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Psychopolitical Dynamics of Air Rage

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Abstract. This article describes two elements of the psychopolitical dynamics of air rage. The first comprises the rise of air rage as a labeling construct. The second comprises aspects of perceived power and social perception that seem to engender behavior labeled as air rage.

Various social behaviors--often involving verbalizing anger or engaging in physical violence or its threat--at airports and on aircraft throughout the world continue to be reported as evidence and examples of a relatively new construct: viz., air rage. However, as mentioned in a previous IBPP article, the need for a new construct is not immediately obvious. After all, anger, violence, and the threat of violence have been observed in transportation contexts for thousands of years involving chariots, boats, trains, automobiles, and bipedal locomotion.

One part of the rationale for a new construct may involve the need to label as a vehicle to at least simulate control over one's external and internal environments. Indeed, there seems to be a satisfaction of phenomenology in naming a phenomenon, as if the name or process of naming possesses some surplus power of description, explanation, causal ascription, and prediction. Another part of the answer may involve arriving at a common term that seems to facilitate the sharing of emotion, cognition, and motivation about some facet of social life. This social sharing about social life often is believed to increase one's sense of power over a phenomenon through the joint evaluation of one's phenomenology--e.g., a belief in the power of numbers and consensus. Yet a third part of the answer may involve the need of those who strive to be experts on some facet of social life. This is because the creation of a new construct ineluctably creates a vacuum that must be filled by construct servicers--including experts waiting in the wings to explain the construct for the rest of us.

Given that the construct has utility for people seeking to adapt to at least some of the many environments within which they must live, one might either ascribe it ontological validity or agree to treat it as an "as if" phenomenon. But a question would still remain--what psychological pathways furnish the route to something that exists or seems to?

From the broadest vantage point, air rage is an expression of a disparity between what one wants to be or have and what one is or has. The size and consequences of the disparity through time and at any moment define one's political power--given that one lives in the context of a social world that harbors infinite need and finite resources to satisfy need. And, of course, one's political power becomes an Issue, not just in matters of airports and aircraft, but in all matters. What makes airports and aircraft special are their limited confines that may intensify both the disparity and the noxious consequences of the disparity--as may the mobility and safety/security vulnerabilities of aircraft. Other intensification factors may include being far from home and being amidst strangers. These last two can induce deindividuation consequences, including the facilitation and disinhibition of antisocial tendencies seemingly foreign to common aspects of the "usual self." (In some cases the usual, antisocial self can become even more antisocial in behavioral output.)

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What can be done about the rise of the relatively new construct of air rage? Probably little, given the mass media's propensity (and that of most of us) to seize upon any anomaly as a "hot story" requiring expert analysis. About the incidence and prevalence of behaviors labeled as air rage? Increasing penalties will work with some groups of people and not with others. Of the latter, some would view increasing penalties as all the more reason to air rage. So would barring alcoholic beverages--even if such beverages form a common accompaniment of air-rage examples. And so would the publicly divulged policy of airline or government personnel on board carrying weapons. (The added dangers of such weapons on board should further discredit this initiative.) Beyond a respectful but firm communication style, the greatest contribution to minimizing air rage may be to impart anger management techniques to airport and aircraft personnel. Another valuable option may be the publicly communicated installment of surveillance apparata at gates and aboard aircraft.

Those excited about the aviation enterprise may have stirrings of deep-seated, primeval urges to slip the bonds of the ordinary, to commune with Nature and God. Unfortunately, there are some people with more noxious stirrings--equally deep-seated and primeval--that come along for the ride. (See Borrillo, D.J. (Summer, 1999). Air rage: Modern-day dogfight. Federal Air Surgeon's Medical Bulletin, http://www.cami.jccbi.gov/aam-400a/FASMB/FAS9902/airrage.htm; Fowlkes, J., Dwyer, D. J., Oser, R. L., & Salas, E. (1998). Event-based approach to training (EBAT). International Journal of Aviation Psychology, 8, 209-221; O'Hare, D., & Lawrence, B. (2000). The shape of aviation psychology: A review of articles published in the first 5 years of The International Journal of Aviation Psychology. International Journal of Aviation Psychology, 10, 1-11; Passenger misconduct effects on aircrews. (April, 2000). Callback: From NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System, 250. http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/callback_Issues/cb_250.htm.; When air rage is all the rage: An airing out. (March 24, 2000). IBPP, 811.) (Keywords: Air Rage.)

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