Hiring Quotas and Traditional Stereotypes: Forces Shaping Aviation Recruitment

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This paper is an opinion piece on emotional reactions in the media last summer as a response to a United Airlines announcement of their gender and minority diversity and inclusion program for pilot training in the United States.

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The topic of equal opportunity hiring and diversity quotas in airline pilot recruitment has recently stirred venomous responses on social media and from provocateur hosts on television and podcasts. United Airlines announced an equity initiative to train and hire half of its airline pilot intake from minority groups, such as females and indigenous peoples (United Airlines, 2021). The reactions from some existing pilots and others in the aviation community were swift, exposing somewhat negative attitudes, and in some cases, even blatant misogyny. These visceral responses to the United Airlines announcement highlight significant factors. The instant perception and genuine fear that equity quotas correlate to lower standards for the safety-critical role of an airline pilot, and further, the powerful challenge to the long-held traditional belief and socio-cultural norm associated with the idealistic white male stereotype aviator.

Although ever-present, to see these bias factors emerge in social and entertainment media highlight the human reactions and perceptions that have suppressed female and minority pilots for over 100 years of aviation. History has given us only glimpses of female pilot heroes during the second world war and even fewer ethnic minority pilots such as the Tuskegee Airmen. Studies have shown that female, and minority pilots face significantly more challenges than those of the traditional stereotype white male heroic aviator (Crouse et al., 2021; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Kristovics et al., 2006; Lamb & Winter, 2021; Rabir et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2006; Schulker et al., 2018). I*s this because evidence indicates that white male pilots are just better?* Indeed not, studies suggest that while there are subtle differences between how males and females learn to fly and manage an aircraft, overall female pilots tend to take fewer risks more willing to avoid potentially dangerous situations (McFadden, 1996; Mitchell et al., 2006; Neal-Smith, 2014; Vermueulen & Mitchell, 2007). However, the frightening reality is that human perceptions are strongly influenced by traditional beliefs, cultural norms, and social identity, including stereotypes; they are also shaped by emotional reactions, including fear and disgust when social and cultural norms are violated (Ajzen, 1996; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Crouse et al., 2021; Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008). Further, these perceptions are often a distorted view of reality, inaccurately guiding the individual's thoughts, words, and ultimate behaviors.

The presence of purposeful misogyny in the aviation industry has always existed perpetually supported by the image of rugged masculinity, the heroic and handsome white male aviator as the ultimate stereotype (Ashkanasy & Falkus, 2007; Chhokar et al., 2007; Gibbon, 2016; Morrison & Conaway, 2012; Puckett & Haynes, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2016). In my more than 20 years as a commercial pilot, I often found myself wishing I looked like Tom Cruise from *'TOP GUN'* rather than Reese Witherspoon from *'Legally Blonde'* so I would have some reprieve from the disparate treatment and be treated as equal as my male colleagues.

Despite the best intentions of airlines to have their flight decks reflect the diversity of the traveling public, studies have shown that most passengers have more trust in and greater willingness to fly with the pilots who resemble this white male stereotype (Crouse et al., 2021; Ragbir et al., 2021; Rice, 2015; Winter et al., 2014). Passenger perceptions often assign a higher ability and competence to pilots who look like the ideal stereotype. When passengers see a pilot who does not look ideal, this can cause emotional responses such as fear and disgust. Fear is an

entirely reasonable emotion that passengers experience when they perceive that aviation safety will be at risk if any other pilot is in control of their or their family's safety (Ragbir et al., 2021; Rice, 2015; Winter et al., 2014). This fear and disgust were quickly capitalized upon and amplified by television media hosts keen to take advantage to grandstand themselves without the care or courage to recognize these are the very triggering factors of discrimination and inequality in the first place.

The real danger to aviation safety lurks within these human perceptions formed by not just passengers but other pilots, aviation staff, and decision-makers. It is a natural human condition that we make assumptions, including those relating to skill, competence, and qualifications based on outward appearances, especially if they conform to an ideal stereotype (Ajzen, 1996; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). To this end, the stereotypical white male pilot is often credited with higher levels of competency and ability at face value and given a '*right of passage*' even before they prove otherwise (Gibbon, 2006; Lamb & Winter, 2021; Schulker et al., 2018). Aviation accident reports are abundant with the stereotypical white male pilots whose competency, capability, and experience were not as closely scrutinized as a non-stereotypical pilot, only to be discovered post-accident investigation of significant deficiencies in qualifications, knowledge, skills, attributes, or past performance.

Conversely, those who do not resemble the ideal stereotype are more likely to be judged as inferior, face greater scrutiny, are overlooked for opportunities, and in some cases, face discrimination and harassment (Gibbon, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2006). These minority pilots have often had to work harder (Gibbon, 2016: Lamb & Winter, 2021) and need higher levels of skill and resilience to prove themselves worthy to their peers and superiors consistently. Ironically the peers and superiors within aviation and, in particular, aviation management are predominately close to the ideal stereotype of white males (Lamb & Winter, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2006; Puckett & Hynes, 2011; Rabir et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2014).

For the airlines moving forward to increase diversity on the flight deck, the language and messaging for these initiatives needs to be carefully designed. When the messaging implies targets or quotas to hire minorities, the enterprises may ignite the fears and disgust that cause the inequality in the first place. Further resentment arises from perceptions that a diversity hire means someone else has missed out, directly impacting safe team performance on the flight deck. Experiencing underlying bias personally, first hand, can be confronting. For example, while in the flight deck waiting for our clearance on the first of four flight sectors, the Captain scowled, "…*do you know how many young men would kill to be in your seat right now?"* the tone and implication of his voice set the scene for a very uncomfortable flight deck. Later I was to learn that his son had not been selected for the airline pilot intake. This finding offered some explanation of his resentment. Therefore, like me, many female pilots cringe at the language surrounding diversity targets, or diversity "quota's" which may imply that the female or other minority was only hired to make up numbers rather than merit.

Diversity in safety-critical teams such as those in the operating theater or the flight deck has increased safety performance, improved crew coordination, and resulted in higher resilience and operational elasticity to achieve safer outcomes (Helmreich & Merritt, 2019; Hollnagel et al., 2006). However, building and establishing a diverse culture also takes time and a constant commitment and effort from all stakeholders, including the passengers (Gibbon, 2006;

Helmreich & Merritt, 2019; Lamb & Winter, 2021). In addition, diversity benefits increased operating efficiency, higher retention rates, and more engaged and proactive safety culture (Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008; Helmreich & Merritt, 2019; Hollnagel et al., 2006).

The highest levels of safety performance are achieved by hiring, regardless of gender or ethnicity, the most dedicated, competent, and professional pilots by their merit and placing them within a flight deck team who work efficiently and effectively together during routine operations and emergencies. In addition, consistent training and monitoring supported through a resilient and proactive safety culture is the lifeblood of human safety performance. A recent qualitative ethnographic study by Lamb and Winter (2021) examined the internal and external challenges of gender bias within the aviation industry; six emergent themes were identified as consistent sources of gender inequality among pilots. These six themes include; negative attitudes towards female pilots, negative behavior towards female pilots, purposeful misogyny, general perception, traditional beliefs, and belief male pilots are better than female pilots.

Considering these challenges, Lamb and Winter (2021) proposed a strategic roadmap that expanded on some of the approaches from the successful implementation of reform tactics used by the Australian Defense Force (ADF) originally outlined by Gibbon (2016). Gibbon (2016) pointed to the necessity to focus on long-term and consistent general reform strategies. These strategies fall under the broad categories of the following; Increasing Accountability for executives and all workers, Positive Programs such as mentoring and outreach, and the use of Positive Language relating to gender inclusion in all communications. The Australian Defense Force implemented the suggestions put forward in the Gibbon (2016) study, and these resulted in demonstrably positive outcomes that gained the attention of the military and the airlines.

The roadmap presented by Lamb and Winter (2021) includes eight targeted strategies to combat each of the six significant challenges towards gender diversity in the flight deck. These strategies include Mentoring and Buddy Programs (MBP), Equality Awareness Training (EAT), Leave Gender IN initiatives (LGIN) (Gibbon, 2016), Achievement Awards (AA), Technical Merit Commendations (TMC), Critical Mass Representation (CMR), Female Hero Promotion (FHP), and Anti-Misogyny Workshops (AMW) (Lamb & Winter, 2021). These strategies provide a balance between educating about the dangers of stereotyping and introducing hiring quotas that, despite best intentions, ignite fear and resentment. Diversity in the flight deck supports safety; however, it also requires a long-term and consistent commitment to high levels of excellence in individual pilot and aviation team safety performance.

Many airlines are embracing some of these strategies to varying degrees and commitment. For example, EasyJet's 'Amy Johnson Initiative' has a vital purpose of encouraging more females to train as pilots. EasyJet launched this program in October 2015 to directly challenge the industry-wide aviation stereotype, hoping to double the number of female pilots and setting an ambitious target of 20% by 2020 (Easyjet, 2021). According to the FAA, as of December 31, 2020, only 4.7 percent of airline transport pilot certificates are held by females, 7 percent have commercial pilot certificates, and the total percent of females who carry a pilot certificate is 8.4 (FAA, 2020).

Airlines, including Southwest Airlines, have pledged a commitment to diversity and inclusion, offering their policy statement through the lens of dedication to "The Golden Rule – to behave respectfully and to work in ways that reflect and embrace how people want to be treated." Similarly, the American Airlines policy states that inclusion and diversity are welcomed and valued. The airline is a place where people of all generations, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, gender identity, disabilities, religious affiliations, and backgrounds feel welcome and valued. (American Airlines, 2021) The National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) also promotes their commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) "When each individual feels empowered to be their authentic self, we broaden the horizons of where business aviation can go." The Federal Aviation Administration recognizes that "As our NextGen technology and systems continue to evolve to meet the aviation challenges of tomorrow, so must our workforce" (FAA, 2021, p. 1).

The airlines are moving forward to support diversity and inclusion for the future and safety of our aviation industry. They are providing opportunities to attract the best pilots and crew without lowering standards or compromising on quality and safety – no one should have a rite of passage or be given an easier path to sit in the flight deck. It is a privilege that must be earned after consistent, proven performance, be rightly qualified, experienced, fit for duty, and dedicated to an efficient team environment for the safety of their passengers and crew. Therefore, if there ever were a call to action for the airlines to lead with power on this issue, it would be to carefully consider the language used for their diversity and inclusion programs, particularly for flight crew hiring. Messaging and language that will support positive passenger perceptions that regardless of "gender or ethnicity, we hire the best of the best." This positive and customer-sensitive messaging moves beyond misplaced faith in the stereotype of a bygone era and into a bright and safe future aviation industry.

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