

## RESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD TOURISM EMPLOYMENT IN THE REGION OF VALENCIA (SPAIN)

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There is no doubt about the importance of tourism in Spain. However, this has not been reflected in significant research on Spanish residents' opinion even if there is a growing academic interest. Although the Region of Valencia ranks fifth in the Spanish autonomous communities by number of tourists, studies of social perception of tourism until now refer to specific tourist areas and particular tourist developments. This article is a part of a wider investigation project into the social perception of tourism in this region that attempts to fill this lack. The specific objective here is the analysis of the public opinion about the characteristics of employment in the tourism sector. The assumption is that the views on the impact of tourism on employment are more positive the stronger the person's relationship with tourism industry, as the Social Exchange Theory predicts.

Three hypotheses are proposed: a) tourism is an economic activity that the host population evaluates positively because it is identified as an important generator of employment and wealth; b) but people recognize that working conditions in the tourism sector are worse than in other economic activities; c) those people most related to tourism are more likely to accept the activity and positively assess their working conditions.

In March 2011, we conducted a telephone survey to a sample of 1,156 people representative of the population aged 18 and over residing in the Region of Valencia. The estimated sampling error is  $\pm 2.9$  for  $p = q = 50\%$  and a significance level of 95.5%. The data were processed with SPSS 20.0 and descriptive results and dependence tests based on Chi-square and ANOVA are presented.

Public opinion on tourism and its importance in the region are highly positive. Tourism arouses interest in the population and almost all respondents (93%) say that tourists do not generate significant discomfort. 86% of respondents believe that the general situation for tourism is good or very good and 66% believe that in the next 12 months the situation will be the same or better. Also most (58%) believes that the Valencian tourism is of very good quality. 59% of the population does not perceive that the number of tourists has decreased, although 83% believe that tourists who visit them spend less and less. The population perceives an obvious influence of tourism in infrastructures and employment: 80% of the residents value the effect of tourism on employment as positive. Same is not

true with the working conditions in the tourist sector. Almost three quarters of respondents contemplate the need for upper qualifications and they also think that women earn lower wages than men in tourism jobs. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents recognize that it is a sector with worse working conditions than other sectors.

Over a third of the working population declares that its job is much related to tourism or tourists. But it is not possible to establish any statistically significant difference between those linked to the industry and not linked. This is true for any of the issues: the importance of tourism in the Valencian economy, the quality of the tourism, or discomfort caused by tourists.

The Social Exchange Theory assumes that those groups closest to tourism are more likely to accept and legitimize the activity and positively assess their working conditions. Not evidence to support this hypothesis was found. It can be said that the benefits of tourism to the economy are perceived in the abstract and general, but clearly this is not specific to the individual and the family.

Therefore, we must conclude that opinions on working conditions are independent of the link between respondents and the sector. It can be said that tourism is considered a priority for the economic development of the region, regardless of the perceived direct benefit. Social Exchange Theory, as has been applied in tourism studies to date, once again shows its weakness.

However, these results give us the opportunity to think over some questions that we believe interesting for sociological research on the social impacts of tourism. First, we can question why tourism is widely supported by people; despite they know that the working conditions are far from optimal. We have to look at the general situation of employment in Spain. We went from a society with a social model of job fair (wage society) supported the Keynesian pact, and where working conditions were central, to another social flexible model, characterized by constant adaptation to market needs and business. In this model the rights and working conditions are adjusted downwards according to the market criteria. These changes in labour relations model, together with the effects of globalization, make unemployment a central dimension.

Second, we have to study the tourism impacts in Spain bearing in mind their relationship with Spanish socioeconomic conditions. Many of the studies on the impacts of tourism are made in countries where tourism is not as significant weight in the economy as in the Spanish case and where, perhaps, the importance of unemployment is not the same. In Spain, unemployment is a structural component, and also the case of the Region of Valencia, which has risen from 9.6% unemployment rate in 2008 to 25.4% in 2011. The importance of unemployment in this socioeconomic context is the fact that let us understanding why the negative perception of working conditions does not avoid social support. Any activity that generates employment is accepted even if the working conditions are not optimal.

The Valencian society supports tourism development but at the same time recognizes that it does not generate good jobs. Given this contradiction, the question is who should or deserve to work in an industry as critical to the economic sustainability of the country and especially in this region, whose working conditions are perceived unrewarding and, consequently, calls for low-functioning professional profiles prestige and social status. It seems safe to guess that the best qualified people try shaping their professional future in other areas, leaving the tourism sector as an area of attraction for less skilled workers.