



Social sciences in the extractive industries – an example

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In October 2017, the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) merged to form the International Science Council, “to be the global voice of all sciences in a digitally connected world”. In keeping with the spirit of this new endeavour, this paper demonstrates application of the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism to mineral exploration projects.

The theory’s basic assumptions are:

- Human beings act toward things or persons on the basis of the meaning these things or persons have to them;
- This meaning is derived from the social interaction one has with one’s fellows; and
- These meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things she/he encounters.

When interpreting a situation we make assumptions about the attitudes of immediate others involved, and on that basis tell ourselves what they are about to do, i.e. we define the situation. Then we place ourselves in the shoes of our “reference communities” and interpret our definition in light of what we believe to be the reference communities’ norms – the norms that tell us how to handle the situation. A reference community is “the audience of real or imaginary people whose conception or picture of communal life, especially our and other people’s place in it, we always hold close to our hearts and usually take for granted.” We interpret situations in a two-step process: (i) we make assumptions about the attitudes of others involved and use these to predict what they are planning to do (interpretation/definition) and (ii) we decide what action to take by comparing our options to the norms of our “reference communities” (decision). The paper will discuss the core concepts: interactions and relationships; identity; meanings; reference communities; and related processes. It will show how these lead a collection of individuals to arrive at joint actions and to the establishment of new social structures. Examples from a field study of a number of mineral exploration projects will illustrate the application of symbolic interactionism.