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The Effects of
Short-Term Repeated Work-Related Separations
on Pilots, Cabin Crew, and Their Partners

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
at Massey University

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Abstract

Separations from a spouse or intimate partner due to work are becoming increasingly common in industrialised societies. Previous research has focused on military and long-term work-related separations, mainly examining the reactions of the partners at home. The partners at home have been almost exclusively female and have been in heterosexual relationships. In addition to the gender bias and the focus on the partners at home, there are other limitations to the findings of previous studies. These limitations include the absence of stated hypotheses or theories and the lack of a control group. Results from previous studies on both long-term and short-term work-related separations indicate that the separations have negative effects on both the individuals' health and on their marriages or intimate relationships. The present research examined in the aviation industry the relationship between short-term work-related separations and aspects of physical and mental health. The primary aims of the present study included studying female and male travelling partners (international crew) and partners at home (partners of international crew) who were in heterosexual and same-gender relationships. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilised, together with a control group of national flight crew and their partners who were not considered to be separated due to their work. The present research consisted of three studies; interviews of international crew which were qualitatively examined (Part 1); and two studies (the crew study and the partner study) using a survey which collected both quantitative and qualitative data (Part 2). In the first part of the research, most international crew reported that work-related separations had some adverse effects on themselves individually and on their relationships. In particular, all crew reported that loneliness was a key factor which they attributed to the separations. From this finding of the widespread reporting of loneliness, a model of the moderating process of loneliness on the relationship between separation and physical and mental health was proposed. This theory was tested in the second part of the research using hierarchical multiple regressions. However, results from the second part of the research failed to support the proposed moderating role of loneliness for either crew or their partners. Although no interaction effect was discovered, loneliness was a significant predictor of all six physical and mental health outcome variables for crew, and three of the outcome variables for partners. In addition, loneliness was claimed to be the most difficult
problem of the work-related separations for both international crew and their partners in the qualitative section of the surveys. By comparing results from international crew and international partners with the control groups of national crew and national partners, the present study concluded that claims of the effects of repeated short-term work-related separations have been exaggerated. There were few differences between those who were separated and those who were not, in terms of aspects of physical and mental health. Those crew who were separated reported higher levels of psychological distress and higher levels of physical health symptoms than crew who were not separated. Partners who were separated were more likely to report lower levels of job satisfaction than partners who were not separated. When crew and partners were compared, international crew reported higher levels of psychological distress, physical health symptoms, and lower levels of job satisfaction than international partners. In addition, international crew reported higher levels of self-rated health. However, these differences could have been a result of the unique working conditions of flight crew, as the analyses comparing national crew with their partners also found similar differences. The findings of the present study were discussed in terms of the implications for further research, including the need to use a control group. Although few differences were found between those who were separated and those who were not, it was acknowledged that some individuals may be more adversely affected by the separations than others. For these individuals, the effects of work-related separations should not be underestimated because of potential health and safety risks. Implications for organisations and individuals for whom work-related separations are part of their employment were discussed including the need to address the issue of loneliness.
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Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. iv

List of Tables .......................................................................................................... viii
List of Appendices .................................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1: Overview of Thesis

1.1 Chapter Overview .............................................................................................. 2
1.2 Work-Related Separation .................................................................................. 2
1.3 The Present Study ............................................................................................. 3
1.4 Outline of Thesis ............................................................................................... 5
1.5 Chapter Summary ............................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Work-Related Separation

2.1 Chapter Overview .............................................................................................. 8
2.2 Work-Related Separation .................................................................................. 8
2.3 Theories ............................................................................................................. 13
2.4 Chapter Summary ............................................................................................... 19

Chapter 3: The Effects of Work-Related Separation

3.1 Chapter Overview .............................................................................................. 21
3.2 The Effects of Work-Related Separation .............................................................. 21
3.3 Health ............................................................................................................... 22
3.4 Other Effects of Work-Related Separation ........................................................... 29
3.5 The Effects of Work-Related Separation on Children ........................................... 33
3.6 The Effects of Work-Related Separation Over Time ............................................ 34
3.7 Differences Between Groups in the Effects of Work-Related Separation ............... 36
3.8 Summary of the Work-Related Separation Literature ............................................ 41
3.9 Chapter Summary ............................................................................................... 42
Chapter 4: Work-Related Separation and the Aviation Industry

4.1 Chapter Overview ........................................... 44
4.2 Work-Related Separation as Part of the Aviation Work Environment 44
4.3 Specific Working Conditions in the Aviation Work Environment Affecting Health 46
4.4 Features of the Aviation Work Environment Affecting Mental Health 53
4.5 Chapter Summary ............................................ 54

Chapter 5: Methodological Overview

5.1 Chapter Overview ............................................ 57
5.2 The Multimethod Approach .................................. 57
5.3 The Multimethod Approach and Triangulation in the Present Research 60
5.4 Chapter Summary ............................................ 61

Chapter 6: Fieldwork and the Development of Hypotheses

6.1 Chapter Overview ............................................ 64
6.2 Purpose ......................................................... 64
6.3 Method ........................................................ 64
6.4 Participants ................................................... 66
6.5 Procedure ...................................................... 68
6.6 Data Analysis .................................................. 71
6.7 Findings ......................................................... 72
6.8 Discussion ...................................................... 82
6.9 Towards the Second Part of the Research ......................... 86
6.10 Chapter Summary ............................................. 96

Chapter 7: Method

7.1 Chapter Overview ............................................ 99
7.2 Samples ......................................................... 99
7.3 Procedure ..................................................... 101
7.4 Questionnaire ................................................ 102
7.5 Chapter Summary ............................................. 106
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Summary of biographical information for Air New Zealand crew</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>((N = 308))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Summary of employment information for Air New Zealand crew</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>((N = 308))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summary of relationship/family information for Air New Zealand crew</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>((N = 308))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inter-correlations between personal, employment, and outcome variables for crew ((N = 308))</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across gender for international crew</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across gender for national</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across relationship type for international crew</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across airline</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across job type for international crew</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across job type for national crew</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on job satisfaction showing standardised regression coefficients (\beta), (R), (R^2), adjusted (R^2) ((adj R^2)), and (R^2) change ((\Delta R^2)) for crew ((N = 274))</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
23 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on job satisfaction showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 146$) .............................................. 171

24 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on life satisfaction showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 200$) .............................................. 172

25 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on dyadic satisfaction showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 200$) .............................................. 173

26 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on psychological distress showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 200$) .............................................. 175

27 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on physical health symptoms showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 200$) .............................................. 176

28 Hierarchical multiple regression of personal characteristics and loneliness on self-rated health showing standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), $R$, $R^2$, adjusted $R^2$ (adj $R^2$), and $R^2$ change ($\Delta R^2$) for partners ($N = 200$) .............................................. 177

29 Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across international crew/partners .............................................. 179

30 Means and standard deviations for personal characteristics, loneliness, satisfaction, psychological distress, and physical health variables across national crew/partners .............................................. 180
List of Appendices

Appendix

A Industrial Relations Issues .......................................................... 233
B Interview Introductory Letter ......................................................... 235
C Interview Information Sheet .......................................................... 236
D Consent Form ................................................................................. 237
E Interview Guide ............................................................................... 238
F Questionnaire Introductory Letter ................................................... 239
G Questionnaire Information Sheet ...................................................... 240
H Complete Crew Questionnaire ......................................................... 241
I Partners' Biographic Questions .......................................................... 255
J Crew Reminder Letter ...................................................................... 257
K Reliability Coefficients ................................................................... 258
Chapter 1
Thesis Overview

Chapter Contents

1.1 Chapter Overview ............................................................... 2
1.2 Work-Related Separation ..................................................... 2
1.3 The Present Study ............................................................. 3
1.4 Outline of Thesis .............................................................. 5
1.5 Chapter Summary ............................................................. 6