



Journal of Managerial Psychology

Intergenerational conflict at US airlines: an unresolved Oedipal Complex?

Amy L. Fraher,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Amy L. Fraher, (2017) "Intergenerational conflict at US airlines: an unresolved Oedipal Complex?", Journal of Managerial Psychology, Vol. 32 Issue: 1, pp.75-88, doi: 10.1108/JMP-06-2015-0238

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JMP-06-2015-0238>

Downloaded on: 26 April 2017, At: 16:21 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 63 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 62 times since 2017*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2017), "Family role overload's relationship with stress and satisfaction", Journal of Managerial Psychology, Vol. 32 Iss 1 pp. 61-74 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JMP-01-2016-0020>

(2017), "Relational models and engagement: an attachment theory perspective", Journal of Managerial Psychology, Vol. 32 Iss 1 pp. 30-44 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JMP-01-2016-0006>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:374558 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Intergenerational conflict at US airlines: an unresolved Oedipal Complex?

Intergenerational
conflict at US
airlines

75

Amy L. Fraher
*Department of Organisation, Work and Employment,
Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

Received 23 June 2015
Revised 6 April 2016
19 August 2016
Accepted 14 September 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how, if at all, organizational dynamics changed at US airlines after an industry wide modification to mandatory retirement age regulations in 2007. Findings challenge assumptions that society, organizations, and employees will all unequivocally benefit from abolishing mandatory retirement by investigating the impact of age-related policy changes on US airline pilots.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted with captains and copilots from US airlines between September 2010 and July 2011. From this data set, two informant subgroups emerged: first, senior captains averaging 59 years of age; and second, junior pilots averaging 43.5 years of age.

Findings – Findings revealed that both senior and junior pilots reported retirement age policy changes created an antagonistic environment, pitting employees against each other in competition over scarce resources.

Research limitations/implications – Paper findings are based on empirical materials collected during an 11 month snapshot-in-time between September 2010 and July 2011 and interview data are based on a small subgroup of US airline pilots who self-selected to participate in the study. Therefore, findings are not unbiased and may not be generalizable across all airlines' pilot workgroups.

Practical implications – Considerable research has been conducted identifying the policy and practice changes that employers need to adopt to retain older workers. However, few studies consider the psychological impact of these age-related workplace changes on employees or the organizational psychodynamics they might trigger.

Originality/value – This paper makes two main contributions. First, through use of the psychoanalytic construct of the Oedipus complex, the paper sheds light on some of the psychodynamic consequences of age-related policy changes. Second, it challenges assumptions about workforce aging and the underlying causes of intergenerational conflict, highlighting ways that policy changes intended to eradicate discrimination against older workers can result in age discrimination against younger employees.

Keywords Employee relations, Age discrimination, Managerial psychology, Downsizing, Conflict

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Workforce aging, projected labor shortages, and the need to retain older employees are major themes in managerial research (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Buyens *et al.*, 2009). Over the last ten years or so, academics studied managers' stereotypes about older workers (Taylor *et al.*, 2010; van Dalen *et al.*, 2010; Rupp *et al.*, 2006) and government agencies identified policy changes required to keep older employees working (OECD, 2006; United Nations, 2007). In addition, several organizations lobbied to abolish mandatory retirement regulations altogether, prompting *The Economist* (2006) to propose: "If people want to work longer, and companies are willing to employ them, then what's the problem?" Underlying assumptions embedded within this dialogue are that society, organizations, and employees will all unequivocally benefit from abolishing mandatory retirement rules and retaining older workers. Yet, few studies empirically test these assumptions by investigating the impact of age-related policy changes on employees – young or old – or the intergenerational conflicts these changes might trigger within the workplace. Thus, the research question investigated here is:

RQ1. How, if at all, organizational dynamics changed after an industry wide modification to mandatory retirement age regulations?



2. Background

In 2007, the *Fair Treatment of Experienced Pilots Act* was unanimously passed by the US Congress allowing airline pilots to continue to fly until age 65. The Act modified what had been colloquially termed the “Age-60 Rule” which had been in effect for nearly 50 years requiring pilots to retire at 60. For many junior US pilots, the impact of the 2007 retirement age change was the last in a long series of socioeconomic blows – the proverbial “last straw” – which began on September 11, 2001 (9/11), gained momentum through the 2008 financial crisis and great recession that followed, and included traumatic experiences such as airline bankruptcy, company restructuring, and unemployment (Fraher, 2012). In the decade following 9/11, almost 200,000 airline employees lost their jobs, including over 14,000 pilots at the seven major US carriers, a 29 percent reduction in force (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2011). Although some employees took early retirement or left on their own accord, most of the reductions involved junior workers who were furloughed, or laid-off, with the right to return to work when, and if, their airline needs them again. Almost 1,500 junior pilots were furloughed twice between 2001 and 2009, many waiting several years to be recalled to work (Fraher, 2014). Additionally during this industry downsizing, hundreds of airline captains were demoted back to the co-pilot seat and most airlines defaulted on their corporate pension plans thereby providing a fraction of the original payout for retiring senior pilots.

This study examines how this seemingly innocuous 2007 policy change became an inciting incident in the US airline industry, pitting senior and junior pilots against each other in an intergenerational conflict over scarce resources during an intense period of industry restructuring. Using the psychoanalytic construct of the Oedipus complex, this paper brings together empirical research and psychoanalytic theory to broaden our understanding of the impact of age-related policy changes by surfacing issues which might have otherwise remained invisible thereby making two theoretical contributions. First, the paper challenges assumptions about workforce aging and underlying causes of intergenerational conflict, highlighting ways that policy changes intended to eradicate discrimination against older workers can result in age discrimination against younger employees, particularly during times of scarce resources. Second, the paper answers the call to deepen our examination of the emotional implications of downsizing, in particular, the challenges of managing “survivors” (Doherty *et al.*, 1996; Guo and Giacobbe-Miller, 2012; Sadri, 1996).

3. Literature

3.1 Oedipal complex

The theoretical underpinnings of the oedipal framework applied in this paper are based on two concepts: Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of the mythological story of Oedipus and Howard Schwartz’s (1990, 2002) theory of the “organization ideal.” Oedipus was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta and fulfilled a prophecy that he would kill his father, marry his mother, and inflict disaster on his Greek kingdom Thebes. From this myth Freud (1957, 1963) theorized about the Oedipus complex, arguing that it was a normal phase of early childhood development in which a boy unconsciously desires his mother while simultaneously wishing to eliminate his father for competing with him for her attention. Although Freud noted these feelings in both genders, this analysis will focus on the male psychodynamics here since US airline pilots are predominantly men.

The boy’s eventual identification with the father, and recognition that he too might be worthy of attracting someone like mother and her love, is a developmental achievement and a sign of the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex. The boy copes with his aggression by turning the feelings inward, thereby developing maturity and self-control, and learns how to fulfill adult obligations of family, work, and society (Schwartz, 1990, 2002; Schwartz and Hirschhorn, 2009). If the boy’s Oedipus complex is unresolved, the father’s presence continues

to be experienced as an intrusion, and the boy grows up with an expectation that the world will revolved around his needs. In this case, Melanie Klein's (1975) concept of splitting is useful because what seems to the child to be prohibiting the realization of his "fantasy" to live within the loving embrace of mother's "goodness" is father's "badness."

Phantasy. Freud applied the term fantasy, or phantasy, rather loosely to a variety of wish-fulfilling activities rooted in internal impulses (Bott Spillius, 2001; Desmond, 2013). However, Klein narrowed the focus, calling phantasy the unconscious link between an individual's intrapsychic world and the surrounding environment (Rose, 2007; Guinchard, 1998). Susan Isaacs (1952) further emphasized that phantasies are a common part of human existence based on normal unconscious mental processes. If problems arise, Isaac noted, it is not from individuals' phantasies, *per se*, but from the way in which phantasies become enacted and related to external reality, such as the intergenerational conflict discussed in this airline industry study.

In the unresolved Oedipus complex scenario the father comes to be seen, not as the figure who guarantees a safe space within which mother's adoration for the child can blossom, but rather as a selfish invader who takes mother's affection away. The boy's phantasy is that union with mother is all that is needed to achieve happiness and is, in fact, something to which he feels entitled. As such, expelling father, rather than aspiring to be like him, would return the child to his phantasized perfect "good" world. In Freudian terms, this representation of the "good" world is called the "ego ideal," the child's phantasy of the perfect, loving way things should be (Freud, 1955). Yet, this blissful state can never be achieved, making pursuit of the ego ideal fraught with anxiety and disappointment.

Ego ideal. Applied to organizations, Schwartz (1990, p. 18) renamed the ego ideal the "organization ideal," observing that although organizational life is similarly fraught with frustration, for many committed employees their "ego ideal is the organization": their life revolves around a phantasy of the perfect job in a loving organization. Numerous studies have documented ways employers exploit these unconscious desires, often using discursive strategies that promote their organization as a caring, supportive familial community (Driver, 2002; Casey, 1999; Gabriel, 1999; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kunda, 1992; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Sturdy, 1998).

An important point to emphasize is that when applying the concept of the ego ideal to organizations I am not referring to the actual organization, but rather to employees' idea of the organization. That is, what the organization is phantasized to be, and would be, if the "bad" aspects of the world were eliminated. Viewed from this perspective, senior and junior pilots and their airlines are not literally taking up familial roles in an oedipal dynamic but rather are symbolically representing attitudes and behaviors in the oedipal triad. Thus in the imagined "good" world of commercial aviation before the regulatory age change in 2007, the airline environment came to represent an opportunity for extension of the organization ideal; a phantasized blissful environment. Within this organization ideal, senior captains were perceived to use their authority in a protective fatherly role, the airline itself offered the attentive dedication and nurturing support analogous to a motherly role, and junior pilots' identified with captains, aspiring to be like them, providing evidence of the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex. This is a phantasy, of course. Organizations are not perfect and the organization ideal can never be fully achieved, making this quest replete with anxiety, frustration, and disappointment. After airline industry regulations changed commercial pilots' mandatory retirement age, these phantasy-fueled emotions found an outlet within the dynamics of the pilot workgroup itself.

3.2 Value of psychoanalysis

The potential for psychoanalysis to explore emotional conflicts such as these, opening a valuable window into the world of organizations by offering fresh insights with extensive

explanatory powers and ample practical implications, has been well documented (Gabriel and Carr, 2002; Fotaki *et al.*, 2012; Gabriel, 1998; Carr, 2002; Paul *et al.*, 2002). By accessing organizational anxieties and revealing unconscious social dynamics, a psychoanalytic lens can shed light into some of the darkest corners of workplace life, exposing employees' competing phantasies (Long, 2008; Fraher, 2004, 2016; de Swarte, 1998). For example, psychodynamic studies include Barings Bank (Brown, 2005), Lehman Brothers (Stein, 2013), Long Term Capital Management (Long, 2008), NASA (Schwartz, 1987; Feldman, 2004), and the NHS (Fraher, 2011). Freud's Oedipus complex has thus far not found a place in managerial studies of intergenerational conflict or aviation studies, yet it has been found elsewhere. Stein (2007a) observed that an oedipal mindset developed within the Enron corporate culture, fostering a contempt for authority that led to the company's demise. Similarly, Schwartz and Hirschhorn (2009) analyzed Jayson Blair's plagiarism scandal at *The New York Times* and identified oedipal and anti-oedipal organizational dynamics as the underlying cause. These studies provide ample support of the value of adopting an oedipal framework as a way to illuminate the complex intergenerational dynamics studied here.

3.3 Intergenerational conflict at work

There is a long history of sociological research examining the difference between age cohorts from a generational perspective (Mannheim, 1928). Most of these studies hypothesize that sharing the same birth years and formative experiences can create common generational character traits within age groups and tensions between them. For example, "the Silent Generation" (born 1925-1945) purportedly prefer hierarchy and rules; "Baby Boomers" (1946-1964) are idealistic and driven; "Generation X-ers" (1965-1980) are pragmatic and entrepreneurial; and "Millennials" (1981-2000) are social and techno-savvy (Dries *et al.*, 2008).

Several recent studies warn that age diversity can pose HRM problems and contend that organizations that fail to proactively address potential issues may invite intergenerational conflict (Dencker *et al.*, 2007; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Hertel *et al.*, 2013). Yet, in contrast, other studies claim that concerns about managing a widening generation gap have been exaggerated and evidence of intergenerational conflict may be more myth than reality (Giancola, 2006; Wong *et al.*, 2008). For instance, the generational approach erroneously assumes that all individuals regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, experienced the same early life events in the same formative way and struggles to account for generational outliers such as Baby Boomers who like social media or Millennials who do not. Finally, there is ample evidence that even if age cohorts have identifiable characteristics, these differences are unlikely to fuel workplace intergenerational conflict without provocation.

In sum, sociological research examining age cohorts from a generational perspective lacks the nuance today's complex workplaces require to explain employee attitudes and behaviors and overshadows the impact of macro-level influences such as the mandatory retirement regulations investigated in this study. Therefore, there is a need to identify new ways to evaluate the impact of age-related policy changes on organizational dynamics and the intergenerational conflicts these changes might trigger.

4. Methods

Field material was collected over eleven months between September 2010 and July 2011 as part of a larger study of aviation safety in the post-9/11 period. In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted with US captains and copilots with a wide variety of experience at several different airlines. A high percentage had experience flying for one of America's largest airlines before industry wide restructuring and employee layoffs occurred after 9/11. Informants ranged in age from 32 to 63 years old, were predominately male (96 percent) and averaged 23 years of total aviation experience with 13.5 years flying at major commercial air

carriers and an average of 10,271 flight hours. In sum, they were all established professionals with significant aviation experience and years invested in their airline career.

Overtime, a subgroup of 26 pilots (60 percent) emerged who spontaneously commented on the 2007 policy change and/or referenced intergenerational dynamics during their interview. Of this group, seven (27 percent) were captains and 19 (73 percent) were copilots before 9/11 however, at the time of the interview in 2010-2011, three captains had been demoted to co-pilot, and all 19 copilots were laid-off: seven left their airline for another flying job; three left the airline industry entirely for a non-flying job; and nine were unemployed awaiting recall to work at their airline.

From this data set, two informant subgroups emerged: senior captains averaging 59 years of age; and junior pilots averaging 43.5 years of age. Junior pilots had either experienced demotion from captain to co-pilot or at least one airline lay-off in the post-9/11 period. In the following discussion, these pilots are identified as either a “senior pilot” or “junior pilot” and referred to by their pseudonym (see Table I).

4.1 Data analysis – a grounded theory method

Interviews were mainly non-directive, and ranged from 41 minutes to two hours and three minutes. As a former commercial airline pilot myself, I was able to engage with pilots as a peer,

Pseudonym	Year hired	Work role at time of interview
<i>Senior Captains, Hired 1970-1980s</i>		
1. Ralph	1986	Remained Captain
2. Jasper	1989	Remained Captain
3. Gilles	1978	Remained Captain
4. Nathan	1985	Remained Captain
<i>Junior Captains, Hired 1990s</i>		
5. Andrew	1996	Capt bumped back to co-pilot
6. Raul	1996	Capt bumped back to co-pilot
7. Henry	1997	Left US to Capt at Asian Airline
<i>Laid-Off Co-Pilots who Left Airline for Another Flying Job</i>		
8. Kevin	1997	Military Reserve Pilot
9. Dan	1999	Military Reserve Pilot
10. Oscar	1999	Charter Pilot
11. Graham	2000	Charter Pilot
12. Karen	2000	Co-pilot at other US Airline
13. Charles	2000	Co-pilot at Asian Airline
14. Josh	1998	Charter Pilot
<i>Laid-Off Co-Pilots who Left Airline for Non-Flying Job</i>		
15. Raj	2000	Defense Industry
16. Aaron	2000	Defense Industry
17. Thorpe	2000	Sales
<i>Laid-Off Co-Pilots waiting for Airline Recall</i>		
18. Jose	1999	Unemployed
19. Doug	2000	Unemployed
20. Tom	2000	Unemployed
21. Christopher	2000	Unemployed
22. Greg	2000	Unemployed
23. Tom	2000	Unemployed
24. Aaron	2000	Unemployed
25. Christopher	2000	Unemployed
26. Anthony	2000	Unemployed

Table I.
Airline pilot
informants

eliciting responses of an honesty and depth that might have been difficult for another researcher. As a result, informants were particularly forthcoming and detailed in their responses. Although an interview guide was used (see Appendix), respondents co-determined the direction and flow of the conversation. Pilot interviews were initially intended to contribute to a book investigating airline safety, therefore questions predominantly focused on operational issues. The nature and extent of the oedipal conflict only emerged over time, and quite spontaneously, as informants volunteered other information outside the scope of the initial questioning. These responses typically emerged in reply to questions about informants' "confidence in industry decision makers" such as airline managers, union leaders, and government regulators as well as the question "What are the biggest challenges facing the future of commercial aviation – what worries you most?"

Following Stewart and Lucio's (2011, p. 328) suggestion, I sought "active and conscious worker voices" and analyzed their narratives in order to "highlight patterns of collective expressions of what work does to people, their various struggles to make sense of this together with their practical struggles against it." I began to see what Gioia *et al.* (2012, p. 16) described as emerging "social construction processes" which required me to "focus more on the means by which organization members go about constructing and understanding their experience and less on the number and frequency of measurable occurrences." Through this lens the Oedipus complex first became salient. To ensure qualitative rigor, I adopted Gioia *et al.*'s (2012, p. 18) data structure process which demonstrates the dynamic relations among first order concepts using informant-centric terms and second order codes using researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions. Through this process an inductive model emerged that captured informants' experiences in theoretical terms leading to adoption of the Oedipal framework (see Figure 1). The following section explores how anxiety about these changes, uncertainty about the future, and competition over scarce resources between these age cohorts manifested.

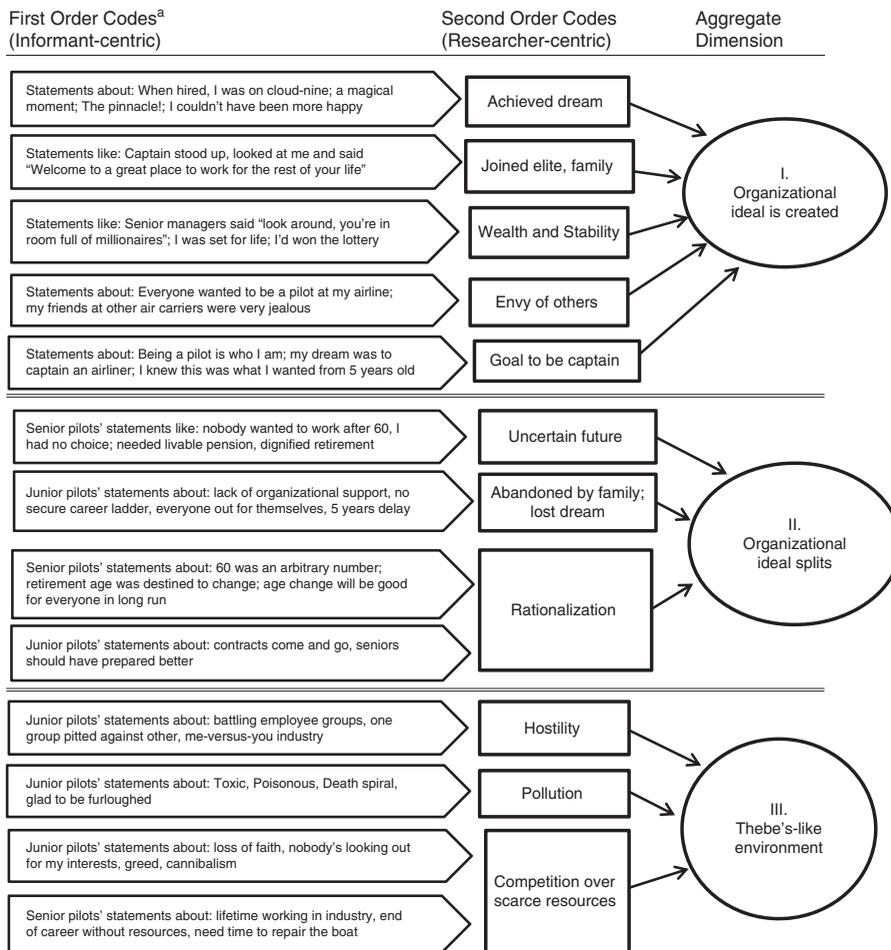
5. Findings

5.1 *The organization ideal is created*

The image of the airline as a familial organization ideal in which senior pilots protected and guided juniors in a fatherly way while mother-airline provided a supportive, nurturing environment in a resolved Oedipus complex was fostered early in the development of the psyche of most commercial pilots. Almost all pilots interviewed related childhood aspirations to fly. For several pilots, both men and women, this included literally walking in their father's footsteps, following him into the piloting profession. To accomplish this goal, like British paratroopers in Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) study, most pilots aspired from a young age to join the ranks of a major airline. For example, Christopher emphasized "Being a [major airline] pilot is who I am; this is who I've always wanted to be." These dreams were not limited to male pilots. Karen, who grew up in an aviation family, recalled she wanted to fly "from the time I was 5 years old." The dream of not only working for a major airline but also becoming an airline captain held an almost mystical allure in pilots' collective psyche, as Anthony demonstrated: "My dream was to [...] Captain at [my] airline." Similarly, Charles recalled, "I thought that I was going to be set for life. Good retirement, good benefits, good opportunities to fly nice equipment [and make captain]. Everything just seemed like I'd "won the lottery"[...] I couldn't have been more happy."

When first hired, senior pilots and flight managers acculturated new pilots, creating a "society of normalization" (Foucault and Gordon, 1980, p. 107) sustained through company rituals, parties, stories, congratulatory speeches, slogans, metaphors, and jokes, all reinforcing an image of stability, success, and material rewards. Thorpe described his first day:

We walked into a dinner and a captain stood up and looked at me – looked at all of us actually. And said, "Welcome to the last uniform that you'll ever wear. Welcome to a great place to work for the rest of your life". And I'll never forget what that felt like [...] I said "This is it!" [...] I was as excited as I have probably ever been in my life.



Note: ^aAll data derived from semi-structured interviews

Figure 1.
Overview of data structure

Similar to other workplace studies (Casey, 1999; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), discursive strategies promised newly hired pilots that they had joined an elite group, in one sense a healthy, thriving family. When talking about how their airlines “manufactured” them, pilots provided insights about how the work environment produced and amplified the idealized identities to which they aspired. Through this acculturation process, they found a sense of personal fulfillment, harmonious social interactions, job stability, and financial benefit, enhancing their sense of identity. The Oedipus complex seemed resolved.

5.2 The split of organization ideals

After adoption of the 2007 retirement age change policy, competing organization ideals emerged between senior and junior pilots creating an “ethos of survivalism” (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1143).

Senior pilots. Airline bankruptcies, pension plan default, downsizing, layoffs, and the threat of merger left senior pilots more interested in their individual survival than protecting

and mentoring junior pilots or partnering with mother-airline. Jasper, a senior captain, explained “nobody wanted [the age change]; nobody planned on it, or wanted to work after age 60.” However, after the airlines bankruptcy and pension plan default, Jasper noted, many senior pilots felt they had no choice but to continue flying:

I was counting on a halfway decent retirement and had [my airline] not gone through bankruptcy and gutted our retirement [...] I would have gotten \$6,000 a month in retirement and now I'll get \$2,200 – one a livable pension, the other not so much.

Forced by circumstances they felt were beyond their control, many senior pilots postponed retirement cognizant of the impact this decision had on junior pilots and organizational dynamics. “There’s a lot of resentment,” Jasper noted, “I see it around me. A lot of people are talking about the “over age 60 guys” who are still flying.”

However, several captains explained the mandatory retirement age was “an arbitrary number,” “destined to change anyway,” and junior pilots would understand the “complexity” of the issue better when they reached retirement age themselves. Captain Nathan described his feelings about the regulatory change:

I went down to Congress several times to lobby as a proponent for the [age] change [...] I saw my father retire at age 60 mandatorily and he was still a great pilot. There was no reason for him to retire [...] I'm proud to say that I was a part of that [policy change].

Junior pilots. While senior pilots such as Jasper and Nathan benefited from the regulatory age change, for junior pilots the policy was particularly problematic because it either slowed their career progression into the captain seat or prolonged their lay-off “on the street” and out of the cockpit. Junior pilots explained that the retirement of just one senior captain created over a dozen job opportunities for them. For example, when a 747 captain retires, that opening allows a 777 captain to move up to take his 747 seat, a 767 captain to move to the 777, a 737 captain to move to the 767, a 777 co-pilot to now bid 737 captain, and so on down the seniority list until a laid-off co-pilot is recalled to work.

Henry was a captain before post-9/11 downsizing landed him back in the co-pilot seat. Frustrated, he left the USA and now flies as captain for an Asian airline. However, strong feelings remain about the age change:

The guys that are over 60 now – flying until 65 – are guys that for their entire career had been able to take advantage of the people retiring at 60 for their job security and their advancement. And then all of a sudden there’s a 5 year delay for everybody else to advance.

This “five year delay” combined with the years many laid-off pilots spent awaiting recall, put junior pilots behind in their career advancement. They felt captains were being selfish and directly blamed senior pilots for their lack of access to mother-airline. Tom voiced a common complaint, “I am positive I would not have been furloughed had people retired at the planned date.” Similarly, Greg emphasized, the retirement age change “was a bad decision [because] [...] It definitely pitted one group against another.”

As a result, competing narratives emerged. Senior captains flew past age 60 to supplement their pensions and ensure “some sort of dignified retirement.” Meanwhile, junior pilots felt captains were acting “greedy” and should have saved for their own retirement since “contract provisions come and go.” In a sense, this regulatory change pitted one group’s ego ideal against the other in an unwinnable conflict over limited resources – senior captains wanted the chance for a dignified retirement and junior pilots wanted job security and opportunities for advancement. However, what seems overlooked is how managerial decisions, socioeconomic circumstances, and regulatory policy changes created these conditions.

5.3 Resultant toxic environment

As a result of this intergenerational discord, different age cohorts of pilots perceived each other to be contributing to what many respondents described as a “toxic” environment (Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004; Stein, 2007b; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). Using the lens of the oedipal construct, this resultant toxicity seems symbolic of the period of pestilence that came over the kingdom of Thebes after Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. For example, Henry recalled how the US airline industry “became a really unpleasant environment to be in” and Kevin noted that “It has become a ‘me-versus-you’ industry.” Similarly Tom recalled, when “the retirement age was raised to 65, it was just a perfect storm that created something – it was a really bad atmosphere.” And Greg observed “I’ve never worked in such a toxic environment.” Yet, Jason’s comments were perhaps most revealing about junior pilots’ feelings: “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.”

In addition to the loss of their dream job and the challenge of surviving in a toxic environment, junior pilots blamed senior pilots for selling them out or “eating their young,” as Tom described:

I don’t have faith in anybody. Nobody’s looking out for my interests [...] It is all about collective greed and selfishness [...] The one word I would use is cannibalistic – those in charge really want to hold on to what they have, so they can get what they can for themselves and their contemporaries, at the expense of the junior members.

Yet, senior pilots like Captain Ralph emphasized the complexity of the socioeconomic issues with which older workers were forced to grapple:

This industry has gone through a crisis and there are many, many people out there who have spent a lifetime working here. They suddenly found themselves at the end of a career without the resources that they had spent 30 years building. And from that standpoint to allow those folks more time to repair the boat, certainly you have to go along with that.

As a result, it seems that senior pilots prioritized the need to repair their boat to make a getaway from Thebes-like discord. Meanwhile, junior pilots felt adrift in a toxic “me-versus-you” environment that had abandoned all sense of the healthy familial community they once experienced. An environment many felt relieved to be rid of.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how organizational psychodynamics changed within the US aviation industry after government regulations modified commercial airline pilots’ mandatory retirement age from 60 to 65 years old. Findings support that both senior captains and junior copilots reported retirement age changes created an antagonistic environment, pitting employees against each other in competition over scarce airline resources made particularly acute by the intense post-9/11 industry restructuring period.

Analysis revealed several common features in pilots’ collective narrative about their aviation careers. Before the age-related policy change in 2007, pilots believed that they had achieved a dream through employment at their airline and they were “set for life” in terms of their financial future, professional stability, career advancement, and job security. They unanimously reported expecting to make captain, enjoy a good quality of life, and collect a reasonable retirement. Thus the “good” world of the airline pilot included an organization ideal in which senior pilots took up a fatherly role protecting and mentoring junior pilots, mother-airline offered support and opportunity for growth, and junior pilots aspired to be like senior pilots, one day making captain too.

After the regulatory age change, the anticipated advancement opportunities, material rewards, job security and reasonable retirement that pilots – both junior and senior – expected

proved unrealistic. As a result of the loss of this organizational ideal and an increase in anxiety which this realization generated, a split emerged between senior and junior pilots' as they struggled to cope with their particular vulnerabilities. For senior pilots, this struggle included uncomfortable feelings about impending retirement causing them to prioritize their individual desires and fiscal needs. It was as if captains wanted to claim fatherly privileges without the accompanying familial obligations. Meanwhile, junior pilots struggled to cope with their own vulnerabilities, in part, a result of the changing psychodynamics of this oedipal triad. In their new image of a "good" world, junior pilots, who felt abandoned and betrayed, refused oedipal subordination to father-captains and instead wanted to expel senior pilots as a threat to job security and an obstacle to career advancement. In this phantasy, father-captain is not required because the son-co-pilot could ably service all mother-airlines' needs; an oedipal relationship to which junior pilots felt entitled.

Although junior pilots' collective narratives revealed that most had aspired to become captains from a very young age, what changed in their organization ideal was how they envisioned achieving this aspiration. Before the age change policy, junior pilots accepted oedipal subordination, envisioning they would become captains through mentoring by senior pilots and advancement up the airlines' hierarchy. In their revised organization ideal, junior pilots now felt that they must eliminate father-captain who stands in the way of their aspirations in order to "become" him – not become "like" him – taking his place with mother-airline. By rejecting the father who rejected them, junior pilots' phantasized, they could reunite with mother-airline feeling valued, supported, and important, just like when they were first hired.

Bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study provides several insights. First, most organizational studies of aging hypothesize that there is a ubiquitous preference for youth. Yet, this discourse is often based on assumptions about age stereotypes that may be more myth than reality. Second, findings of this study reveal that it was younger lower paid employees, not older higher paid workers, who became the victims of workplace ageism. Until ageism is perceived like sexual harassment or racial discrimination – that is, potentially impacting all workers – intergenerational conflicts such as those reported here will continue to emerge, particularly in restructuring industries where opportunities are limited.

Third, without a more nuanced approach to examining intergenerational dynamics, such as the psychoanalytic construct applied here, the roots of workplace conflicts may not be surfaced. Through application of the Oedipus complex in this study, it becomes apparent that the reported intergenerational conflict was not a matter of fate, as Sophocles infers in *Oedipus Rex*. But rather, workplace conflicts resulted from a confluence of factors that could have been managed with greater sensitivity. For instance the date the regulatory change took effect, which extended senior employees tenure by five years while thousands of junior employees were out of work, could have been phased in with more awareness of the potential repercussions.

In sum, this study demonstrates that as the generational divide widens in our aging workforce there is a need for scholars to identify new, more nuanced ways to evaluate the impact of macro-level influences on organizational dynamics, such as mandatory retirement policies, and analyze the intergenerational conflicts these changes might trigger. If more attention had been paid to the managerial process by which the age change policy was implemented, what appears to be an unavoidable and even fatalistic intergenerational conflict between age groups might not have emerged in this manner at all.

References

- Bott Spillius, E. (2001), "Freud and Klein on the concept of phantasy", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 82 No. 2, pp. 361-373.
- Brown, A.D. (2005), "Making sense of the collapse of Barings Bank", *Human Relations*, Vol. 58 No. 12, p. 1579.
- Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2011), available at: www.rita.dot.gov/bts/data_and_statistics/index.html

- Buyens, D., Hans Van, D., Dewilde, T. and De Vos, A. (2009), "The aging workforce: perceptions of career ending", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 102-117.
- Carr, A. (2002), "Managing in a psychoanalytically informed manner", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 343-347.
- Casey, C. (1999), "'Come, join our family': discipline and integration in corporate organizational culture", *Human Relations*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 155-178.
- de Swarte, T. (1998), "Psychoanalysis and management: the strange meeting of two concepts", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 13 No. 7, pp. 459-468.
- Dencker, J.C., Joshi, A. and Martocchio, J.J. (2007), "Employee benefits as context for intergenerational conflict", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 208-220.
- Desmond, J. (2013), "Organization of dreams: the dream of organization – dreaming organization", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 654-669.
- Doherty, N., Bank, J. and Vinnicombe, S. (1996), "Managing survivors the experience of survivors in British telecom and the British financial services sector", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 11 No. 7, p. 51.
- Dries, N., Pepermans, R. and De Kerpel, E. (2008), "Exploring four generations' beliefs about career: Is 'satisfied' the new 'successful'?", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 907-928.
- Driver, M. (2002), "The learning organization: foucauldian gloom or utopian sunshine?", *Human Relations*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 33-53.
- Feldman, S.P. (2004), "The culture of objectivity: quantification, uncertainty, and the evaluation of risk at NASA", *Human Relations*, Vol. 57 No. 6, pp. 691-718.
- Fleming, P. and Spicer, A. (2003), "Working at a cynical distance: implications for power, subjectivity and resistance", *Organization*, Vol. 10, pp. 157-179.
- Fotaki, M., Long, S. and Schwartz, H.S. (2012), "What can psychoanalysis offer organization studies today? Taking stock of current developments and thinking about future directions", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 9, pp. 1105-1120.
- Foucault, M. and Gordon, C. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Harvester Press, Brighton, pp. 1972-1977.
- Fraher, A.L. (2004), *A History of Group Study and Psychodynamic Organizations*, Free Association Books, London.
- Fraher, A.L. (2011), *Thinking Through Crisis: Improving Teamwork and Leadership in High-Risk Fields*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.
- Fraher, A.L. (2012), "When profit-seeking trumps safety: the risks and opportunities of liminality in commercial aviation in post-9/11 America", in Long, S. and Sievers, B. (Eds), *Towards a Socioanalysis of Money, Finance and Capitalism: Beneath the Surface of the Financial Industry*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 192-206.
- Fraher, A.L. (2014), *The Next Crash: How Short-Term Profit Seeking Trumps Airline Safety*, Cornell University Press, New York, NY.
- Fraher, A.L. (2016), "A toxic triangle of destructive leadership at Bristol royal infirmary: a study of organizational Munchausen syndrome by proxy", *Leadership*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 34-52.
- Freud, S. (1955), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Hogarth Press, London.
- Freud, S. (1957), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Hogarth Press, London.
- Freud, S. (1963), *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Books, London.
- Gabriel, Y. (1998), "Psychoanalytic contributions to the study of the emotional life of organizations", *Administration & Society*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 291-314.
- Gabriel, Y. (1999), "Beyond happy families: a critical reevaluation of the control-resistance-identity triangle", *Human Relations*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 179-203.
- Gabriel, Y. (2012), "Organizations in a state of darkness: towards a theory of organizational Miasma", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 9, pp. 1137-1152.

- Gabriel, Y. and Carr, A. (2002), "Organizations, management and psychoanalysis: an overview", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 348-365.
- Giancola, F. (2006), "The generation gap: more myth than reality", *HR. Human Resource Planning*, Vol. 29 No. 4, p. 32.
- Gioia, D.A., Corley, K.G. and Hamilton, A.L. (2012), "Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: notes on the Gioia methodology", *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 15-31.
- Guinchard, R. (1998), "Absenteeism and phantasy", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 13 No. 7, pp. 485-497.
- Guo, C. and Jacobbe-Miller, J.K. (2012), "Understanding survivors' reactions to downsizing in China", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 27-47.
- Hertel, G., Béatrice, I.J.M.v.d.H., de Lange, A.H. and Deller, J. (2013), "Facilitating age diversity in organizations – part I: challenging popular misbeliefs", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 28 Nos 7/8, pp. 729-740.
- Isaacs, S. (1952), "The nature and function of phantasy", in King, P. and Steiner, R. (Eds), *The Freud/Klein Controversies, 1941-1945*, Routledge, London, pp. 264-321.
- Klein, M. (1975), *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works*, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 1921-1945.
- Kunda, G. (1992), *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Lancaster, L.C. and Stillman, D. (2002), *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work*, Harper Business, New York, NY.
- Long, S. (2008), *The Perverse Organisation and Its Deadly Sins*, Karnac Books, London.
- Maitlis, S. and Ozcelik, H. (2004), "Toxic decision processes: a study of emotion and organizational decision making", *Organization Science*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 375-393.
- Mannheim, K. (1928), "The problem of generations", in Mannheim, K. (Ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, pp. 276-322.
- Mishra, A.K. and Spreitzer, G.M. (1998), "Explaining how survivors respond to downsizing: the roles of trust, empowerment, justice, and work redesign", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 567-587.
- OECD (2006), *Live Longer, Work Longer*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Ogbonna, E. and Wilkinson, B. (1990), "Corporate strategy and corporate culture: the view from the checkout", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 19, pp. 9-15.
- Paul, J., Strbiak, C.A. and Landrum, N.E. (2002), "Psychoanalytic diagnosis of top management team dysfunction", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 381-393.
- Posthuma, R.A. and Campion, M.A. (2009), "Age stereotypes in the workplace: common stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 158-188.
- Rose, S.H. (2007), "Complications in gay men's intimacy: unconscious derivatives", *Psychoanalytic Social Work*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 65-88.
- Rupp, D.E., Vodanovich, S.J. and Credé, M. (2006), "Age bias in the workplace: the impact of ageism and causal attributions", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 1337-1364.
- Sadri, G. (1996), "Reflections the impact of downsizing on survivors – some findings and recommendations", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 56-59.
- Schwartz, H.S. (1987), "On the psychodynamics of organizational disaster: the case of the space shuttle challenger", *Columbia Journal of World Business*.
- Schwartz, H.S. (1990), *Narcissistic Process and Corporate Decay: The Theory of the Organization Ideal*, New York University Press, New York, NY.
- Schwartz, H.S. (2002), "Political correctness and organizational nihilism", *Human Relations*, Vol. 55 No. 11, pp. 1275-1294.

- Schwartz, H.S. and Hirschhorn, L. (2009), "Organization and meaning: a multilevel pschoanalytic treatment of the Jayson Blair scandal at *The New York Times*", *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 441-474.
- Stein, M. (2007a), "Oedipus Rex at Enron: leadership, oedipal struggles, and organizational collapse", *Human Relations*, Vol. 60 No. 9, p. 1387.
- Stein, M. (2007b), "Toxicity and the unconscious experience of the body at the employee-customer interface", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 28 No. 8, p. 1223.
- Stein, M. (2013), "When does narcissistic leadership become problematic? Dick Fuld at Lehman Brothers", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 22 No. 3, p. 282.
- Stewart, P. and Lucio, M.M. (2011), "Collective narratives and politics in the contemporary study of work", *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 327-341.
- Sturdy, A. (1998), "Customer care in a consumer society: smiling and sometimes meaning it?", *Organization*, Vol. 5, pp. 27-53.
- Taylor, P., Brooke, L., McLoughlin, C. and Tia Di, B. (2010), "Older workers and organizational change: corporate memory versus potentiality", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 374-386.
- The Economist* (2006), "How to manage an ageing workforce", *The Economist*, February 18.
- Thornborrow, T. and Brown, A.D. (2009), "'Being regimented': aspiration, discipline and identity work in the British parachute regiment", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 355-376.
- United Nations (2007), *World Economic and Social Survey 2007: Development in an Aging World*, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, New York, NY.
- van Dalen, H.P., Henkens, K., Henderikse, W. and Schippers, J. (2010), "Do European employers support later retirement?", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 360-373.
- Wong, M., Gardiner, E., Lang, W. and Coulon, L. (2008), "Generational differences in personality and motivation: do they exist and what are the implications for the workplace?", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 878-890.

Appendix. Airline pilot interview guide

- (1) Can you please describe a timeline of your airline career – date hired at your airline, furloughed, recalled, etc.
 - (a) If on furlough, will you go back when recalled?
- (2) Can you describe how, in your experience, work conditions have changed at your airline since September 11th 2001 (9/11)
- (3) How has this affected your job performance and the work of others?
- (4) While flying at your airline, did you witness increased stress on the pilot workforce due to company cost cutting measures?
 - (a) If so, can you provide some examples?
- (5) While flying at your airline, did you witness questionable safety practices due to company cost cutting measures?
 - (a) If so, can you provide some examples?
- (6) Do you feel that airlines are less safe now than they were before 9/11?
 - (a) Can you provide some examples?
- (7) Do you feel that airline mergers impact safety?
 - (a) Can you provide some examples?

-
- (8) Airline executives would like the public to believe that 9/11 caused the latest industry downturn, requiring the drastic cost-cutting measures that ensued. Do you think that's true or were there other causes?
 - (9) Do you have confidence in the decision makers leading your airline – why/why not?
 - (10) Do you have confidence in the aviation industry regulators to monitor safety – why/why not?
 - (11) What are the biggest challenges facing the future of commercial aviation – what worries you most?

About the author

Dr Amy L. Fraher is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behavior at the Department of Organisation, Work and Employment at the Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK. A retired US Navy Commander and Naval Aviator, and former United Airlines pilot, she has over 6,000 mishap-free flight hours in four jet airliners, five military aircraft, and several types of civilian airplanes. She has held academic appointments at the University of California Davis and the University of San Francisco, USA, Warwick Business School, Bristol Business School, Norwich Business School, and Leicester School of Management, UK, and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. She has published widely including *The Next Crash: How Short-Term Profit-Seeking Trumps Safety in Commercial Aviation* (2014), *Thinking Through Crisis: Improving Teamwork and Leadership in High Risk Fields* (2011), *Group Dynamics for High-Risk Teams* (2005), *A History of Group Study and Psychodynamic Organizations* (2004), and in journals such as *Journal of Management Studies*, *Human Relations*, *History of Psychology*, *Organisational & Social Dynamics*, *Socio-Analysis*, and *Team Performance Management*. Dr Amy L. Fraher can be contacted at: a.l.fraher@bham.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com