



## THE INTERFACE BETWEEN WORK AND HEALTH IN THE CRAFT OF TOUR GUIDES

**Kerley dos Santos Alves<sup>1†</sup> — José Newton Garcia Araújo<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of Tourism, Federal University of Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Psychology, PUC Minas Gerais, Professor in undergraduate and graduate courses at PUC Minas - Brazil; member of Centre International de Recherche, Formation et Intervention en Psychosociologia (CIRFIP), France

### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to analyze the relation between work and health in the professional practice of tour guides working in the tourist city of Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais state, Brazil. It is based on literature research covering the professionalization process of this professional category and the relation between work, mental health and illness. Data collection was conducted through free observation of the work environment as well as by means of semi-structured interviews with tour guides. The study concluded that the constant feeling of insecurity to which these professionals are exposed may cause emotional and psychic distress that turns into psychopathology, which in turn is expressed in physical and mental fatigue, depressive states, frustration, dissatisfaction and sickness.*

**Keywords:** Tourism, Tour guide, Health, Work, Psychic distress, Hospitality.

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### Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated working and health conditions of tourism workers who acquire work-related sickness. It is based on research “The mental health of tourism and hospitality workers: professionalism x illness”, which was concluded in 2016 and originated other projects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourist services in Brazil have developed in an informal basis due to bureaucratic difficulties inherent to the formalization of the business activity. Since many Brazilian tourist service providers are family-based and small-sized organizations, the Brazilian tourism industry still operates with a strong participation of the informal labor market. The development of the activity in the country increased from the 1980s, a period that marked a shift in labor relations and that was shaped by neoliberal dynamics. By early 21st century, several proposals came out, of which we can highlight: productive restructuring, accelerated privatization, state downsizing, fiscal and monetary policies aligned with global organizations for capitalism hegemony, such as the International Monetary Fund (Antunes, 2001).

Therefore, it was a time in which informal work gained new outlines amid institutional and economic transformations focused on market deregulation, also changing the analytical approach to the issue of informality. Tavares (2015) argues that until the 1980s, informal work was seen as independent work, without any direct articulation with the capitalist accumulation process. Rather it was seen under the sign of flexibility. After many

changes in companies with neoliberalism, formal work gave room to informality, and workers kept the same professional demands but they did not have any social guarantee. However, traditional labor sectors managed to soften the interventions of this new economic order by creating labor unions. The most affected by the neoliberal rules were the services sector and the informal workers (Montaño, 2002). The tourism industry also took part in this changing scenario, and this brought work flexibility and intensification far beyond the industrial sector, since both also started to cover the service sector.

On many occasions, tourism workers – chiefly the tour guides – are informally employed and lack protection both from labor legislations and social guarantees ensured to formal workers. They live under the shadow of informality, devaluation of their functions, low pay, staff turnover and, in short, poor work conditions (Cavalcante and Costa, 2011). They generally occupy temporary jobs, with usually exhaustive tasks, relatively low financial return and low personal benefits. This is reason for concern in their everyday life, and it even affects their health conditions. That is why this article aimed to understand the relation between work and health in the professional practice of tour guides working in the tourist city of Ouro Preto, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, in order to make a description of their work context.

In this regard, fieldwork data collection for this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 10 tour guides from the informal labor market and 5 from the formal labor market who are employed in the city government and work in tourist information services at Ouro Preto Tourism Secretary. The present study is based on the premise that the profession of tour guide is a service provision activity in which there are various demand levels despite the weak labor guarantee and stability. In this sense, Pimenta (2006) highlights the long working hours, the lack of autonomy over working processes, and the prevalence of interpersonal relationships, which requires professional qualification in the field of customer service, besides some attributes such as politeness, ethical posture, good humor, good appearance, and smiling face.

## 2. TOUR GUIDES IN BRAZIL: THE JOURNEY OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

The arising of tourism, considered by many as a phenomenon of modernity, was marked by businessman Thomas Cook's travel on 5 July 1841. He arranged a large scale travel to take a group of 570 people in a train journey, thus launching a new concept of tourism, the tourist guiding, i.e., the intermediation of transportation, hosting and hospitality services (Barbosa, 2002; Braga, 2008). From that moment, not only a new form of recreation was created, but new professions appeared and have been developing in parallel with tourism since then. One of them is the profession of tour guide. Currently, tour guides perform services of tourist guidance and information. In the tourism industry, they were the first to gain recognition and regulation by the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, which requires that professionals take specific training courses and registration.

According to Canani (1999) there is evidence of tour guides before the 19th century. Based on guidelines from the Brazilian National Apprenticeship Service (SENAC), the author suggests that tourist guidance services appeared even before tourism as we know it today:

Historically there have been reports of Roman tourists seeking historical and religious places, they used to visit the Greek temples, go to Egypt to visit the Pyramids, the Sphinx and the Valley of the Kings, just like tourists do today. At that time, there were already tourist attractions; some priests taught the sacred crocodiles to appear when they were called and open their mouths to show their sharp teeth to tourists. At that time, tourists already complained about the conditions of hostels and tour guide services, and many left their names engraved on the monuments (Brazil, 1993); (Canani, 1999).

At that time, tour guides were informal workers that relied on the interpretation of the patrimony and the reproduction of tales, since the craft was not considered a professional activity until the late 20th century.

In Brazil, Law 8.623, on 28 January 1993, began regulating the profession of tour guide and ensured labor rights and duties. Both Brazilian Law 8.623 and Decree 946 define the tour guide as the professional who is accredited by the Brazilian Tourism Institute (Embratur) and performs activities of accompanying, orienting, and providing information to groups of people in visits and excursions in urban, municipal, state, international or specialized levels (Brazil, 1993).

In 2003, Brazilian Law 10.683, in line with Decree 4.898, transferred Embratur's competences to the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, therefore tour guides must now be accredited by this organization through an online system called Cadastur. Tourist services are controlled by state tourism agencies across the country. In their everyday professional practice, tour guides must carry their ID badge in an easily visible place. The following lines clarify the conditions under which tourist guides should legally practice the profession, according to Brazilian Decree 946, in its article 5, which describes:

The registration and classification of tour guides in one or more of the classes provided in this Decree shall be subject to proof of compliance with the following requirements:

- I. be Brazilian or foreign resident in Brazil and enabled for the exercise of professional activity in the country;
- II. be at least eighteen years, for regional tour guide, or over 21 years to act as national or international tour guide;
- III. be an elector and be in compliance with the electoral obligations;
- IV. be an army reservist up to date with the military obligations if the applicant is male and below the age of 45;
- V. have completed the secondary school;
- VI. have completed the professional tour guide training course for the category for which he/she is being accredited.

§ 1º The entities responsible for the courses referred to in section VI of this article should send in advance their curriculum planning and course plans for inspection by Embratur (Brazil, 1993).

When it comes to work conditions, Canani (1999) argues that tour guide is a profession that requires a lot from workers, since they must be creative and able to deal with different kinds of audiences. Besides, in order to improve their services, they must both develop communication skills and enhance physical strength in order to endure intense walking, which ends up interfering with their mental and physical health conditions. That is why it is important to conduct research on the ever changing forms of work organization throughout the history of tourism, in its most important aspects, and the harm to workers' physical and mental health.

### **3. THE RELATION BETWEEN WORK AND HEALTH FROM THE PERCEPTION OF TOUR GUIDES**

The purpose of discussing the professional practice of tour guides came with the possibility of understanding how they, as informal workers, establish relationships with the city in which they work and how they build their social networking in the touristic trade, besides how they withstand the social and economic conditions in which they live, once this professional category comprises many informal workers unsupported by labor legislation.

My job means to me the evaluation of my city. Today for me it is my fixed income, because I used to have another job that was my fixed work, and I only worked as a tour guide on weekends. Today, as I do not have another job, I have been dedicating myself more to tourism, it is an income support for my family, I worry [about informality] because I have to get work and sometimes it is not easy. (Tour Guide).

Uncertainty persists in the informal labor market due to lack of work contract and no guarantee of financial support in case of illness and accidents nor in case of neglect and abuse by employers. Despite this, some enjoy the freedom and autonomy with the possibility of being self-employed and creating their own work routines. In a contrasting approach, some reports showed the positive aspects of working without a contract:

My health is OK. I think that working in tourism is cool because we deal with different people, and we do not get bored easily, we always deal with different people, there is no routine, the routine is to visit the touristic attractions, and they are beautiful and enjoyable. So no one bothers me, I make a quiet tour through the city, it is not like having a boss that bothers me (Tour Guide).

The next speech reflects many workers' desire, which is to get rid of their boss and fixed schedules. The choice of the profession is associated with the subjects' life stories and imaginary.

The profession chose me. I never imagined being a tour guide. When I was studying in the seventh grade, there was a group that wanted to create a young guard in the city, and then a monument guard that was in charge of watching churches. I took part in it and enjoyed the task, so I became a tour guide. I have worked as a tour guide since 1972, but I have been within the tourism industry since 1967. (Tour Guide).

Between 15 and 16 years old, I worked hoeing the streets and saw the tour guides working. I used to leave my job to listen to their stories about the city. I liked their job and so I went to study at the Municipal Library. I read books and learned the stories, so I found my profession. For me, my job means everything, I love my profession. I believe this is the best profession ever. (Tour Guide).

Look, I actually started working when I was 10 years old. I used to work as a shoeshiner and a park attendant, and over time I thought I had profile to be a tour guide and so I decided to study in order to become one. So, it has been a long time, almost 40 years, as a tour guide. (Tour Guide).

The perception of the respondents with regard to their personal features and the profession reveal stereotypes that define a tour guide's profile and what it should be like. The following were mentioned: kindness, cheerfulness, smiling face, being helpful, ability to catch peoples' attention. According to [Valle \(2003\)](#) tour guides take the role of providing tourist information, assistance, motivation and amusement, as well as understanding, fulfilling, preventing, creating needs and arousing the visitors' curiosity in order to benefit both the community and the tourist.

I have been a tour guide for 40 years. I mean, at first I was a member of the city young guard, then I realized that tourism was a sector that was up to me because of my way of being, communicative, outgoing. So I tried to attend tourism training courses and it started to happen. I was expanding my knowledge to better inform and serve (Tour Guide).

Moreover, it is possible to consider that the work of tour guides provides a sense of belonging and identity in relation to the place they occupy.

It is a unique city, isn't it? A quiet town to work, and there is not much violence. Everyone respects each other's space, there are several places for the tour guides to work, from the city entrance to the bus terminal, to the Tiradentes Square, to the churches. I consider myself very happy because I have my space to work. I worked at the FIEMG building, a renowned, well-organized entity, as you can see. So everyone

works in the space they like, and I like this one. So if you do not work in the sun, you work in the shade. (Tour Guide).

The respondents naturally express their situation of social exclusion from labor rights. In this sense, it is worth understanding how they perceive and position themselves in relation to this type of participation in the labor market and how this type of employment relationship affects their professional practice.

I'm proud of what I do, most tour guides do not have record in working papers, you know. At travel agencies I had bad luck, I had an hernia injury and it hindered me because I could not stop working, I wanted to work, my colleagues called me, but I could not, so I lost opportunities, lost commissions, I felt useless. (Tour Guide).

When hired by a travel agency, tour guides may manage to get a work contract with a defined pay. However, it is common practice for informal workers to take tourists to specific commercial establishments in order to earn tips from owners. But, according to the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, this practice is forbidden by Decree 27/2014, which defines tour guide's tasks and work guidelines.

We do not earn tips. We earn "commissions" due to partnership. We take tourists to certain establishments – it is not a secret, tourists themselves know it –, and if they buy something the owner will pass on a percentage to us. (Tour Guide).

In Ouro Preto, in addition to informal tour guides, there are workers called *cicerones*<sup>1</sup>. In 2007, the city government created Law 17/07, which allows *cicerones* to perform accredited tourist services. They are hired by the city government for tourist guidance and information and they are permitted to guide up to 10 visitors in Ouro Preto. They carry an ID badge accredited by the city government.

When I worked as an independent tour guide, the fact that it was an informal profession, without any labor guarantee, ended up generating a lot of stress, because the uncertain work always meant the risk getting no money to survive. Now that I have a formal job as a tour guide I have even more duties, I thought it would be easier, but it did not happen. (Tour Guide).

Such a report leads us to question the precariousness and uncertainty in this activity from the perception of the tour guides that work formally. With respect to illegal work in tourism, all tour guides should be accredited by the Brazilian Tourism Institute (Embratur) and to do that they must attend training courses. The most cited training was the one offered by the Brazilian National Service of Commercial Apprenticeship (SENAC).

In some cities around Ouro Preto there are tour guide labor unions. As for their functioning, we can note that there are diverging opinions.

The tour guide today is considered a profession, isn't it? So the labor union is important, and mine is headquartered in Belo Horizonte city. In addition to being a member of the tour guide labor union, I am also employed by the Ouro Preto government through public tender. I competed with 42 people for 4 vacancies and I was classified in the fourth place. So, as a city government employer, I have all labor rights. But I am also a member of the tour guide labor union. (Tour Guide).

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<sup>1</sup> *Cicerone* is an old term for a guide, one who conducts visitors and sightseers to museums, galleries, etc., and explains matters of archaeological, antiquarian, historic or artistic interest. The word is presumably taken from Marcus Tullius Cicero, as a type of learning and eloquence. The Oxford English Dictionary finds examples of the use earlier in English than Italian, the earliest quotation being from Joseph Addison's *Dialogue on Medals* (published posthumously 1726). It appears that the word was first applied to learned antiquarians who show and explain to foreigners the antiquities and curiosities of the country [Oxford Dictionaries \(2016\)](#).

The labor union operates satisfactorily, but like almost all unions do, you know? When you are in trouble you see that the labor union is there for you [ironic]. I mean, I believe that today labor unions are ineffective, because for you to work as a tour guide they require complete secondary education, technical training in tourism and accreditation by Embratur. I mean, not all tour guides are accredited by Embratur, and there are some unaccredited intruders who perform the same work as we do. There should be a great partnership between labor unions, local associations and monument administrators in order to keep control over this. Nowadays, the guy gets out of jail, washes his face, takes a glass of milk, smokes a cigarette and becomes a tour guide, and who should be monitoring this? (Tour Guide).

According to the reports, there is no supervision over illegal work in the tourism industry, and complaints about unaccredited tour guides are recurrent. They are popularly called “rats”.

Over the time I have been working as a tour guide, it has been clear for me that I am frustrated because I often realize that the work that I try to do is honest. The unaccredited tour guides on the market did not study and attend any training. Not all, but many of them do not have profile to be a tour guide. (Tour Guide).

From the perspective of those unaccredited tour guides, they see no advantages in working in tourism, rather they do the job by necessity and for the financial return:

Everything is hard for us, we suffer harassment by the others. But, on the other side, the unaccredited tour guides may negotiate better prices with tourists and it pleases a lot of them. I do that because I need the money. (Unaccredited Tour Guide).

Regarding the city's infrastructure and working conditions, the respondents emphasized the lack of support and they cited some situations that might be hindering their professional practice.

Lack of attention of student groups is the main barrier, lack of toilets for tourists, lack of travel bus parking lots, lack of open restaurants that afford amenities for the tour guides. (Tour Guide).

What makes me a little upset is the difficulty we find in terms of infrastructure, which is a reality not only here but in several places. Also the working hours of the attractions do not fit with the arrival of tourists. If a tourist has to get to the airport at a certain time and the attraction is closed, he/she could lose a lot that would be interesting. (Tour Guide).

An issue that I see as a problem is the lack of public toilets for tourists and bus parking lots. Besides, very few restaurants afford amenities for tour guides. (Tour Guide).

Tourism workers also point out several deficiencies in the capacity of receptive tourism that affect an effective work. The situations showed in their statements contrast with the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism guidelines published through a document entitled “Strategic Proposal for Touristic Organization – 2014 World Cup – Brazil”.

In order to achieve competitive results, in addition to the basic infrastructure, we need services that facilitate tourist mobility throughout the destination. The structuring of receptive tourism in a professional manner, offering quality and safe products and services, is one of the factors that satisfy tourist expectations. Tour guides play an important role in this context, because they act as local partners. A competitive destination must be able to offer well-prepared, properly accredited and language fluent tour guides (Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, 2014).

The tourism workers we interviewed entered the tourism industry before they were adults, and many were even children. Another interesting factor is that when asked about their career choice, they said they began to work professionally as tour guides because of family references, and that they were especially influenced by their fathers, who also used to work as a tour guide.

I started to work when I was 9 years old. At first, I did not know what a tour guide did. As I grew older, I began to like it, I think it was because of family references (Tour Guide).

So [...] I asked my brothers to learn our father's profession, but they did not want. Then my mother said, "Why do not you learn it?". And I said, "I have never seen any female tour guide, only male. So let's see what will happen". And I started. I will take my father's profession on. (Tour Guide).

I wanted to follow my father's steps. (Tour Guide).

My whole family works in tourism and I have attended two tourist service trainings. (Tour Guide).

Working in tourist guidance requires physical and emotional preparation from workers.

Look, being a tour guide allows me to get in touch with the world through the people with whom I have contact because each one tells me a little about their state, country, history, life story. So in fact, we exchanged information, I show my knowledge as a tour guide and I end up making friends with tourists in such a way that they sometimes talk about their private life and family with me. So this relationship between a tour guide and a tourist is interesting to expand knowledge, right? And second, I always liked to go through this experience, it is a form of enrichment, it increases knowledge in such a way that you... (pause) you become a person even slightly different from the others in the city. The *mineiro* [born in Minas Gerais state) is a quiet person, he/she does not talk much, and a tour guide must be the other way round. We transmit knowledge and acquire knowledge. Answering another question that you asked me, I think that for being a tour guide you have to like it, because sometimes – what I said before – you are not well paid for the work done, but you like it. It is much like the teaching profession today. We hear teachers complaining about distress and lack of recognition by the government, and sometimes tour guides go through the same. (Tour Guide).

When it comes to career choice, in general, the respondents expressed satisfaction but made remarks on the treatment a tour guide receives.

Some people think that we who work on the streets are vagabonds, drunkards, or that we do not want to work, because they think it is easy, but it is not. (Tour Guide).

When analyzing the development of the activity, it is worth pointing out several difficult situations in the professional practice of these workers.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The craft of tour guide arose compulsorily in the life of each of the respondents, who very young faced the need to make a living and saw tourist services as the possibility of entering the labor market. When they started their working life in the activity, they intended to learn from practice without any training.

Some of them even relied on just knowledge and practice by observing the work of people around them or their family members. These reports serve as a basis to foment discussion about the precarious work conditions and uncertainties from the perception of tour guides working in the informal labor market in the tourist city of Ouro Preto, Brazil.

The informal tourism workers, whose earnings are lower than statutory minimum wage, are not supported by social security or risk prevention guarantees.

Moreover, they have a low rate of unionization, and those who are members of associations or labor unions highlight their ineffectiveness. Through direct observation, it was possible to identify a paradox in the respondents' reports. They said that they are proud to work on their own, with autonomy and without a boss, despite the daily lack of financial security and income guarantee.

Work in tourism presented a character of devaluation and precariousness that brings social costs for workers, such as lack of rights and alienation of labor. Most respondents emphasized their satisfaction with their jobs, but they also reported feelings of irritation and frequent headaches. Besides, they fear about their future due to the frequent financial instability. Specifically, the difficulties regarding professional support and recognition were mentioned as being responsible for feelings of disappointment, anxiety, fatigue, and stress, which may trigger illnesses and, in some cases, depression.

Some people consider such illnesses are caused by the workers' own carelessness due to the long hours they devote to work and also because they do not contribute to social security.

About this issue, they emphasize they will be helpless if they lose working capacity, i.e., they recognize they have become sick at work but they do not point their job as the cause of their illness. Despite this, other workers realize they are sick and associate it to their work conditions, work overload and absence of social protection.

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