CHAPTER 27

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CLIMATE DENIAL: EMOTION, PSYCHOLOGY, CULTURE, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

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GLOBAL climate change is not only the single most significant environmental issue of our time, widespread and potentially catastrophic social impacts are predicted from sea-level rise and changing patterns of precipitation and disease. Climate change will likely jeopardize state economic resources, exacerbate social inequality, alter community structures, and generate new patterns of economic and social conflict. Yet we see remarkably little public reaction for a phenomenon of this magnitude. By 'reaction' we can think of the widest possible range of responses from planning by federal and state officials, to social movement activity from concerned citizens, individual behavioral changes, even the extent to which individuals ac-knowledge climate change by talking about it with others.[1] Instead climate change is like a proverbial 'elephant in the room.' Climate scientists may have identified global warming as the most important issue of our time, but it has taken over twenty years for the problem to penetrate the public discourse in even the most superficial manner. Although public concern is beginning to arise, climate change remains low on the public list of priorities worldwide (Brechin 2008; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009; Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003).

While 'apathy' in the United States is particularly notable, this gap between the severity of the problem and its lack of public salience is visible in most Western nations (Lorenzoni et al. 2007; Poortinga and Pigeon 2003). Especially for urban dwellers in the rich and powerful Northern countries climate change is seen as 'no more than background noise' (Brechin 2008; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006). Indeed, no nation has a base of public citizens that are sufficiently socially and politically engaged to effect the level of change that predictions of climate science would seem to warrant. Instead we are confronted with a series of paradoxes: as scientific evidence for climate change pours in, public urgency and even interest in the issue fails to correspond. In a number of cases, public interest has actually declined at the same time as scientific consensus on the problem has increased. What can explain the misfit between scientific information and public concern? Are people just uninformed of the facts? Are they inherently greedy and self-interested?

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Given the seriousness of what is at stake, these gaps between information, concern, and social response have been the subject of much scientific study (see e.g. Lorenzoni et al. 2007; Moser and Dilling in this volume; Moser and Dilling 2007). Survey researchers repeatedly demonstrate the minimal public interest in climate change. Psychologists conduct experiments outlining conceptually flawed mental models and apply theories of cognitive dissonance and emergency helping behavior to climate change. Sociologists note relationships between oil company executives and federal governments, analyze climate skeptic campaigns, and describe how media framing skews public understanding. Each of these efforts points to important answers. However few of their findings support either the theory that people fail to respond because they are uninformed (the 'information deficit model'), or the notion that people have stopped caring about the environment, future generations, or people living in poor nations. Yet if our collective passivity comes from neither ignorance nor greed, it would seem even more irrational.

This chapter outlines the phenomenon of climate denial, that is, the active resistance to information on a collective level. I begin with a review of existing explanations for the public failure to respond to climate change from psychology and sociology. I then use ethnographic data to introduce the framework of socially organized denial. This view from the ground up builds upon many of the above explanations, and highlights the intersecting role of emotions, culture, social structure, and inequality in people's lived experience. This research concerns not the outright rejection of climate science by so-called climate skeptics, but the more pervasive and everyday problem of how and why people who purport to be concerned about climate change, manage to ignore it. The term 'denial' is sometimes used to describe the phenomenon of outright rejection of information as true, in this case, the reaction of climate skeptics mentioned above. But this is a very different, more literal use of the term 'denial' than I will describe. Instead, people actually work to *avoid acknowledging disturbing information* in order to avoid emotions of fear, guilt, and helplessness, follow cultural norms, and maintain positive conceptions of individual and national identity. As a result of this kind of denial, people describe a sense of 'knowing and not knowing' about climate change, of having information but not thinking about it in their everyday lives. Information from climate science is known in the abstract, but disconnected from, and invisible within political, social, or private life. As troubling as the success of climate skeptic campaigns may be to our sense of how a rational democracy works, the paradox of apathy in the face of knowledge and concern about climate change poses an even larger barrier to our collective response.

1 CURRENT PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

For nearly twenty years the majority of research on climate change from both disciplines presumed information was the limiting factor in public non-response. The thinking was that, 'if people only knew the facts,' they would act differently. These studies emphasized either the complexity of climate science or political economic corruption as reasons people do not adequately understand what is at stake. Given the complexity of climate change, it is not surprising that these researchers found evidence of conceptual misunderstanding.

Systematic reviews of surveys and polling data by Nisbet and Myers (2007) and Brewer (2005) describe widespread misunderstanding regarding climate science extending back into the 1980s. Researchers have lamented the confusion between global warming and the ozone hole (e.g. Bell 1994; Bostrom et al. 1994; Read et al. 1994), investigated the role of media framing (Bell 1994; Ungar 1992; Brossard et al. 2004; Dispensa and Brulle 2003; Weiskel 2005; Carvalho 2007), and described how understanding global warming requires a complex grasp of scientific knowledge in many fields (Moser and Dilling 2007). Recent work by Sterman and Sweeney (2007) examines public misperceptions of climate models as a cause for inaction. Similarly, working from the assumption that information limits present engagement, psychologists Grame Halford and Peter Sheehan write, 'With better mental models and more appropriate analogies for global change issues, it is likely that more people, including more opinion leaders, will make the decision to implement some positive coping action of a precautionary nature' (1991: 606).

Yet as Read (et al. 1994) pointed out more than a decade ago, only two simple facts are essential to understanding climate change: global warming is the result of an increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere, and the single most important source of carbon dioxide is the combustion of fossil fuels, most notably coal and oil. So how can it be that people around the world fail to understand these basic facts? And while such 'information deficit' explanations are indispensable, they do not account for the behavior of the significant number of people who know about global warming and express concern, yet still fail to take any action.

A second body of scholarship points to relationships between political economy and public perception. Here scholars have identified the fossil fuel industry influence on government policy (the US holds prominent examples), the tactics of climate skeptic campaigns (Jacques 2009; Dunlap and McCright in this volume; Jacques et al. 2008; McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003), how corporate control of media limits and molds available information about global warming (Dispensa and Brulle 2003), and even the 'normal' distortion of climate science through the 'balance as bias phenomenon' in journalism (Boykoff 2008). Presumably such political economic barriers have far-reaching and interactive effects with the other factors discussed above. Yet note that explanations for public non-response that highlight corporate media and climate skeptic campaigns, also implicitly direct our attention to a lack of information as the biggest barrier to engagement, though for different reasons. Certainly there are cases when the public may either lack information or be outright misinformed, but are these issues the limiting factor behind greater public interest, concern, or political participation? Clearly knowledge is necessary to generate public response (e.g. O'Connor et al. 2002), but is knowledge sufficient (Bord et al. 2000)?

A third body of scholarship applies psychological theories on cognitive dissonance, efficacy, and helping behavior to climate change (see e.g. Stoll-Kleeman et al. 2001; Lorenzoni et al. 2007; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Festinger's (1957) concept of cognitive dissonance describes 'dissonance' as a condition which emerges when an actor has two thoughts (cognitions) that are inconsistent. This dissonance is an unpleasant condition which people seek to resolve, often through changing one of their cognitions. Studies drawing upon these frameworks point to multiple factors that would seem to 'complicate' how people process information on climate change. For example, Paul Kellstedt and colleagues (2008) have found that increased levels of information about global warming have a negative effect on concern and sense of personal responsibility. In particular,

respondents who are better informed about climate change feel less rather than more responsible for it. Furthermore, they find that 'in sharp contrast with the knowledge-deficit hypothesis, respondents with higher levels of information about global warming show less concern' (120). Note that these findings are in accordance with cognitive dissonance because people with low self-efficacy will be likely to deny responsibility and concern since unless they feel able to do something about the problem, an awareness of concern or responsibility would be conflicting cognitions. Similarly, Krosnic et al. (2006) observe that people stopped paying attention to global climate change when they realized that there is no easy solution for it. Instead they note that many people judge as serious only those problems for which they think action can be taken. In a third highly relevant application, Cynthia Frantz and Stephan Mayer (2009) apply a classic model of helping behavior to the public response to climate change. Based on the criteria of this model, the authors note that climate change is difficult to notice, is marked by a diffusion of responsibility, and there are psychological costs of acting, each of which inhibit the likelihood of individual response.

While emphasizing many important factors, the above exclude either the emotional and psychological complexity of our response to climate change, or the significance of political economy in shaping that response. Yet interesting results emerge when these two are integrated. Norwegian sociologist Hanno Sandvik (2008) reports a negative association between concern for climate change and national wealth, and a 'marginally significant' tendency that nations' per capita carbon dioxide emissions are negatively correlated to public concern. Sandvik writes, 'these findings suggest that the willingness of a nation to contribute to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions decreases with its share of these emissions' (333). Although Sandvik is the first to explicitly test a relationship between wealth and concern, his findings are in accordance with earlier work. For example, Zahran et al. (2006) found that citizens residing in US states with higher emissions of climate gases are somewhat less likely to support climate change policies. O'Connor et al. (2002) found that higher income negatively affected participants' willingness to take actions such as driving less. Similarly, an inverse relationship between wealth and concern is also reported in Dunlap's 1998 cross-national research, but with a smaller sample of nations. Further-more, there are no examples of the reverse relationship, in which higher income is positively correlated with concern or support for climate protection policy. Note that these studies contradict Inglehart's (1990) theory of post-materialism in which moderniza-tion and wealth promote greater environmental concern amongst citizens.

2 INTRODUCING THE CLIMATE ELEPHANT

Surveys are excellent for documenting large-scale patterns in human response, but what is going on behind the numbers? Qualitative and ethnographic research allows us to look into the details of people's lived experience. We move now to examine ethnographic data on how people make sense of climate change in a nation with some of the highest levels of education, political activity, and environmental concern in the world (Dryzek et al. 2003). What follows is a view into how people experience the reality of global climate change in their everyday lives. It is not an exhaustive attempt. I use the voices of people in one community in Norway during a recent very dry and warm winter in order to make visible

the narratives and cultural constructions that can inform a larger story behind worldwide public paralysis in the face of predictions from climate scientists.

As it happened, in this rural community there was unusually warm weather during my stay. November brought severe flooding across the entire region. The first snowfall did not come until late January—some two months later than usual. As of January 2001, the winter of 2000 for Norway was recorded as the second warmest in the past 130 years. This fact was highly publicized. Regional and national newspapers carried headlines like, 'Warmer, Wetter and Wilder,' 'Green Winters—Here to Stay?' and, 'Year 2000 Is One of the Warmest in History.' As a result of these conditions, the local ski area only opened in late December with the aid of 100 percent artificial snow—a completely unprecedented event with dramatic recreational effects and measurable economic impacts on the community. The local lake failed to freeze sufficiently to allow for ice-fishing. Casual comments about the weather, a long-accepted form of small talk, commonly included references to unusual weather, shaking of heads, and the phrase 'climate change.'

It was not just the weather that was unusual that winter. As a sociologist, I was perplexed by the behavior of the people as well. Despite clear social and economic impacts on the community, no social action was taking place. People could have reacted differently to that strange winter. The shortened ski season affected everyone in the community. In the words of one taxi driver: 'It makes a difference if we move from five months of winter tourism to only three. It affects all of us, you know, not just those up on the mountain. It affects the hotels, the shops in town, us taxi drivers, we notice it too.' Why didn't this awareness translate into social action? Community members could have written letters to the local paper, brought the issue up in one of the many public forums that took place that winter, made attempts to plan for the local effects of climate change, put pressure on local and national leaders to develop long-term climate plans or short-term economic relief, decreased their automobile use, or at the least, engaged their neighbors, children, and political leaders in discussions about what climate change might mean for their community in the next ten and twenty years. The residents of this town could have rallied around the problem of the lack of snow and its economic and cultural impacts. But they did not. Whether or not the warm weather and lack of snow in town were actually a result of global warming cannot be determined for certain. But, among competing explanations for it, the unusual weather *was* widely linked to global warming in both the media and in the minds of citizens. What perplexed me was that despite the fact that people were clearly aware of global warming as a phenomenon, everyday life went on as though it did not exist. Mothers listened to news of unusual flooding as they drove their children to school. Families watched evening news coverage of the failing climate talks in The Hague, followed by American sit-coms. Few people even seemed to spend much time thinking about global warming.

2.1 'We Don't Really Want To Know'

That winter and spring I spent a lot of time attending public meetings, reading the newspapers, talking with people on the street, and generally watching and listening to what was going on. I conducted forty-six interviews with a range of community members. Global warming was frequently mentioned and people in the community seemed to be both informed and concerned about it. Yet at the same time I noticed that it was an uncomfortable issue. People were aware that climate change could radically alter life within

the next decades, yet they did not go about their days wondering what life would be like for their children, whether farming practices would change or whether their grandchildren would be able to ski on real snow. They spent their days thinking about more local, manageable topics. Vigdis, a college age student told me that she was afraid of global warming, but that it didn't enter her everyday life:

> I often get afraid, like—it goes very much up and down, then, with how much I think about it. But if I sit myself down and think about it, it could actually happen, I thought about how if this here continues we could come to have no difference between winter and spring and summer, like—and lots of stuff about the ice that is melting and that there will be flooding, like, and that is depressing, the way I see it.

In the words of one person who held his hands in front of his eyes as he spoke, 'people want to protect themselves a bit.' Other community members in Norway described this sense of knowing and not knowing, of having information but not thinking about it in their everyday lives. As one young woman told me, 'In the every day I don't think so much about it, but I know that environmental protection is very important.' As a topic that was troubling, it was an issue that many people preferred to avoid. Thus community members describe climate change as an issue that they have to 'sit themselves down and think about,' 'don't think about in the everyday,' 'but which in between is discouraging and an emotional weight.' Since members of the community did know about global warming but did not integrate this knowledge into everyday life, they experienced what Robert Lifton (1982) calls the *absurdity of the double life*, a phrase I adapt in coining the term *double reality*. In one reality was the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life. In the other reality existed the troubling knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions for future weather scenarios. In the words of Kjersti, a teacher at the local agricultural school in her early 30s: 'We live in one way and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It's a skill, an art of living.'

What was happening in that community, and indeed what we can all observe in the public silence on climate change in the United States and elsewhere, was not a rejection of information per se, but the failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action. British sociologist Stanley Cohen calls this implicatory denial: 'the facts of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, homeless people in our streets are recognized, but are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act . . . Unlike literal or interpretive denial, knowledge itself is not at issue, but doing the "right" thing with the knowledge' (Cohen 2001: 9).

3 THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DENIAL: WEAVING EMOTION, CULTURE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

The denial metaphor of the elephant in the room is useful because it reminds us that ignoring a serious problem is not easy to do. Ignoring the obvious can be a lot of work. In her work on apathy in the United States, sociologist Nina Eliasoph observes, 'We often

assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs. But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it, to curtail feelings of empathy as to extend them . . . If there is no exit from the political world then political silence must be as active and colorful as a bright summer shadow' (Eliasoph 1998: 6). How did people manage to outwardly ignore what was happening in the community? Did they manage to ignore it inwardly as well?

How we respond to disturbing information is a complex process. Individuals may block out certain information in order to maintain coherent meaning systems (e.g. cognitive dissonance see e.g. Festinger 1957; Gecas and Burke 1995), desirable emotional states (Rosenberg 1991), a sense of self-efficacy (Gecas and Burke 1995), and in order to follow norms of attention, emotion (Hochschild 1983), and conversation (Eliasoph 1998). Society organizes patterns of perception, memory, and organizational aspects of thinking (Zerubavel 1997). These cultural norms are in turn attuned to specific political economic relations. Thus, alongside the serious threat to democracy posed by capital's control of the production and dissemination of knowledge—e.g. the fact that increased corporate control of media limits and molds available information about global warming (Carvahlo 2007; Dispensa and Brulle 2003) and corporate funded research centers generate conflicting knowledge (McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003; Jacques et al. 2008; Jacques 2009) is another phenomenon that reinforces public non-response: how people cope with information which *does* become available. Overt and more readily identifiable processes such as manipulation and control of information set the stage for the less visible (and to date less studied) process of socially organized denial which I describe here.

The concept of denial is generally considered the domain of psychology. But the information individuals find disturbing, and the mechanisms they employ to protect themselves from such information, may also be analyzed within the context of both social interaction and the broader political economy. Social context itself can be a significant part of what makes it difficult to respond to climate change. Sociologists remind us that notions of what is normal to think and talk about are not given, but are socially structured. It is by paying simultaneous attention to individual responses and social context that we can begin to analyze people's reactions to global warming in reference to the larger political economy. Drawing next from my ethnographic data from Norway, I will describe how people use a variety of methods for normalizing or minimizing disturbing information, what can be called 'strategies of denial.' I placed the strategies I observed into two broad categories: *interpretative* and *cultural*.

4 INTERPRETATIVE DENIAL: COMBATING GLOBAL WARMING BY INCREASING CARBON DIOXIDE

On the one hand, residents structured their relationship to information on global warming through narrative interpretation. Community members used a variety of social narratives, some produced by the national government, to deflect responsibility for and legitimate Norwegian climate and petroleum policy. I observed three types of narratives: selective interpretation, perspectival selectivity, and claims to virtue.

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In the case of selective interpretation, to the extent that they are able, 'people tend to assign those meanings to events that will produce the desired emotions' (Rosenberg 1991: 135). In this case, community members had a set of 'stock stories' about who they were. By portraying Norwegians as close to nature, egalitarian, simple and humble, these narratives of national identity served to counter the criticism and doubt Norwegians face with regards to climate and petroleum policies. Notions of Mythic Norway were portrayed in official government images, and drawn upon by advertisers and everyday people in the town.

People also normalized information about global warming using what Morris Rosenberg calls 'perspectival selectivity' (Rosenberg 1991). Perspectival selectivity 'refers to the angle of vision that one brings to bear on certain events' (ibid. 134). For example, people may manage unpleasant emotions by searching for and repeatedly telling stories of others who are worse off than they are. Three narratives in this category—'Amerika as a Tension Point,' 'We Have Suffered,' and 'Norway is a Little Land'—served to minimize Norwegian responsibility for the problem of global warming by pointing to the larger impact of the United States on carbon dioxide emissions, stressing that Norway has been a relatively poor nation until quite recently, and emphasizing the nation's small population size. For example, multiple newspaper articles in the national papers in the winter and spring of 2001 listed the figure that the United States emits 25 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions, while accounting for only 4 percent of the global population, visibly in their articles. While obviously the US must be held accountable for our emissions, framing the figure in terms of total emissions and population makes the difference between the US and 'little Norway' appear greatest. When looking at per capita emissions in each country the contrasts are not so large. Perspectival selectivity was used to create what social psychologists Susan Opotow and Leah Weiss call 'denial of self-involvement' (2000). Examples of these narratives are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Norgaard 2006a, 2006b, forthcoming 2011).

A third interpretative strategy is in the vein of what historical psychologist Robert J. Lifton calls 'claim to virtue.' He coined the phrase to describe how the Nazi doctors in concentration camps who gave Jews lethal injections interpreted their genocidal actions in terms of compassion. From the doctor's perspective, their acts were compassionate because, by killing people who were ill (or who might become ill) they were able to prevent the spread of disease in the camps. Through the claim that unjust acts are actually working towards the opposite end as they appear (in the case of the doctors, saving the Jews rather than killing them), these actions are made acceptable. Two such claims to virtue were in use that winter with respect to climate change. Although the Norwegian government speaks urgently of the need to reduce emissions of climate gases, they were at the time involved in two projects that do exactly the opposite: the building of two new natural gas facilities and expansion of the petroleum sector by increasing oil development. Both actions have been justified by switching the focus from national targets and measures (as specified under the Kyoto Protocol), to emphasizing climate change as an *international* problem and attempting to meet Norwegian climate commitments through the *trading* of climate gas emissions rather than reduction of actual output.

4.1 'Gas Plants Are Better Than Coal'

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Norwegian government in combination with oil and gas companies began presenting a series of justifications for the development of new natural gas facilities: as natural gas produced less carbon dioxide than coal, Norway could sell this excess energy to other nations and actually be helping overall global emissions. Thus, although the government acknowledges that Norway's emissions of climate gases must decrease, it has used a claim to virtue to argue that the building two new natural gas plants—thereby *increasing* Norway's contribution to climate gases—was actually helping to solve the problem of global warming. However, as Norwegian researches Hovden and Lindseth (2002: 158) point out: 'While it is claimed that these would be off-set by reductions elsewhere, this does not change the fact that emissions from Norwegian gas-based power would increase the CO_2 emission reductions that Norway would have to complete in order to fulfil its international obligations'.

4.2 'Increasing Production of Norwegian Oil Will Help the Climate'

A second example, the justification for increasing national oil production, follows a similar pattern. Norway had increased production of oil and gas threefold in the preceding ten years, dropped its plan of a national carbon dioxide emissions stabilization target, and shifted from a focus on national strategies (mandated under the Kyoto Protocol) to a focus on international efforts. Within the new international perspective, the government has argued that 'since Norwegian petroleum products are not the dirtiest in the international market, Norwegian oil and gas production is good climate policy internationally' (Hovden and Lindseth 2002: 153). Hovden and Lindseth describe how

> Miljkosok, an environmental cooperative forum consisting of the petroleum industry, the government and various interest groups and organizations produced a report in 1996 that in effect, concluded that Norwegian oil production was environmentally benign. The arguments were a) that a cut in Norwegian production would increase the price of oil on the world market, which would make coal more competitive, and, most importantly, b) that as Norwegian petroleum production has fewer emissions per unit oil produced, it was environ-mentally preferable to the oil produced by other countries. The unavoidable conclusion was that Norway should increase its Continental Shelf activity, as this would, in sum, be beneficial with respect to the global emissions of CO_2 and No_x. (Ibid. 152)

Thus, by shifting attention from the national level (on which Norway is retreating from the Kyoto Protocol and other earlier reduction goals) to the international (in which Norway produces 'cleaner' oil than other nations), the Norwegian government claims that increasing oil production is the best thing it can do for the global climate, even though these activities increase carbon dioxide emissions and are in direct opposition to their agreement under the Kyoto Protocol!

The interpretative strategies of selective interpretation, perspectival selectivity, and claims to virtue worked together to reinforce one another. For example, selective interpretation and perspectival selectivity gave a background picture of Norwegian environmentalism and innocence, whereas claims to virtue were linked to particular, contested climate and petroleum activities such as the expansion of oil and gas production or plans of carbon trading.

5 Cultural Denial

In addition to the more identifiable strategy of interpretation, people collectively held information about global warming at arm's length by following established cultural norms about what to pay attention to, feel, talk, and think about in different contexts. I categorize these as 'cultural denial.' From the perspective of sociology of cognition, people learn to think through socialization into different 'thought communities' (Zerubavel 1997). At the same time as they feel 'just like everyday life,' these culturally prescribed norms of attention reflect a particularly insidious form of social control akin to Steven Lukes's third dimension of power. While outright coercion is a serious matter, it is also more easily recognized, identified and, in (so-called) democratic societies, condemned. As Cohen notes 'Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about), and without being punished for "knowing" the wrong things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publically remembered and acknowledged' (Cohen 2001: 10–11).

Thus information about climate change disappeared into daily life for reasons that were more culturally diffuse. For example, simply upholding norms of attention with respect to space made the lack of snow and warm temperatures seem less significant (depoliticized in part because connections to unusual weather events elsewhere were not made), while following norms of attention with respect to time encouraged community members to not think too far ahead into the future, hence minimizing the extent to which the implications of immediate events are forecast. Cultural norms of emotion limited the extent to which community members could bring strong feelings they privately held regarding climate change into the public political process, which in turn served to reinforce the sense that everything was fine. Mechanisms of cultural denial are however more complex. Elsewhere I describe other cultural aspects of denial such as how community members used an available repertoire of conversational tactics, emotion management strategies, and techniques of shifting attention in order to follow local norms (Norgaard 2006a, 2006b, 2009, forthcoming 2011).

6 Conclusion

Were Norwegians in this one community the only people to normalize their behaviour through selective interpretation and claims to virtue? The rather puzzling behavior of people that winter in this community is related to larger questions about social and environmental action in Norway, the United States, and around the world: How are the citizens of wealthy industrialized nations responding to global warming? Why are so few people taking any sort of action? Why do some social and environmental problems result in people rising up when others do not? And, given that many do know the grim facts, how do people manage to produce an everyday reality in which this urgent social and ecological problem is invisible? These are critical questions facing citizens of all the wealthier nations of the world today. Climate change is not unique to Norway, nor are its present and future impacts. Nor, unfortunately, is the failure of response unique to this small community.

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Despite the extreme seriousness of this global environmental problem, the pattern of meager public response—in terms of social movement activity, behavioral changes, or public pressure on governments—exists worldwide.

While I know of no other ethnographic or sociological studies of climate denial, a handful of research speaks to the salience of these circumstances for people around the world. For example, Stoll-Kleemann and co-authors found that participants in Swiss focus groups experienced fears about future climate scenarios, dissonance with respect to their contribution to the problem, and developed justifications for their own inaction: 'To overcome the dissonance created in their minds' they 'created a number of socio-psycho-logical denial mechanisms. Such mechanisms heightened the costs of shifting away from comfortable lifestyles, set blame on the inaction of others, including governments, and emphasized doubts regarding the immediacy of personal action when the effects of climate change seemed uncertain and far away' (2001: 107). Both unique and universal mechanisms of denial from interpretative narratives to cultural practices surely exist, especially in wealthy nations around the world. Indeed the phenomenon of denial, our collective resistance to disturbing information, poses a new challenge for our modern society that is increasingly relevant in our globalized information age, even beyond the issue of climate change.

Until recently denial has been studied almost exclusively as a psychological phenome-non. Yet even the briefest examination of Norwegian political economy illustrates the relevance of linking psychological material on interactions and culture with macro-level political economy in order to make sense of why people don't want to know about global warming. The notion that well-educated, wealthy people in the Northern hemisphere do not respond to climate change because they are poorly informed fails to capture how, in the present global context, 'knowing' or 'not knowing' is itself a political act. All nations emit carbon dioxide and other climate gases into the common atmosphere. While in the perhaps distant future climate change may have drastic consequences for Norwegians, in the immediate sense Norwegian wealth comes directly from the production of oil and their economy flourishes with their current level of carbon dioxide emissions. Given that Norwegian economic prosperity and way of life are intimately tied to the production of oil, denial of the issue of climate change serves to maintain Norwegian global economic interests and perpetuate global environmental injustice. It is easy to see power operating when key political and economic decision makers negotiate contracts with Shell, British Petroleum, and Exxon, or representatives of nation-states negotiate emissions-trading strategies. Yet everyday people play a critical role in legitimizing the status quo by not talking about global warming even in the face of late winter snow and a lake that never froze. The absence of these conversations worked to hold 'normal' reality in place.

Citizens of wealthy nations who fail to respond to the issue of climate change benefit from their denial in economic terms. They also benefit by avoiding the emotional and psychological entanglement and identity conflicts that may arise from knowing that one is doing 'the wrong thing.' Socially organized denial is thus connected to studies of privilege and has important implications for environmental justice. Most environmental justice research has focused on the experience of less powerful groups who have disproportionate exposure to environmental problems. While important, this approach passes over the role of citizens in wealthy nations, who as we turn a blind eye to the impacts of our high carbon

lifestyles and lead a comfortable life, perpetuate environmental problems such as global warming (see also Baer in this volume; Gardiner this volume).

The conditions for denial are supported by the dynamics of global capitalism. Ongoing changes in social organization, especially the twin forces of globalization and increasing inequality creates a situation in which, for privileged people, environmental and social justice problems are increasingly distant in time or space or both. Social inequality helps to perpetuate environmental degradation making it easier to displace visible outcomes and costs across borders of time and space, out of the way of those citizens with the potential time, energy, cultural capital, and political clout to generate moral outrage and take action in a variety of ways. The issue of climate change will deeply affect nations with less infrastructure long before it will significantly touch the lives of Norwegians or other wealthy people in the Global North. As a result, ecological collapse seems a fanciful issue to people living in 'safe' and 'stable' societies. And with the dynamics of global capitalism in which gaps between rich and poor increase, the problem of denial will become increasingly salient for those who have the economic resources and incentive to build physical, mental, and cultural walls around our daily lives.

To be 'in denial' has a negative connotation—associated with stupidity or ineptitude. Yet a key point in labeling this phenomenon *denial* is to highlight the fact that our non-response is not a reflection of our greed or inhumanity. Indeed, if information on climate change is repelled because it is too disturbing this is the very opposite of an inhumane interpretation. Instead it is my hope that the perspective of denial will draw attention to a new psychological predicament for privileged people. At the same time as it poses individual challenges, our capacity for denial in the face of problems that feel too large to tackle threatens to dangerously erode the critical democratic role of the public sphere at a time when we would seem to need it more than ever.

NOTE

1. This failure of public response is the subject of a large body of literature some of which is addressed in this chapter. In their work on the topic, Lorenzoni et al. 2007 define 'engagement' as consisting of three parts: cognitive (knowledge), affective (concern and motivation), and behavioral (taking an action). See also Moser and Dilling this volume. However, I am interested in response more broadly, including for example the presence or absence of conversations that could generate future democratic outcomes.

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