011a). And high-risk fields like aviation (Fraher, 2004b, 2005, 2011a,b), coal mining (Jacques, 1952), firefighting (Weick, 1995), law enforcement (Fraher, 2011a), mountain climbing (Elmes & Barry 1999; Kayes 2004; Tempest, Starkey, & Ennew, 2007), oil refinement (Hirschhorn & Young, 1993), and nursing (Menzies, 1959). Drawing on a variety of psychodynamic concepts, these studies depicted the organisations studied as perverse (Long, 2008), envious (Stein, 2000), narcissistic (Elmes & Barry 1999; Stein, 2003), greedy (Long, 2008), resentful (Hirschhorn, 1997), toxic (Stein, 2007b), and manifesting Munchausen-by-proxy-syndrome (Fraher, 2011a).

In particular, Stein's (2011) exploration of what he called a "culture of mania" (p. 174) is especially relevant to the study of changes in post-9/11 airlines. Expanding Melanie Klein's (1935) concept of individual mania and applying it to the market system, Stein observed a "manic culture" developing in the decades preceding the 2008 credit crisis. During these incubation years governments and regulatory agencies abdicated their authority, auditors failed to function, and financial institutions engaged in dangerous risk-taking. In these situations, "risk is generally understood to be the probability or likelihood of the occurrence of adverse events" (Stein, 2003, p. 528). Stein identified four characteristics underpinning increased risk: denial, omnipotence, triumphalism, and over-activity (2011, p. 174). Rather than serving as warnings, these behavioural markers acted as stimulants, amplifying systemic risks. Stein (2011, p. 175) contended that a key trigger and contributor to the mania was triumphant feelings in the West over the so-called "collapse of communism" (p. 175).

In a manic culture, Stein (2011, pp 176–177) theorised, organisational leaders may observe emerging problems but, rather than becoming concerned, they play down their severity. Warnings imply a need to worry, challenging the organisation's sense of omnipotence. Therefore, in a manic culture, warnings go unheeded. Rather than exploring thoughtful responses triggered by appropriate concern, people deny reality, engaging in hyperactivity that can include attacks on systems designed to contain risks. Victories over volatile situations become occasions to celebrate in a triumphant way, validating managerial decision-making, reinforcing organisational superiority, and amplifying feelings of contempt for those less successful. Such collective feelings of contempt may be largely unconscious. Nonetheless, their impact is no less influential than conscious behaviour. In sum, conscious and unconscious attitudes combine to create dangerous ways of thinking and behaving, escalating risk. In fields like aviation, the implications can be disastrous.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Applying Stein's (2011) framework to the post-9/11 US airline industry leads to the generation of three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (*H1*): following a twenty-three year incubation period, a "culture of mania" emerged in the US airline industry in the decade following the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001.

Hypothesis 2 (*H2*): This "culture of mania" increased risk and diminished safety in the post-9/11 US airline industry.

Hypothesis 3 (*H3*): Changes in the post-9/11 airline power structure shifted the increased risk downward, placing the burden to provide containment for work-related anxieties which had previously been held at the systemic and organisational level, on to individual employees with troubling implications for air safety.

To investigate these hypotheses, this study utilises primary data drawn from semi-structured interviews and surveys, as well as a wide range of secondary sources such as government documents from Congress, and the Government Accounting Office (GAO), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), and other sources such as books, journals, online resources, and newspapers.

Informants in the survey ($N = 127$) replied to an online labour union forum inviting them to complete a web-based protocol investigating their opinions about the aviation industry. The survey asked ten aviation work-related questions, ten Likert scaled safety-related questions, and five open ended questions. Respondents were also asked to provide an e-mail address if they were willing to participate in a follow-on telephone interview. Seventy-two pilots (57%) volunteered to be interviewed; thirty-three (26%) completed a semi-structured interview. Interviews were transcribed and the content analysed. Informants ranged in age from thirty-two to sixty-three years old, with the majority (52%) being between forty and forty-seven years of age. They were predominately male (96%), averaged twenty-three years of total aviation experience, 13.5 years flying at a major commercial airline and reported an average of 10,271 flight hours. Thirty-five per cent of the respondents were actively employed at their airline, 51% had been involuntarily furloughed, and 14% had voluntarily left. Forty-three per cent had served in the military; of that, 50% had been military pilots. Although the study included pilots from most major US carriers, a significant number of study volunteers (87%) were employed by one major carrier. I suspect this is because that carrier had furloughed the most employees in the post-9/11 period, indirectly providing pilots with the time and motivation to participate.

FINDINGS

Hypothesis One (H1)

Turner (1976) was one of the first researchers to evaluate how organisational decision-making can lead to crisis, noting disasters do not typically occur spontaneously but rather "incubate" over a number of years until ignited by a "precipitating event" (p. 381). Using this concept along with Stein's culture of mania model in what follows, I outline the details of the twenty-three year incubation period and the precipitating event in the US airline industry; factors which contributed to development of a manic culture.

Airline Deregulation Act of 1978

As commercial airlines began to flourish in America in the 1930s, the government instituted the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB)—a predecessor of sorts to the FAA—to subsidise, regulate, promote, and protect the fledgling industry. However, over time the CAB earned a reputation for bureaucratic complacency as industry requests often underwent years of delay and red tape only to be finally rejected because they were outdated. For decades, leading economists argued against this high level of government regulation but it was not until the 1970s when the Middle East oil crisis led to skyrocketing fuel prices and escalating airfares on near empty flights, and the Penn Central railroad collapsed requiring a huge taxpayer bailout, that Congress acquiesced to demands for less intrusive regulations. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed the *US Airline Deregulation Act* into effect, disbanding the CAB and withdrawing government control, allowing airlines to compete over routes, schedules and fares in a free market (Heppenheimer, 1986; Petzinger, 1995; Sheth, Allvine, Uslay, & Dixit, 2007).

Not everyone was a fan of airline deregulation. Many industry insiders at the time such as American Airlines CEO Robert Crandall were strong critics, believing the government and general public were naïve about the risks. Crandall (2009) noted how Congress, the media, and flying public became enthralled with the burgeoning low frill carriers like Southwest Airlines, and its predecessor Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA), and "drove the industry to the lowest common denominator" with disastrous side effects. Other experts agreed, joining Crandall in his opinion that deregulation was a huge mistake: "We have failed to confront the reality that unfettered competition just doesn't work very well in certain industries" (Demerjian, 2008).

Post-deregulation

Many airlines' struggles to stay solvent in the post-9/11 period originated with managerial decisions made during the first decades of deregulation when intense competition and unbridled expansion required the extensive purchase of new aeroplanes and record hiring of employees at industry leading pay rates. This rapid expansion exhausted the available labour supply and put less experienced pilots in the cockpit of nearly every air carrier. Thus began a trend in which a pilot with no college diploma, little ground training or operational experience, and as few as 250 flight hours in small single-engine aeroplanes logged via flight instruction, sightseeing tours, or banner tows could be at the controls of a complex commercial flight in challenging environmental conditions. Fortunately, strong labour unions at most major air carriers in the 1980s largely restricted these low time pilots to the smaller, regional airlines and their less sophisticated aircraft (Fraher, 2014).

As one might imagine, these changes had safety ramifications. In the early 1990s, safety analysts predicted that even if accident rates remained constant, the anticipated 3–4% annual aviation industry growth would result in a near doubling of US air crashes by the turn of the twenty-first century (Gore, 1996). Many cited an antiquated aviation regulatory system in which motivated lobbyists and overly conservative financial concerns combined to block implementation of safety innovations as the core problem. As Flight Safety CEO Stuart Matthews put it, "The FAA was simply never created to deal with the environment that has been produced by deregulation" (Gore, 1996, p. 1.1).

These problems have only been exacerbated in the post-9/11 period. In 2008, a Congressional hearing examined the regulatory relationship between the FAA and US airlines. It discovered numerous safety inspectors who "found it difficult to bring enforcement action against airlines because FAA management appeared to be 'too close to airline management' " (Oberstar & Mica, 2008, p. 13). Many FAA employees confessed, "I often don't even bother" bringing airline violations forward "because I know FAA management won't do anything with it" and they feared "retribution" (p. 5). As a result, Congress found "extensive evidence" which "points toward a systemic pattern of FAA failure to exercise the required regulatory oversight" over US airlines (p. 1). However, this was not the first time the FAA had been criticised.

Consider, for example, ValuJet Airlines which entered service in 1993. To keep costs low, ValuJet purchased used aircraft, skimped on crew training, and outsourced most functions, subcontracting maintenance to questionable companies, and raising safety concerns. Nevertheless, the following year Valujet went public, earning $21 million in 1994 alone and quickly becoming the darling of Wall Street. Although ValuJet's fleet was the oldest and its safety record was the worst—whistle-blowers had repeatedly raised safety concerns—the FAA, in denial about the escalating risk, failed to intervene (Schiavo, 1997). Not until a high profile crash in the Florida Everglades killed 110 people in 1996 did regulators permanently ground the low-cost carrier, which had grown from a single, used DC-9 to a fleet of fifty-six jets in just three years. An unprecedented expansion rate.

Yet, instead of these incidents signalling a system-wide warning, the cost-cutting models of low-frill airlines like ValuJet were championed as a model of innovative management. Many of their questionable safety practices like maintenance outsourcing and training shortcuts spread, continuing at airlines today. These types of short-term cost saving strategies seemed to further stimulate the cut-throat competition, creating a sense of triumphalism for the surviving airlines. As a result, we find the post-deregulation airline industry's flagrant denial of safety risks and increasing hyperactivity in the 1980s and 1990s a tinderbox ready to explode by the turn of the century.

September 11th 2001 became the inciting event that precipitated a breakdown in industry self-restraint. The loss of four US airliners in terrorist hijackings on 9/11 was the proverbial "last straw", launching the struggling US airline industry—which had over-expanded and over-spent in a competitive frenzy during the post-deregulation period—into full-blown mania.

Hypothesis 2 (H2)

To understand the dynamics of this manic culture, let us look at some aviation accidents. Since 2001, there have been six fatal commercial air carrier accidents in the US resulting in 418 deaths. Not an extraordinary number. Yet, after analysing each accident, the NTSB identified an unusual and alarming pattern. In nearly every crash, investigators cited aspects of pilot and/or mechanic professionalism and failure to adhere to established procedures as factors. Four of the accidents involved companies "doing business" as another entity—an outsourcing strategy nearly unheard of in aviation before 2001—with new, yet unexplored safety risks.

Pinnacle Airlines

Consider one 2004 accident: Pinnacle Airlines Flight 3701, doing business as Northwest Airlink. The crash occurred about 10 p.m. while the captain and first officer were repositioning their regional jet from

Arkansas to Minneapolis-St. Paul for the next day's flight schedule. Although they flight planned for a lower altitude, the pilots intentionally climbed their jet to its maximum operating altitude of 41,000 feet.

Their bizarre decision did not go unnoticed by air traffic control who radioed, "I've never seen you guys up [this high] at forty one."

The captain laughed, "We don't have any passengers on board so we decided to have a little fun."

As the jet struggled to maintain its maximum altitude, the aircraft repeatedly stalled, causing one pilot to joke, "Dude, it's losing it" (NTSB, 2004, p. 108). Although they recognised the deteriorating performance, neither pilot responded with urgency until airflow became so disrupted, both engines failed and the jet began a glider-like descent to impact, killing both men.

The NTSB (2004) found the "probable cause" of the accident was the "pilots' unprofessional behavior, deviation from standard operating procedures, and poor airmanship" (p. 73). This thrill-seeking effort to impress each other and blatant disregard for safety prompted the evaluation of other crashes. And the NTSB identified five airline accidents in the post-9/11 period involving a "lack of cockpit discipline and adherence to standard operating procedures" (p. 60). Yet, curiously, the NTSB and FAA blamed individual pilots and their training programmes for this behaviour and made no recommendation to examine the aviation industry system or the organisational culture at airlines for clues to this unusual pattern of behaviour.

Colgan Air

Just five years later, another shocking accident occurred. This time involving Colgan Air, doing business as Continental Connection Flight 3407. The turbo-prop aeroplane was on approach for landing to Buffalo-Niagara International Airport at night in icy weather when the captain allowed the speed to become dangerously slow. This caused a warning device called a "stick shaker" to turn off the autopilot and vibrate the control yoke, indicating impending stall—as designed. Although the aircraft was in no imminent danger, the captain panicked. Distracted by the icing, startled by the warning, and confused by the autopilot, he lost control of the aircraft and crashed five miles from their destination, killing all forty-nine aboard and one person on the ground (NTSB, 2009, p. 82).

The cockpit voice recorder revealed that both pilots were improperly monitoring the aircraft instruments, distracted instead by non-essential communications such as commuting, applying to major airlines, changing aircraft, and the implications of the co-pilot's annual gross salary of $15,800. This lack of situational awareness was compounded by fatigue: both pilots had slept in the flight crew lounge the night before the accident to save money.

Like Valujet, Colgan Air had been in trouble before and had doubled in size over a short period. An FAA whistle-blower testified to Congress about numerous safety violations dating back to 2005—four years before this fatal crash—which went unheeded. Any effort to enforce regulations met resistance from FAA management, the whistle-blower testified. "(Colgan Air President) Mike Colgan is a friend of this office," he was told (PBS, 2010).

The Colgan Air crash so shocked America that Congress convened another hearing and the FAA hosted twelve regional meetings. Encouragingly, what seemed to be universally recognised was that "a generational 'paradigm shift' in the pilot population" had occurred involving "a fundamental shift in experience, expectations, and work practices", that required corresponding managerial changes and training improvements (FAA, 2010, p. 22).

Similarly, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA, 2009), the world's largest pilots' union, noted how industry decisions made after 9/11 significantly altered the airline business model encouraging them to cut costs, park larger aeroplanes, and furlough their more experienced and more expensive pilots, and shift flying to commuter affiliates like Pinnacle and Colgan. For years, strong unions like ALPA controlled this form of outsourcing through contract negotiations and job action. But after 9/11, with most contracts voided by bankruptcy judges, airline management was free to negotiate anew and commuter airlines jumped at the chance to expand service, often putting low-time pilots in powerful regional jets operating in complex airspace and challenging environmental conditions.

Another managerial strategy to offset the impact of skyrocketing fuel prices, low-frill competitors' cheaper overhead costs, and post-bankruptcy airlines' leaner workforce was to merge. So many airlines considered merging in the post-9/11 period that Congress commissioned a study to review the process and found nothing detrimental about the practice (US GAO, 2008). Yet, what they failed to consider is how airline mergers are stressful for employees who routinely lose money, benefits, control over their schedules—and sometimes even their jobs—with little time to prepare. And, because seniority establishes the order for promotion, aircraft assignment, work schedules, and pay, disputes over the integration of seniority lists can be particularly contentious and distracting for employees.

Examples of the repercussions of this post-9/11 stress and distraction are readily available. Take for instance the United and Delta jets, transporting a combined 300 passengers, which came within 100 feet of colliding in Fort Lauderdale in 2007; the Northwest pilots who, out of radio contact for an hour, overflew their Minneapolis destination by 150 miles with 147 passengers onboard in 2009; and the Delta crew who in 2009 landed their 767 with 194 passengers on a taxiway at their main airport, Atlanta-Hartsfield International, instead of their assigned runway. These types of near-misses have become more common in the post-9/11 period as pilots' struggle to cope with the drastic changes that have befallen their profession.

Will we soon see a major airline disaster? Pilot interview data indicate that this is likely. Ninety-six percent of the pilots I interviewed reported witnessing increased stress on the pilot workforce due to post-9/11 cost-cutting measures; 78% reported this as a daily occurrence. Ninety-eight percent of pilots interviewed witnessed mistakes or distractions on the flight deck because of airline cost-cutting and work rule changes; 60% saw this on a daily or weekly basis. In order to more fully analyse this culture and understand the shifting power structure, we need a different sort of framework. A framework which will reveal how systemic, organisational, and individual anxieties played out, increasing risk as the culture turned manic. For this we turn back to psychoanalysis.

Examining anxiety

Anthropologist Eric Miller (1999) studied the institution of employment in peoples' minds demonstrating the extent to which the workplace can be used to buttress or even replace an individual's defences against anxiety (p. 102). Applying this model, the roles, structures, and boundaries of the organisation are seen to help contain life's uncertainties. And if the organisation fails to adequately contain anxieties, strong labour unions can often be relied upon to keep things in balance. Correspondingly, when employees lose their job, they often experience a profound sense of betrayal, abandonment, and loss of identity which heightens anxieties and evokes defences. The workplace is no longer felt to be safe, even for those who retained their jobs as fear for survival preoccupies employees thinking, increasing anxieties, and distracting them from their work. Expressed differently, one could say the organisation no longer functions effectively as a "container of anxiety" (Gabriel, 1999, p. 292).

Psychoanalyst Anton Obholzer (1999) proposed three categories of workplace anxiety which need containment: 1) primitive anxiety, 2) anxiety arising from the nature of the work, and 3) personal anxiety. Primitive anxiety is the "ever-present, all-pervasive anxiety that is the fate of mankind" (p. 90) and typically held at the systemic level. To manage this feeling, society imbues a network of social, political, religious, and work institutions to provide meaning in order to "fend off the dread of the unknown" (p. 90). The second anxiety which must be managed is usually held at the organisational level and arises from the workplace itself and the ways in which work related tasks are managed. Uncontained, this anxiety can lead to accidents, employee burnout, absenteeism, depression, injury, and high job turnover. If defence related anxieties are allowed to dominate, the primary task of the organisation can become sabotaged putting the organisation's survival at risk. Most importantly, this means any managerial efforts to reorganise work must also address the corresponding disruption to the workplace anxiety-holding system (p. 92). The third level of anxiety is normally held at the personal level, a result of the individual's inner world based on past experiences, both conscious and unconscious.

These three categories—primitive anxiety at the systemic level, work anxiety at the organisational level, and personal anxiety at the individual level—became important elements in the creation of the manic culture which ensued in the post-9/11 airline industry. First, in the months following September 11th, primitive anxiety was at a record high throughout the US, a country which had never been attacked on its own soil. In a burst of hyperactivity, laws were rapidly enacted like the *PATRIOT Act*, *Aviation and Transportation Security Act*, and *Air Transportation Safety and System Stabilization Act*, and institutions created, such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as a way to deny America's vulnerability, with little regard for the cost or long term implications. US airlines also moved quickly arming pilots, fingerprinting employees, reissuing identification badges, developing new security policies, procedures, and trainings, and equipping all aircraft with bulletproof cockpit doors. Yet, there is little convincing evidence that any of these changes did little more than act as defences against anxieties prompted by the precipitating event.

As the economic situation worsened, every major US airline entered bankruptcy, restructured, and furloughed employees. Bureau of Transportation Statistic data demonstrates the impact: over 14,000 commercial pilots lost their jobs at the seven US "network" airlines since 9/11; nearly a 30% reduction. Even once aggressive labour groups now shied away from confronting airline management, fearing repercussions. Take the *Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association* strike at Northwest Airlines in 2005 when 4,400 mechanics and aircraft cleaners walked off the job, angry about the company's demand for $176 million in wage and benefit concessions and a 53% reduction in jobs. In an unprecedented move 1,500 temporary mechanics on furlough from other airlines crossed the picket line to work at Northwest, and pilots, flight attendants, and other labour groups refused to strike in sympathy, fearing for their own jobs (Maynard, 2005).

For many airline employees I interviewed, this period of time was devastating. The emotional experience of post-9/11 work life was not just a feeling of loss but of abandonment by the organisation, betrayal by the labour union, and disloyalty by fellow employees. Informants in this study reported feeling "constant turmoil" at work. Employees were "distracted", "unhappy", "beat down", and pushed to the "breaking point". There was a "mood change" after 9/11 in which airline management became "more of big brother", looking over workers' shoulders. Respondents felt it was "almost punitive and pervaded the whole environment" which "made people even more angry". One co-pilot noted "It was almost a relief to find out I was getting furloughed because then I wouldn't have to deal with that poisonous atmosphere anymore." A senior captain recalled nearly every flight "I was flying with a co-pilot that was being furloughed either that month or the next month. The stress" was "unbelievable". And "when there's stress on one pilot, there's definitely stress on both." Prompted in part by his experience of being airborne on 9/11 and later suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, this pilot took time off, sought help, and completed a master's degree in counselling. He noted, "I have quite a bit of background in the effects of depression and stress [now]. It was really obvious to me, that at least half of the guys I was flying with were clinically depressed." They "were probably at the level where they really shouldn't have been flying". At least one pilot committed suicide.

Hypothesis 3 (H3)

A top down managerial model emerged in the post-9/11 period in which airline executives contemptuously held all the power, making little effort to communicate with employees. As a result, only 3% of the pilots I surveyed reported decision-makers at their airline as "competent" and 36% cited them as "very incompetent". They observed managers "are in a completely different world" than rank-and-file employees both in terms of pay and exposure to risk. "Managers just care about themselves, not the airlines," one pilot concluded. In fact, several pilots believed airline managers employed strategies to pit employee groups against each other to create disharmony. Obholzer (1994) described this style of management as " 'paranoid–schizoid by choice' fragmenting and splitting up systems instead of promoting collaboration", as a way to make it more comfortable for managers to make difficult decisions (p. 173). The result was an increase in personal anxiety for pilots, many of whom continued to feel victimised and shameful that US airliners had been commandeered by terrorists. They experienced the airline hijackings, and increased scrutiny afterwards by security officials, as an attack on the piloting profession and their individual professionalism.

These factors combined to reduce all employees' psychological investment in their airline but for pilots, who worked decades to reach this pinnacle of their career, it was particularly acute. As one pilot put it, "Before 9/11 being an airline pilot was a career. After 9/11, it was just a job. There's a big difference in your frame of mind going to your job verses going to your life long career . . . I don't have that pride anymore." Another pilot observed:

> Before 9/11, I was always willing to help out the company if they called me and needed a favor. Post-9/11, when I went back [to work from furlough], I was never willing to help out. I felt like I'd been burned by the company, burned by the union. I just wanted to do my job and go home.

For some pilots, it was not bankruptcy or furloughs that were most unsettling, but the managerial strategies undertaken afterwards to indoctrinate the surviving employees into the new post-9/11 organisational processes, often post-merger. For example, one airline instituted mandatory employee training in business education. One pilot described it as about a hundred employees assembled to play a board game designed to expose workers to various business scenarios. Another called it a " 'Business 101' briefing for kindergartners." A third described the goal as teaching workers how hard the managerial decisions were during bankruptcy:

> You rolled the dice and moved forward and you'd land on a space, like a monopoly game, and it would say "fuel prices have spiked up $5 a barrel". Do you want to: A) park some of your airplanes; B)—and then you'd have to make choices. Based on the choice, you'd lose money or make money.

Besides being offended that they were required to attend the training unpaid, on their day off and "embarrassed" to be playing "a stupid board game", many employees resented feeling forced to drink the company "Kool-Aid". Several were appalled that company executives paid outside consultants $20 million to develop the programme, while simultaneously furloughing employees and cutting wages, benefits, and pensions. Several people reported "riots breaking out" and security being called because employees became so enraged. One pilot observed, managers had “grossly miscalculated the depth of pilot anger and hostility”. Another noted that all the training had accomplished “was to highlight just how out of touch our management team was. If they couldn’t gauge morale within their own employee group, how could we then have any confidence in their decision making as it related to a complex business?”

One pilot recalled people crying, they were so humiliated: “here was a company who had clearly broken employee spirit and morale” and “now they had the audacity to talk about things like quality and working together as a team. What a two-faced joke!” Interestingly, whether it was security changes, managerial practices, regulators, training, or airline culture, many pilots interviewed used the word “joke” to describe post-9/11 changes. This supports Miller’s (1999) finding that companies that tried the hardest to eliminate negative or ambivalent feelings may instead stimulate the most employee resentment, mistrust, and suspicion (p. 107). In fact, Miller noted, for managers to “expect that surviving employees could be persuaded to be loyal to an employer who had been extremely disloyal to the hundreds of ex-employees who had lost their jobs was rightly seen as absurd” (p. 107).

This is yet another example of the denial that permeated airline operations in the post-9/11 period. The biggest problem, one pilot observed, was that the aviation industry is “not facing things”. They act like “just because it’s legal” means “it’s safe”. He explained, “When you’re being pushed to not call in sick, or being questioned when you call in sick, that’s not being safe.” And when “you hear a mechanic tell a captain, ‘If you want that fixed, you need to refuse the airplane’,” that’s not being safe. And when pilots are being rushed through abbreviated training programmes and pressured to fly aeroplanes with documented mechanical problems in order to save money, that is clearly not safe either. These were all reported as post-9/11 cost-cutting measures.

Several people worried that pilots make their job look too easy and the apparent rarity of aviation deaths has caused passengers to become indifferent, regulators lackadaisical, and airline management complacent about air safety. Many observed the only thing preventing a major crash was “luck”, “standard operating procedures”, and the “professionalism” and “experience level” of aircrews. Several pilots confessed they were “stunned” that there were not more safety incidents in the post-9/11 period, believing the current levels of stress and fatigue to be a “recipe for disaster”. As one pilot noted, with “the way the company puts pressure on the employees, it’s just a matter of time”. We have seen “what happens”, we saw the failures with Colgan Air “in the Buffalo accident”. He emphasised, “Something’s got to give.”

These concerns raise a wider, more problematic issue which is how to explain the US aviation industry's disregard for these troubling warning signs. As the numerous post-9/11 Congressional hearings, GAO studies, FAA investigations, NTSB accident reports, and other industry research revealed, problems were being recognised but they were not being dealt with. Instead industry leaders used every opportunity for triumphalism and to celebrate their own managerial decisions. Consider, for instance, FAA Administrator Marion C. Blakey's comments in 2007 when she called the post-9/11 aviation industry "The golden age of safety, the safest period in the safest mode, in the history of the world" (Wald, 2007).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study reveals that a "culture of mania" developed in the US commercial airline industry over a twenty-three year incubation period beginning with the *Airline Deregulation Act of 1978*, and was triggered by events on 9/11. Airlines struggled to stay solvent in the decade that followed intensifying the mania, as hyperactivity in the form of bankruptcies, mergers, furloughs, restructuring, union job action, and outsourcing challenged industry decision-makers. Rather than dealing with issues in an open, thoughtful manner the aviation industry leaders denied the growing risks. In several instances, it took aircraft accidents, fatalities, and whistle-blowers testifying to Congress to draw attention to safety concerns.

Central to the "culture of mania" was an increasing state of denial about the impact of cost-cutting, the declining airline worker–management relationship, and the resultant impact on air safety. Economic recession heightened consumer frugality, war increased fuel costs, and online technology widened passengers' ability to locate the cheapest ticket, forcing airlines to find new ways to maximise profits. Air carriers entered bankruptcy, voiding employee contracts and strong-arming industry changes previously prohibited under law, increasing risk and diminishing safety.

By 2005 US airlines had returned to profitability, yet the mania persisted as a sense of omnipotence seemed to permeate the airline industry. As labour unions lost power, and cosy relationships developed between airlines and their regulators, a sense of insularity settled over the industry in which airline employees and the flying public were forced in a contemptuous way to adapt to the "new normal" of post-9/11 air travel. As airlines demanded employees work longer hours for less money, work sick, and fly questionable equipment, or face repercussions, stress and fatigue increased and job performance deteriorated. Employees' efforts to raise concerns went unheeded, disregarded by both regulators and managers in a contemptuous way. Even after several alarming airline accidents and a series of near-misses, the industry remained in denial as leaders touted their decisions as creating the "golden age of safety", while attacking critics and whistle-blowers for attempting to identify problems.

During this manic period, the aviation industry's ability to provide proper containment diminished, greatly increasing operational risks, as airlines' short-term profit-seeking trumped long-term safety concerns. Changes in the industry power structure shifted the risk previously contained at the systemic and organisational level through proactive regulators, strong labour unions, fair work rules, appropriate remuneration, satisfied employees, and empathetic managers downward, placing the burden on individual employees to contain the organisation's work-related anxieties. The mania amplified further as air carriers engaged in a hyperactive fixation on restructuring, outsourcing, and merging, ignoring the escalating risks and forcing individual employee professionalism to become the final stopgap preventing an airline disaster.

This study contributes to organisation theory, the psychoanalytic study of organisations, and our understanding of the socio-economics of the US aviation industry. By questioning the wisdom of accepting managerial decisions as unbiased and the pursuit of profits above all else as unproblematic, this case study evaluated management–employee relationships and the responsibility of airlines to provide safe air travel. Results of this study indicate that although Congressional hearings, GAO reports, NTSB accident investigations, FAA studies, and an ALPA white paper all documented extensive changes in the post-9/11 airline business model, few safeguards have been put in place to address them. As a result, airlines' managerial profit-seeking has been allowed to trump aviation safety with disturbing implications for employees and the flying public (see Table 1).

Just as Stein (2011) argued the 2008 credit crisis was preceded by the fall of communism which reminded the capitalistic West of its vulnerabilities, instigating a flurry of activity as a way to obliterate anxieties, so too did 9/11 remind the US aviation industry about its fragility and initiate a similar reaction. Events on 9/11 triggered a mania, as a way to deny primitive anxieties about vulnerability, which stripped away the last semblance of effective government oversight, regulatory supervision, and organisational responsibilities. Even the flying public contributed to the mania, putting downward pressure on airline revenue by surfing the internet for the cheapest possible airfare.

Table 1: Aspects of a manic culture in post-9/11 US aviation

Four characteristics	*Feature*	*Examples: post-9/11 US aviation industry*
Denial	• Problems noted, but not reacted to • Warning signs seen as provocations • Vulnerabilities ignored • Increasing risk	• Hypercompetitive market • Shifting pilot demographics • Colgan and Pinnacle accidents • Lack of professionalism • Lack of adherence to SOPs • Whistle-blowers
Omnipotence	• Need to prove superiority • Problems seen as challenge to omnipotence	• Furloughs • Outsourcing • Pilot-pushing • "Golden Age" comment
Triumphalism	• Excessive feelings of exultation • Need to feel victorious • Contempt for those less successful • Need to denigrate	• Increasing customer fees while airlines earned record profits • Decreasing customer service • Stocks and bonuses for managers while employees sacrificed • Business education training • Anxiety shifted to employees for containment
Over-activity	• Protects feelings of vulnerability • Manic attacks on warnings • Dismantled regulatory system	• Bankruptcy • Mergers • Outsourcing • Furloughs • New business models • New laws • New government institutions • Lobbyists driving change • Regulators power weakened • Labour union power weakened

As government and industry regulators distanced themselves, and airlines forced labour groups, employees, and consumers to adjust to the "new normal" of the post-9/11 industry in a contemptuous way, a shift occurred in the industry power structure. This, in itself, was disastrous enough. However, as airlines restructured they failed to address the corresponding disruption to the anxiety-holding system. Therefore primitive anxiety, which had previously been held at the systemic level, and work-related anxiety, which had been contained at the organisational level, shifted downward on to individual employees who were already stressed, fatigued, and despondent, greatly increasing risks. Of the pilots I interviewed, 70% said it is likely that a major airline accident will occur in the coming years due to post-9/11 airline cost-cutting.

With so much evidence available, we must ask deeper, more vexing questions about why so many different parties, from airline management and industry regulators to labour union leaders and consumer watchdog groups, continue to accept this extreme risk-taking. I hope this study makes a contribution to our understanding of how disasters occur. Rather than blaming individuals for the next crash, which will inevitably occur, this study makes clear how a systemic pattern of interrelated behaviours escalated risks in a manic way over the past decade, bringing us to this dangerous precipice.

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