



Application of the sociological “reference community” concept to mineral exploration projects

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According to the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, we interpret situations in a two-step process. During the first step we make assumptions about the attitudes of others involved and use these to predict what they are planning to do (interpretation/definition) and during the second step we decide what action to take by comparing our options to the perceived norms of our “reference communities” (decision). The process is largely implicit and occurs “in our heads”.

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.” In this paper, we use the plural “reference communities” because there is a reference community for each of the identities a person assumes. Reference communities are dynamic and change with circumstances and time; members of different subsets (whichever way defined) within a larger group likely have different reference communities; the less established and the more diverse the group, the more diverse and diffuse are the reference communities related to the subsets within it.

When looking for a normative framework against which to judge their options for action, people often draw on more than a “reference community” of real or imaginary people. The relevant sections of a plethora of publications, databases, reports, newspaper articles, social media communications, workshops, and television and radio programs (that also influence the value system of the real people in the reference community) also are a source of norms and the concept “reference communities” we use in this paper includes these additional sources. Therefore, a huge “field of reference” or very broad reference community, of which particular communities of reference are subsets, surrounds all of us at all times.

Because reference communities shape decisions, identifying and characterizing them contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex situations that often develop around mineral exploration projects.

The present paper discusses the methods used to identify and characterize the reference communities of communities and companies involved in a number of mineral exploration projects in Latin America and their limitations, and suggests further work needed in this area.