

“People Want to Protect Themselves a Little Bit”: Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation*

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Emotions can be a source of information and an impetus for social action, but the desire to avoid unpleasant emotions and the need for emotion management can also prevent social movement participation. Ethnographic and interview data from a rural Norwegian community describes how people avoided thinking about climate change in part because doing so raised fears of ontological security, emotions of helplessness and guilt, and was a threat to individual and collective senses of identity. In contrast to existing studies that focus on the public's lack of information or concern about global warming as the basis for the lack of public response, my work describes the way in which holding information at a distance was an active strategy performed by individuals as part of emotion management. Following Evitar Zerubavel, I describe this process of *collective avoiding* as the social organization of denial. Emotions played a key role in denial, providing much of the reason why people preferred to avoid information. Emotion management was also a central aspect of the process of denial, which in this community was carried out through the use of a cultural stock of social narratives that were invoked to achieve “perspectival selectivity” and “selective interpretation.”

In my childhood there was lots of snow all the time, it was cold, all the way down to -40°C , so that diesel cars just stopped working, you know? And we had ice on the lake. It was like that the entire winter, it was always like that, and we had such a cozy time. Those were completely different times.

Lene, Bygdaby businesswoman, age 48

Global climate change is arguably the single most significant environmental issue of our time. Scientific reports indicate that global warming will have widespread ecological consequences over the coming decades including changes in ecosystems, weather patterns, and sea-level rise (IPCC 2001). Impacts on human society are predicted to be widespread and potentially catastrophic as water shortages, decreased agricultural productivity, extreme weather events, and the spread of diseases take their toll. Potential outcomes for Norway include increased seasonal flooding, decreased winter snows, and the loss of the gulf stream that currently maintains moderate winter temperatures, thereby providing both fish and a livable climate to the northern region. In Norway public support for the environmental movement as well as public awareness of, and belief in, the phenomenon of global warming have been relatively high. In Bygdaby¹ the weather was noticeably warmer and drier than in the past. Yet, in spite of the fact that people were clearly aware of global warming as a phenomenon, everyday life went on as though global warming, and its associated risks—was not a

possibility. Despite the apparent heaviness and seriousness of the issue, it was not discussed in the local newspapers, or the strategy meetings of local political, volunteer, or environmental meetings I attended. Aside from casual comments about the weather, everyday life went on as though global warming, and its associated risks—did not exist. Instead, global warming was an abstract concept that was not integrated into everyday life. Mothers listened to news of unusual flooding as they drove their children to school. Families watched evening news coverage of failing Hague climate talks followed by American made sitcoms. Few people even seemed to spend much time thinking about it. It did not appear to be a common topic of either political or private conversation. How did people manage to outwardly ignore such significant risks? Why did such seemingly serious problems draw so little response?

The people of Bygdaby are not unique. Despite the extreme seriousness of global warming, the pattern of meager public response in the way of social movement activity, behavioral changes, or public pressure on governments exists worldwide.² Public apathy on global warming has been identified as a significant concern by environmental sociologists (e.g., Brechin 2003; Dunlap 1998; Kempton, Bister, and Hartley 1995; Rosa 2001). Existing literature emphasizes the notion (either explicitly or implicitly) that information is the limiting factor in public nonresponse. Yet the people I met were generally well informed about global warming. They expressed concern frequently, yet this concern did not translate into action.

Over time I noticed that conversations about global warming were emotionally charged and punctuated with awkward pauses. The people I spent time with and interviewed raised a number of emotional concerns including fear of the future and guilt over their own actions. During an interview, Eirik described the complexity of the issue:

We go on vacation and we go shopping, and my partner drives to work every day. And I drive often up here to my office myself. We feel that we must do it to make things work on a practical level, but we have a guilty conscience, a bit of a guilty conscience.

Yet despite their apparent salience, emotions are missing from the current discussion about nonresponse to global warming. It became further apparent that community members had a variety of tactics for normalizing these awkward moments and uncomfortable feelings—what Arlie Hochschild calls practices of emotion management (1979, 1983, 1990). This article describes how the presence and management of unpleasant and troubling emotions associated with global warming worked to prevent social movement participation in this rural Norwegian community.

In Bygdaby the possibility of global warming was both deeply disturbing and almost completely invisible, and simultaneously unimaginable and common

knowledge. The people I spoke with *did* believe global warming was happening, expressed concern about it, yet lived their lives as though they did not know about it. Following Evitar Zerubavel, I describe this collective distancing from disturbing information as *the social organization of denial* (1997, 2002). Most research to date has examined denial on the level of individual psychology. Yet what individuals choose to pay attention to or to ignore must be understood within the context of both social norms shaping interpersonal interaction and the broader political economic context. Thus Zerubavel argues that we need both psychology and sociology to study “the mental processes of attending and ignoring” (1997:11). The notion of socially organized denial emphasizes that ignoring is *in response to social circumstances, and carried out through a process of social interaction*.

Stanley Cohen describes three varieties of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory (2001). With implicatory denial, what is denied or minimized are “the psychological, political, or moral implications that conventionally follow” (Cohen 2001:8). Denial in Bygdaby was not a negation of information about global warming per se; rather it was a failure to incorporate this knowledge into everyday life or to transform it into social action. People had access to information, accepted this information as true, and yet for a variety of reasons, chose to ignore it. “The facts of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, and 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” is (Cohen 2001:9). The case of implicatory denial, in which people fail to translate concerns into action, is related to questions of social movement *nonparticipation*.

Although not central to the field of environmental sociology, emotions have been described as the missing link in the development of a sociological imagination (Williams and Bendelow 1997) and have recently become a focal point in the study of social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 1997, 1998; Polletta 1998; Smith and Erickson 1997; Yang 2000). Goodwin and colleagues (2001) describe how emotions (1) are tied to the moral values that are part of the movement framing process; (2) shape movement goals; (3) provide motivation for potential participants to enter movements; (4) form the basis of solidarity among movement participants; and (5) drive away unsatisfied participants. Emotions can be part of what prevents people from participating in movements, either by keeping them from participating in the first place, or causing them to leave once involved. Yet despite this advance in interest, little work has been done on the role of emotions in movement nonmobilization (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001).

Here I emphasize the relationship of emotions and emotion management to the failure to generate social movement activity. I introduce the situation in Bygdaby, describe local emotion norms and show how residents used emotion management techniques of selective attention and perspectival selectivity to collectively recreate a sense of “normal” reality in which information about global warming was held at arm’s length.

Methods: An Ethnography of the Invisible

The observations in this article are based on one year of field research including 46 interviews, media analysis, and eight months of participant observation. The people I spent time with lived in a rural community of about 14,000 inhabitants in western Norway. Because my research question concerned why people were *not* more actively engaged with the issue of global warming, gathering information required a number of strategies to minimize the tendency for people to begin talking about global warming because it was a topic they knew I found interesting. I kept the specific focus of my research vague, telling people that my work was on issues such as “political participation” and “how people think about global issues.” I also triangulated between participant observation, interviews, and media analysis. As a participant observer, I attended to the kinds of things people talked about, how issues were framed, and especially noted topics that were not discussed. I watched regional television news and read the local and national newspapers. I paid particular attention to beliefs, emotions, and cultures of talk with respect to global warming, that is, whether it was discussed, if so how did it come up, and how people seemed to feel talking about it. It is important to note that with this approach I was only able to study *expressed* beliefs and emotions. That is, I could only study beliefs and emotions as they were presented to me in interviews and public space. If indeed people do have “real” emotions, they may or may not be the same ones they are willing to publicly express or to share with me or others in interviews and conversation.

I interviewed as wide a variety of people as I could find. Those I interviewed ranged in age from 19 to early 70s. Respondents were from a variety of occupations, and from six of the nine active local political parties.³ They were farmers and students, businessmen and retired shopkeepers, members of the Communist Party, and the Christian People’s Party (see Table 1).

During one or more interviews I asked the participants about their daily activities and what they felt were the most significant challenges faced by their community, nation, and the world. I attempted to minimize the degree to which respondents felt a moral pressure to provide a particular answer by first listening to see whether global warming was volunteered as an issue. If global warming was not raised (as it often was not), I asked what people thought about the recent weather (which was widely described as abnormal), and

Table 1
Interview Respondent Characteristics

Female	21	Labor Party member	8
Male	25	Center Party	2
		Right Party	1
Politically active	28	Red-Alliance (Communist)	1
Not politically active	15	Socialist-Left Party	3
Unknown	4	Christian People's Party	3
		Unknown	28
Under age 20	7	Student	7
Age 20–35	8	Government employee	15
Age 35–60	19	Business owner	5
Over age 69	11	Farmer (at least part time)	4
		Employee of nongovernmental organization (NGO)	4
		Employed in education	5
		Other/Unknown	6

followed by more specific questions such as when did they first begin thinking about global warming and whether they spoke about global warming with family or friends.⁴

Why Norway?

Despite the salience of my questions to the situation in all Western nations, a case study set in Norway is particularly useful. Anyone who begins to talk about movement nonparticipation, denial, and political action in the United States immediately encounters a host of relevant questions: “Do people really know the information?” “Is global warming really happening? I thought it was still controversial.” “Do people really have enough time and money to spare that we can consider it denial that they are not acting?” “People in the United States are apathetic in general, why would it be any different on this issue?” All of these are valid questions that complicate an analysis like mine. Yet each of these factors is either absent or minimized in Norway: Norway has one of the highest levels of gross domestic product of any nation and a 50-year history of welfare state policies that has redistributed this wealth amongst the people (UNDP 2004). In terms of political activity, Norwegians again are exemplary. High percentages of Norwegians vote and they are active in local politics.⁵ When it comes to information and knowledge, Norwegians are a highly educated public. Norway

and Japan are tied for the highest level of newspaper readership in the world.⁶ Furthermore, in contrast to the situation in the United States (Gelbspan 2004), Norwegian media did raise the issue of global warming in their coverage of the unusual weather, and described potential future weather scenarios and impacts. Although there is certainly skepticism about global warming in Bygdaby, such skepticism is much less than in the United States where large counter-campaigns have been waged by industry (McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003). Finally, Norwegians are proud of their awareness of nature, environmentalism, and leadership on global environmental issues including global warming (Eriksen 1993, 1996). If any nation can find the ability to respond to this problem, it must be in such a place as this, where the population is educated, cared for, politicized, and environmentally engaged.

Research in Norway is also unique because of the particularly strong contradiction between professed values and the nation's political economy. In Norway there is strong identification with humanitarian values and a heightened concern for the environment (Reed and Rothenberg 1993). Yet as the world's sixth largest oil producer, Norway is one of the nations in the world that has benefited most from oil production. The presence of high levels of wealth, political activity, education, idealism, and environmental values together with a petroleum based economy made the contradiction between knowledge and action particularly visible in Norway.

"Bygdaby" was selected because its size allowed me access to a wide cross-section of the community, and the fact that residents spoke a dialect I was able to understand. The presence of a nearby lake (that failed to freeze) and a ski area (that opened late) were not conditions I could have elected for, but they nonetheless added to the visibility and salience of global warming for community members.⁷

The Winter of 2000–2001 in Bygdaby

Global warming was clearly salient for Norwegians on both the local and national levels during the period of my research. A number of unusual weather events took place in the fall and winter that year. Most tangible were the very late snowfall and warmer winter temperatures in Bygdaby. Temperatures in the community as reported by the local newspaper showed that the average temperature in the Bygdaby region on the whole was warmer than in the past.⁸ In fact as of January 2001, the winter of 2000 was recorded as the second warmest in the past 130 years. Additionally, snowfalls arrived some two months later than usual (mid- to late January as opposed to November). As a result the ski area opened late and the ice on the lake failed to freeze sufficiently to allow ice fishing, which was once a frequent activity. These had both recreational and economic effects on the community. In fact, not only did the local ski season start late, the

downhill ski area opened with 100 percent artificial snow—a completely unprecedented event.⁹ A woman who was walking on the lake drowned when the ice cracked and she fell through, although this sort of accident could have happened in the spring of any year when the ice normally broke up.

The topic of global warming was also very visible in the media. In addition to weather events, a number of national and international political events brought global warming to Bygdabyingar's minds. In November, several thousand miles to the south, the nations of the world held climate meetings at The Hague. Both the king and the prime minister mentioned global warming in their New Year's Day speeches. Three weeks later on January 22, 2001, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a new report on climate. In March U.S. President George W. Bush declared that following the Kyoto Protocol was not in the economic interests of the United States and flatly rejected it. Each of these events received significant attention in the regional and national press. Newspapers carried headlines like "Warmer, Wetter, and Wilder" (*VG* November 7, 2000), "Green Winters—Here to Stay?" (*Østlendingen* December 12, 2000), and "Year 2000 Is One of the Warmest in History" (*Aftenposten* November 17, 2000). Indeed I was continually impressed with the level of up-to-date information that people had regarding global warming. Here is an excerpt from a focus group that I conducted with five female students in their late teens the week after the climate talks at The Hague failed. Note that these young women were aware of the failed talks, were familiar with (and critical of) the fact that Norway was required to decrease carbon dioxide emissions 5 percent by the year 2008, and that they felt global warming is a real issue, observable in their immediate surroundings:

- Kari: What have you heard about global warming?
 Siri: I have heard about the conference, I became a bit afraid when they didn't reach [an] agreement . . .
 Trudi: Our Minister of Environment! In 2008 we will [have to] decrease our emissions by 5 percent (General laughter).
 Mette: That will help!
 Kari: And is it something that you feel is really happening, or . . .
 (Several speaking all at once)
 Mette: Now it is incredible, 5 °Celsius is, you know, really strange . . . mmm, Ja—
 Siri: (Interrupting) There should be snow [now].
 Trudi: It comes in much closer for us. It is here . . . You notice it. You know, it's getting worse and worse . . . Last year there was snow at this time of year. And actually that is the way it should have been for quite some time now.¹⁰

People in Bygdaby raised the issue of global warming in conversation under a variety of circumstances. These references were most frequently associated with the ever-present small talk about the weather common everywhere in the world and especially prevalent in farming communities:

I sat at the bus stop near two women in their 40s. We had a short wait and the two of them were chatting about the weather. One remarked to the other, “Things are so strange, you know it makes me wonder about climate change.” The other nodded and, after a pause, the conversation moved on to another topic. (Excerpt from field notes)

A Series of Troubling Emotions

Although the sense that people fail to respond to global warming because they are too poorly informed (Bord, Fisher, and O’Connor 1998; Brechin 2003; Dunlap 1998; Kempton, Bister, and Hartley 1995; Read, Bostrom, Morgan, Fischhoff, and Smuts 1994), too greedy, or too individualistic, suffer from incorrect mental models (Bostrom, Morgan, Fischhoff, and Read 1994), or faulty decision-making processes (Halford and Sheehan 1991) underlies much of the research in environmental sociology, the people I spoke with expressed feelings of deep concern and caring and a significant degree of ambivalence about the issue of global warming. People in Bygdaby told me many reasons why it was difficult to think about this issue. In the words of one man, who held his hands in front of his eyes as he spoke, “people want to protect themselves a bit.” Community members described fears associated with loss of ontological security, feelings of helplessness, guilt, and the associated emotion of fear of “being a bad person” (see Table 2).

Not only were these emotions unpleasant in themselves, the feelings that thinking about global warming raised went against local emotion norms. Feeling rules and emotion norms tell us what we ought to feel—they prescribe the appropriate range, intensity, duration, and targets of feelings in different situations (Gordon 1990; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Thoits 1989). Unlike psychologists, sociologists of emotion describe emotion as deeply embedded in and reflective of both social structure and culture: “Many of the feelings people feel and the reasons they give for their feelings are social, structural, cultural, and relational in origin” (Denzin 1984:53). Emotion norms in Bygdaby (and Norway generally) emphasized the importance of maintaining control (*beholde kontroll*) and toughness (*å være tøff*), and for young people, being cool (*kult*)—especially

Table 2
Troubling Emotions Associated with Thinking about Climate Change

Fear/loss of ontological security
Helplessness
Guilt
Threat to sense of identity (“fear of being a bad person”)

in public spaces. Adults, especially men and public figures, faced pressures to be knowledgeable and intelligent. In some settings, especially for educators, there was an emotion norm of maintaining optimism. Educators described balancing personal doubts and deep feelings of powerlessness with the task of sending a hopeful message to students. Arne, a teacher at the local agricultural school I spoke with, expressed:

I am unfortunately pessimistic. I just have to say it. But I'm not like that toward the students. *You know, I must be optimistic when I speak with the students.*

Note that Arne's use of the phrase "you know" highlights the sense that this reality—the need to be optimistic with students—is taken for granted and incontestable. Another relevant emotion norm concerned national pride. Norwegian nationalism is a topic unto itself. For here it will suffice to note that nationalism was prevalent and expressed in Bygdaby through foods, rituals, and wearing the national costume on Constitution Day. Finally, as will be discussed in the following sections, emotions and emotion norms are far more than personal predictions; rather they often legitimize structural conditions.

Risk, Modern Life, and Fears Regarding Ontological Security

Automobile and plane crashes, toxic chemical spills and explosions, nuclear accidents, food contamination, genetic manipulation, the spread of AIDS, global climate change, ozone depletion, species extinction, and the persistence of nuclear weapons arsenals—the list goes on. Risks abound and people are increasingly aware that no one is entirely safe from the hazards of modern living. Risk reminds us of our dependency, interdependency, and vulnerability. (Jaeger, Renn, Rosa, and Webler 2001:13)

One day in mid-December my husband and I, disappointed with the lack of snow in Bygdaby, decided to take the train a few hours away to a neighboring community. The temperature was about -5° Celsius and the sun was shining brightly on the bare fields surrounding our house as we loaded our skis into the taxi and headed down the road to the train. "Do you like to ski?" I asked our driver. "Oh yes, but I don't do much of that anymore," he replied. "When I was a kid we would have skis on from the first thing in the morning to the end of the day. There was so much more snow back then. When you think of how much has changed in my 50 years it is very scary."

Global warming threatens biological conditions, economic prospects, and social structure (IPCC 2001). At the deepest level, large-scale environmental problems such as global warming threaten people's sense of the continuity of life, what Anthony Giddens calls ontological security (1984, 1991). What will Norwegian winters be like without snow? What will happen to farms in the community in the next generation? Giddens' notion of ontological security refers to the "Confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social

identity” (1984:375). Yet Robert Lifton writes that today “widespread imagery of extinction, of an end to humankind . . . casts doubt in each mind about the self’s larger connectedness. . . . Increasingly we have an amorphous but greatly troubling sense that something has gone wrong with our relationship to nature, something that may undermine its capacity to sustain life” (1982:21). Similarly, Ulrich Beck describes the present phase of modernization as a “risk society” (1992) which is characterized by a “growing embeddedness of risk in the public consciousness” (Jaeger et al. 2001:13). If the climate continues to warm, how are people going to survive in 50 years?—in a hundred? Bjorn, a father in his mid-30s, describes how in as few as a hundred years it may not be possible to live on the planet:

. . . we have now come so far that we have begun to see that environment that can mean to protect or not to protect the environment we are living in, you know, in 100 years it’s possible that the environment will be damaged to the point that it isn’t possible to live on earth any more, you know?

Feelings of Helplessness—“You Have to Focus on Something You Can Do”

I think that there are a lot of people who feel that no matter what I do I can’t do anything about that anyway.

As Hege Marie, a student in her late teens described, a second emotion that the topic of global warming evoked was helplessness. The problem seemed so large and involved the cooperation of people in so many different countries. Governments were unable to reach agreement. Perhaps entire economic structures would have to change. Thus it is not surprising that rather than feeling that there was much that could be done, Liv, a woman in her late 60s, pronounced that “we must take it as it comes,” and Gurid told me “you have to focus on something you can do or else you become completely hopeless.”¹¹

Fear of Guilt

Thinking about global warming was also difficult because it raised feelings of guilt. Members of the community told me they were aware of how their actions contributed to the problem and they felt guilty about it.

So many times I have a guilty conscience because I know that I should do something, or do it less. But at the same time there is the social pressure. And I want for my children and for my wife to be able to experience the same positive things that are normal in their community of friends and in this society. It is very . . . I think it is a bit problematic. I feel that I could do more, but it would be at the expense of, it would create a more difficult relationship between me and my children or my partner. It really isn’t easy.

Guilt was also connected to the sense of global warming as an issue of global inequity: Norwegian wealth and the high standard of living are intimately tied to the production of oil. Given their high newspaper readership and level of

knowledge about the rest of the world, community members were well aware of these circumstances. This understanding contrasted sharply with the deeply ingrained Norwegian values of equality and egalitarianism (Jonassen 1983; Kiel 1993), thus raising feelings of guilt.

Fear of “Being a Bad Person”—Identity: Self and National Images

Another source of concern that comes with awareness of global warming is the threat it implies for individual and national self-concepts. Although coming from a different theoretical tradition, social psychological work on identity complements work on emotion management.

Norwegian public self-image includes a strong self-identification of being environmentally aware and humanitarian (Eriksen 1993, 1996). Norwegians have been proud of their past international leadership on a number of environmental issues including global warming. Stereotypical characterization of Norwegians describes a simple, nature-loving people who are concerned with equality and human rights (Eriksen 1993, 1996). Yet Norway has increased oil and gas production threefold in the last 10 years. Expansion of oil production in the 1990s contributed significantly to the already high standard of living, making Norway one of the countries in the world that has most benefited from fossil fuels. In 2001 Norway was the world’s sixth largest oil producer and the world’s second largest oil exporter after Saudi Arabia (MoPE 2002). Information about global warming—such as Norway’s inability to reach Kyoto reduction quotas, increasing carbon dioxide emissions, and government expansions of oil development—makes for an acute contradiction between the traditional Norwegian values and self-image and the present-day economic situation in which high electricity use, increasing consumption, and wealth from North Sea oil make Norway one of larger per capita contributors to the problem of global warming. Bygdabyingar were widely aware of this issue:

But what we have managed to do in our country, it is clear that we have a [long] way to go yet before we will be able to follow up on the goals we have set—that we helped to create internationally. For example, with carbon dioxide we haven’t achieved very much, we have managed a little, but not very much.

For Norwegians, information on global warming not only contradicts their sense of being environmentally responsible. As a problem generated by wealthy nations for which people in poor nations disproportionately suffer, knowledge of global warming also challenges Bygdabyingar’s sense of themselves as egalitarian and socially just.

Social psychologists Victor Geckas and Peter Burke describe how “Various self-theories suggest that people’s self-conceptions are valued and protected and that a low self-evaluation [on criteria that matter] is an uncomfortable condition

which people are motivated to avoid. This may occur through increased efforts and self-improvement or [more typically] through such self-serving activities as selective perception and cognition, various strategies of impression management, and restructuring the environment and/or redefining the situation to make it reflect a more favorable view of the self” (1995:47). In general, “People work hard to verify and maintain the self-concepts or identities they already hold, and do not easily change them” (1995:52). Per Ingvar, a man in his early 30s, explicitly portrayed the identity process as strategic as he described how people selected positive stories about themselves and ignored negative ones:

We have a sense of ourselves as very good at giving money, but we are not as good as we think we are. People watch the TV program all day in the fall¹² and see how much money people are giving and they feel that we are generous. But when you compare it to how much is spent in a weekend on alcohol, or for fireworks at New Year’s . . . when you are going to make a self-image you choose positive aspects. Nobody chooses negative ones.

Emotion, Cognition, and Social Movements

To say that there were unpleasant emotions associated with global warming is not enough to explain the lack of social movement activity in Bygdaby—especially as such emotions can also serve as the impetus for social action. In order to discuss relationships between emotions and movement nonparticipation it is first necessary to review existing literature on relationships between emotions, cognition, and social movement participation. Emotions are linked to movement participation via at least three connected means: emotions as a source of information; the connection of emotions to cognitive aspects of the movement framing process; and the role of emotions in the transformation of identities as participants become engaged.

First, emotions can provide information. Hochschild writes that “[L]ike the sense of hearing, emotion communicates information” (1983:17) and, “feeling provides a useful set of clues in figuring out what is real” (1983:31).

A person totally without emotion has no warning system, no guidelines to the self-relevance of a sight, a memory, or a fantasy. Like one who cannot touch fire, the emotionless person suffers a sense of arbitrariness, which from the point of view of his or her self-interest is irrational. In fact, emotion is a potential avenue to the reasonable view. (1983:30)

Second, emotions form a key part of the movement framing process. For example, in his discussion of blame and framing Jasper emphasizes the link between the emotions people feel and the interpretations they give for problems: “To frame an outcome as either injustice or as bad luck entails how we should feel about it [grief versus indignation, perhaps] as much as how we understand it” (1998:411).

Finally, emotions form a key part of the process of construction and transformation of collective identity in the course of movement mobilization (Calhoun

1991; Cohen 1985). People may feel a sense of pride, gain dignity in their lives (Bell 1994), or thwart feelings of shame (Stein 2001) through movement participation. Jasper emphasizes how “One can also have negative emotions about one’s identity, such as shame or guilt, many movements are motivated precisely to fight stigmatized identities” (1998:415). Thus, by serving as sources of information, elements in the framing process, and ingredients in the transformation of identity, emotions have been understood as impetus for engagement in social movements. Less has been described about the circumstances under which emotions involved framing a situation or identity construction work against movement mobilization.

A Cultural Took Kit of Emotion Management Strategies

If the emotions of fear, guilt, hopelessness, or “fear of being a bad person” worked against social change in Bygdaby, how might this have happened? In Bygdaby there were active, observable moments, which, although fleeting, pointed to the role of emotions in the generation of nonparticipation as an active process—what Nina Eliasoph calls the *production* of apathy (1998). If what a person feels is different from what they want to or are supposed to feel they may engage in some level of *emotional management* (Hochschild 1979, 1983, 1990; Thoits 1996). While the act of modifying, suppressing, or emphasizing an emotion is carried out by individuals, emotions are being managed to fit social expectations, which in turn often reproduce larger political and economic conditions. Arlie Hochschild’s work on how flight attendants managed emotions in order to produce a pleasant experience for airline passengers (and thus increase income for the airline) is an excellent example of how the act of emotion management may link individuals, cultural norms, and political economy. In the case of global warming in Bygdaby, emotions that were uncomfortable to individuals were also uncomfortable because they violated norms of social interaction in the community. And at least some of these emotion norms in turn normalized Norway’s economic position as a significant producer of oil.

Because the primary way to control one’s emotions is by controlling one’s thoughts, the study of emotion management techniques draws on research at the intersection of theory on emotion and cognition. Because thinking can lead to different emotional states, and because emotions are difficult to control directly, “the main way of controlling one’s emotions is to exert control over one’s thoughts” (Rosenberg 1991:130; see also Hochschild 1983; Jasper 1997; Thoits 1984). In Bygdaby people managed the unpleasant emotions described in the previous section by avoiding thinking about them, by shifting attention to positive self-representations, and—especially in terms of the emotion of guilt—by framing them in ways that minimized their potency. When it came to the strategy of framing and of shifting attention to positive self-representations,

Table 3
Strategies of Emotion Management

Selective attention
Controlling exposure to information
Not thinking too far ahead
Focusing on something you can do
Perspectival selectivity
“Amerika” as a tension point
“Norway is a little land”

community members had available a set of “stock” social narratives upon which to draw, many of which were generated by the national government and conveyed to the public through the media. Table 3 gives an overview of the range of avoidance or normalizing strategies I found to be in use in Bygdaby with respect to global warming.

Ann Swidler uses the metaphor of “tools in a tool kit” to describe the set of resources available to people in a given culture for solving problems (1986). Using this metaphor I will briefly describe how these culturally available strategies served as tools that were used to achieve selective attention and perspectival selectivity—and thereby to manage thinking in such a way as to manage emotions.

Selective Attention

Selective attention can be used to decide what to think about or not to think about, that is, screening out—for example—painful information about problems for which one does not have solutions (e.g., “I don’t really know what to do, so I just don’t think about that”). Strategies of emotion management in the form of selective attention were primarily aimed at managing the emotions of fear and helplessness. Here I describe the techniques of controlling exposure to information, focusing on something you can do, and not thinking too far into the future.

“We Can’t Dig Ourselves into Depression, Right?”—Controlling Exposure to Information

I often get afraid, like—it goes very much up and down, 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 [situation] here continues we could come to have no difference between winter and spring and summer—and the ice that is melting and that there will be flooding, like, and that is depressing.

Community members described feelings of uncertainty as being easily evoked by too much information, thus adhering to the emotion norms of maintaining optimism and control required managing exposure to information on global warming. Educators and activists in particular had to be careful not to become overwhelmed in order to continue their work:

No, but you can't—you know I feel that in a way the philosophy of all this is happening so fast. *I do as much as I can*, and *we can't focus on what's painful*. We don't go in and have meetings and talk about how gruesome everything is. We talk about how it is and *can't dig ourselves down into depression, right?*

Another activist described how she reads very little of the details, that it is in fact “better not to know everything.” People were aware that there was the potential that global warming would radically alter life within the next decades, and when they thought about it they felt worried, yet they did not go about their days wondering what things would be like for their children, whether these could be the last years farming could take place in Bygdaby, or whether their grandchildren would be able to ski on real snow. They spent their days thinking about more local, manageable topics. Mari described how “you have the knowledge, but you live in a completely different world.”

“I Don't Allow Myself to Think So Far Ahead”

There is a lot of unrest in the country. There is a lot that is negative. Then I become like—yeah, pfff! But when someone has something that they are working on, in relation to that you are trying to influence—then its like, okay to be optimistic after all. But I think as this can just explode around us, and so it is well that *I don't allow myself to think so far ahead*.

The most effective way to manage unpleasant emotions was to turn your attention to something else, as Lise, a young mother describes in the above passage, or by focusing attention onto something positive, as she also describes, were common. Norwegian sociologist Ann Nilsen made similar observations in her work with young adults. Nilsen writes that “these interviews so far suggest that these young Norwegians are uncertain about what the long-term future will bring in their personal lives. *This uncertainty is kept at bay by not looking too far ahead, neither in time nor in space*” (1999:181 [my emphasis]). Her interviews with young adults on global warming and their sense of the future contain similar expressions of both powerlessness and guilt. Here a 23-year-old young woman in Nilsen's study reflects on the environment and the Third World (she had just mentioned climate change in the preceding passage):

It's terrible to think of, that we live so well while others live in such miserable circumstances. Of course, it's very good to have a comfortable life. . . . I enjoy it . . . but I feel so bad about the others. *I have a guilty conscience, that's why I try not to think about it, keep it at a distance.* . . . I still think these are important matters, but it's as if I can't make myself be

concerned all the time, not any more. . . . Terribly important these matters, but I don't feel involved in a way, don't want to get involved. (Nilsen 1999:184 [my emphasis])

Focusing on Something You Can Do

Similar to the strategies of controlling exposure to unpleasant information and not thinking too far ahead was the strategy of focusing on something that you could do. Here Peter, a local politician, describes how global warming is a theme that "everyone is interested in" but which does not receive attention on the local level because there "isn't so much that you can do."

Yes, it is of course a theme that everyone is interested in, but locally it isn't discussed much because . . . well climate change, you know there isn't so much you can do with it on a local level, but of course everyone sees that something must be done . . .

Peter's comments are similar to the earlier passage with Lise who describes both the need for optimism and the underlying hopelessness that global warming raised.

Perspectival Selectivity

Unpleasant emotions of guilt and those associated with a "spoiled identity" could be managed through the cognitive strategy of perspectival selectivity. Perspectival selectivity "refers to the angle of vision that one brings to bear on certain events" (Rosenberg 1991:134). Euphemisms, technical jargon, and word changing are used to dispute the meanings of events such as when military generals speak of "collateral damage" rather than the killing of citizens. Stanley Cohen writes, "Officials do not claim that 'nothing happened' but what happened is not what you think it is, not what it looks like, not what you call it" (2001:7). Here I describe two "stock" social narratives that were frequently used to change the angle of vision one might bring to the facts about Norway's role in the problem of global warming.

"Amerika" as a Tension Point

Bygdabyingar knew an amazing number of facts about the United States. References to the United States appeared in numerous conversations I participated in and overheard while in Bygdaby. I use the Norwegian spelling of the word to indicate that I am talking about a stereotypical Norwegian view of the United States, what Steinar Bryn (1994) calls Mythic America. There are many stereotypical images of the United States in Norway, but to me what is most interesting is not the images themselves but how they were used.

Stories about "Amerika" were often told in strategic moments to deflect Norwegian responsibility and shortcomings and to support notions of Norwegian exceptionalism (we may not be the best, but we aren't anything as bad as

they are). For example, in late April of 2001 U.S. President George W. Bush made the infamous statement that he would not sign the Kyoto Protocol¹³ on the grounds that it was “not in the United States’ economic interests.” Many Bygdabyingar took the opportunity to tell me of their criticism of this position. Bush’s comment was widely repeated and discussed in the Norwegian press and in public commentary. Here the statement was used in a motivational speech by a local young woman on May 1, 2001:

The Kyoto agreement is about cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 5 percent. And even that ridiculous pace was too much for the climate-hooligan George W. Bush in the United States. The head of the USA’s environmental protection department said that “We have no interest in meeting the conditions of the agreement.” Well, that may be so, but it is other countries that will be hit the hardest from climate change. . . .

Yet despite widespread criticism of the United States for taking such a position, this is essentially the same move that the Norwegian government made in dropping national emissions targets, increasing oil development, taking a leading role in the development of the carbon trading schemes known as the Kyoto and Clean Development Mechanism, and shifting the focus from a national to an international agenda (Hovden and Lindseth 2002). In this context, criticizing the poor climate record of the United States directs attention away from Norway’s shifting behavior, sending the message that at home things are not that bad. This narrative is what Opatow and Weiss call “self-righteous comparisons,” a form of denial of self-involvement in which the speaker casts themselves “as environmentally ‘clean’ and blameless in comparison to ‘dirty’ and reprehensible others” (2000:481). In the words of Bryn, “Norwegians easily project certain aspects of their own culture onto America, thereby protecting their own cultural innocence and avoiding a deeper analysis of the Norwegian cultural identity (1994:4).

“Norway Is a Little Land”

A second narrative, “Norway is a little land,” deflected troubling information and emotions connected to Norway’s role in global warming with the subtext that “we are so few, it doesn’t really matter what we do anyway.” While it often conveyed a genuine sense of powerlessness, this discourse also worked to let people off the hook, creating the sense of “why bother.” During a conversation about his opposition to Norway joining the European Union, Joar, a Bygdabyingar in his early 50s explained how this emphasis on Norway’s size, while in some sense true, is also a strategic construction:

Kari: But what kind of a role do you think that Norway should take internationally?

Joar: *Well, we are of course a very small country, almost without meaning, if you think economically we are completely uninteresting.*

Kari: But Norway has lots of oil compared with other countries.

Joar: Yeah, yeah, okay. We are in fact almost at the level of Saudi Arabia. *But it [is] of course an advantage to be meaningless.* It doesn't really matter for us to argue, *they don't bother to get mad at us, because we are so meaningless.* And in that connection, we are a bit you know, peaceful, right. We have been involved in both the Middle East and . . . (here he refers to the Oslo Accords and his second example is not spoken, just given as a gesture of the hand for emphasis).

Note that as the conversation continues he uses Norway's small economy as the example of why it "is meaningless." When I asked him about Norway's oil, he suddenly "remembers" the fact that Norway is, after Saudi Arabia, the second largest oil exporter in the world. Then he explains the strategic advantage of being "meaningless," that other countries don't bother to get upset with Norway. At the end of the passage he adds to the construction of Norway as a nation not worth getting upset with by drawing on the sense of Norway as a "peaceful nation" (referring to the peace prize) and their involvement in the Oslo Accords. In being small, meaningless, and peaceful, he is constructing in our conversation a sense of Norwegian innocence that is very prevalent.

The phrase "Norway is a little land" gives the sense that they are doing "their part" and turns blame back onto those who are "worse," especially the United States, as described earlier. It serves to imply that, "the problem isn't really us. We, in fact, are innocent."¹⁴ This can be seen as a classic example of what Opatow and Weiss call denial of self-involvement: "Denial of self-involvement minimizes the extent to which an environmental dispute is relevant to one's self or one's group. . . . By casting themselves as "clean" and insignificant contributors to pollution, they assert their nonrelevance to environmental controversy" (Opatow and Weiss 2000:485). The phrase "Norway is a little land" emphasizes the insignificance. Norway may be little, but the nation's ecological footprint, at 6.2 hectares per capita, is significant and one of the highest in Europe.¹⁵

Discussion: Emotions, Emotion Management, and the "Production of Apathy"

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)

Nonresponse to the possibility of global warming may seem "natural" or "self-evident"—from a social movement or social problem perspective not all potential issues get translated into political action. Yet with a closer view we can understand nonresponse as a *social process*. Things *could have been* different. Community members could have written letters to the local paper articulating

global warming as a political issue; they could have brought the issue up in one of the many public forums; made attempts to plan for the possibility of what the future weather scenarios might bring; put pressure on local and national leaders; decreased their automobile use; asked for national subsidies to cover the economic impacts of the warm winter; or engaged their neighbors, children, and political leaders in discussions about what climate change might mean for their community in the next 10 and 20 years. Indeed in other parts of the world things *were* different. The severe flooding in England that fall was thought to have been linked to global warming by at least some of the impacted residents. People from affected communities in England traveled to the climate talks at The Hague to protest. More recently, three cities in the United States have initiated a lawsuit against the federal government over global warming. Bygdabyingar could have made a similar move—rallied around the lack of snow and its economic and cultural impacts on some level, any level, be it local, national, or international. But they did not.

Most of the emotions Bygdabyingar felt in conjunction with information on global warming are fear, guilt, and concern over individual and collective identity which could have motivated social action. Perhaps in some cases these emotions did generate actions, but they did not generate many. That winter, the question of global warming was glaringly apparent in the unusual weather, artificial snows, unfrozen lake, and thousands of dollars in lost tourist revenues. Yet as a political issue it was invisible.

In summary, in Table 4, I lay out the relationships between the “problematic” emotions of fear, helplessness, guilt and “fear of being a bad person,” or threats to identity that Bygdabyingar described in connection with the topic of global warming. Alongside these I list the extant emotion norms of being optimistic, maintaining control, and national pride. The third column lists corresponding emotion management strategies I observed. Summarizing from the table, emotions of fear and helplessness contradicted emotion norms of being optimistic and maintaining control. These emotions were particularly managed through the use of selective attention: controlling one’s exposure to information; not thinking too far into the future; and focusing on something that could be done. Although the range of emotion management techniques appeared to be used across the community, I found these strategies used with more frequency by educators, men, and public figures. The emotion of guilt and the fear of being a bad person or desire to view oneself and the collective community in positive light contrasted not only with specific local emotion norms surrounding patriotism, but also the general social psychological need to view oneself in a positive light (i.e., identity management). Guilt and identity were managed through the use of perspectival selectivity: by emphasizing Norway’s small population size and that no matter what they did, Norwegians were not as bad as the “Amerikans.”

Table 4
 Relationship between Emotions, Emotion Norms, and Emotion Management Strategies with Respect to Global Warming in Bygdaby

Emotion	Emotion norm	Emotion management strategy
Fear, helplessness	Be optimistic, maintain control	<i>Selective Attention</i> Controlling exposure to information Not thinking too far ahead Focusing on something you can do
Guilt, identity	Be proud of Norway (managing spoiled identity)	<i>Perspectival Selectivity</i> Not as bad as the Americans Norway is a small country anyway

Conclusion: Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation

Emotions can be a source of information (Hochschild 1983) and an impetus for social action (Jasper 1997, 1998; Polletta 1998), but my observations in Bygdaby suggest that the desire to avoid unpleasant emotions and the practice of emotion management can also work against social movement participation. Although not normally applied to environmental issues, research on the sociology of emotions is highly relevant to understanding community members' reactions to global warming. While current work in environmental sociology has emphasized the "information deficit model" (Buckeley 2000), my ethnographic and interview data from a rural Norwegian community do not support this interpretation. Instead this research indicates community members had sufficient information about the issue but avoided thinking about global warming at least in part because doing so raised fears of ontological insecurity, emotions of helplessness and guilt, and was a threat to individual and collective senses of identity. Rather than experience these unpleasant emotions, people used a number of strategies including emotion management to hold information about global warming at arm's length.

I describe this process as the social organization of denial (Zerubavel 1997, 2002). Until recently denial has been studied almost exclusively at the individual level as a psychological phenomenon. But to the extent that emotion norms shape what is acceptable to feel, identity is collectively constructed and emotion management draws on a set of "stock" cultural stories within which individual denial is socially organized (Cohen 2001; Zerubavel 1997, 2002). My

understanding of this process draws upon Ann Swidler's description of culture providing resources for constructing strategies of action (1986). In this view culture shapes social action not through supplying guiding values, but through providing cultural components or "chunks of culture" (Swidler 1986:283) that can be used as tools to construct "strategies of action." Such a "tool kit" may contain "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (Swidler 1986:273). For example, "Publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others" (Swidler 1986:283). In drawing upon strategies of not looking too far into the future or narratives about the small size of Norway, local residents had available a set of options. These strategies can be seen as tools in a "tool kit."

Emotions played a key role in denial, providing much of the reason why people preferred not to think about global warming. Furthermore, the management of unpleasant and "unacceptable" emotions was a central aspect of the process of denial, which in this community was carried out through the use of a cultural stock of strategies and social narratives that were employed to achieve selective attention and perspectival selectivity. Thus movement nonparticipation in response to the issue of global warming did not simply happen, but was actively produced as community members kept the issue of global warming at a distance via a cultural tool kit of emotion management techniques.

The questions and contradictions raised by the issue of global warming apply to a variety of present problems and are relevant for wealthy people around the world. This project also raises questions about democracy and the limitations of public political process. Giddens writes that "we live in the world in a different sense from previous eras of history . . . the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what 'the world actually is'" (1991:187). With the information age the experiences and perceptions of space and time for people in places like Bygdaby are changing. People in wealthier parts of the world like Bygdaby are now learning a great deal about "distant" places. At the same time more of their food and clothing are imported from poor nations and more of their society's waste products are exported there. These ongoing global changes in social organization create a situation in which, for privileged people, environmental and social justice problems are increasingly distant in time or space or both. What does it take for people to engage in social movements under these new conditions? Will Bygdabyingar, Norwegians, or people around the world begin to react to global warming? The answers are difficult to predict, but this project suggests that in order for people to do so emotion and conversation norms may need to shift, or individuals will have to have a different relationship with emotions of powerlessness, fear, and guilt.

What is also clear is that privileged people around the world will be faced with more and more opportunities to develop a “moral imagination” and “imagine the reality” of what is happening, or construct their own innocence from the resources of their culture’s ever-present toolkit.

ENDNOTES

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¹I have changed the names of all people and places. “Bygdaby” is a term used to describe the size of the community, a place somewhere between *bygd* (rural district) and *by* (a city).

²While there is significant scientific consensus, we can not *prove* that global warming is happening, or that specific weather patterns are in fact global warming. Yet given the *seriousness* of predicted outcomes, it makes sense to ask, why is the public so apathetic?

³With 21 parties nationally, the political spectrum in Norway is very broad. While I did not interview community members associated with every active party, the six parties included were the largest and most significant (accounting for 37 of the 43 seats held in the county council) and reflect a wide range of the political spectrum.

⁴Despite downplaying my interest in global warming, the possibility that people told me what they felt they should say is ever present. Nonetheless, between the use of general observations and downplaying my interest, I believe I was fairly successful in avoiding this situation.

⁵Levels of political alienation in Norway are lower than in most other Western democratic nations. High levels of political activity in Bygdaby follow the larger national pattern of political engagement from voting to participation in local political parties, involvement with grassroots organization and in the streets protest. Voter turnout in the local election of 1999 was 60 percent. National voter turnout in Storting (National Parliament) elections was 78 percent in the 1997 election and has been around the 80 percent level since the 1970s. Bygdabyingar were actively engaged with issues from opposition to the European Union and racism to land zoning and the local labor market. There were also local volunteer organizations, involved in everything from human rights to opposition to the European Union. In addition to the formal political system, politics happened in the streets. During my eight-month stay in the community residents took to the streets with signs and songs to recognize Crystal Night, to picket over the closing of a local slaughterhouse and to march in a parade for the 1st of May.

⁶Norway and Japan were tied for the highest level of newspaper readership in the world (World Association of Newspapers, *World Press Trends 2000*, Paris, Zenith Media, 2000).

⁷Although there are relatively strong rural–urban and regional differences within Norway, I expect readers familiar with other regions of the country will recognize the features of life I describe. National level discourses, such as “Amerika as a tension point” and “Norway is a little land” are equally applicable nationwide, while emotion norms and management strategies connected to sense of place and traditional practices are likely more variable.

⁸The average temperature in the Bygdaby region was 1.5 degrees Celsius warmer than the 30-year average.

⁹When the resort did open on December 26 it was with a single run of 100 percent artificial snow. No snow had fallen naturally. Skiers found themselves on a tiny corridor of “snow” between exposed rocks and trees. That year the resort owner invested US\$1.8 million in snow-making

equipment and another US\$170,000 on electricity and labor to create the artificial snow. The process required the installation of about 4.5 miles of water lines in order to pump water some 1,500 feet up the mountainside! It took people working around the clock for 14 days to produce snow for the one ski run.

¹⁰This interview was on November 28. Bygdaby did not get snow until mid-January.

¹¹Given that global warming exists whether or not people pay attention to it, this reaction is actually a fear of *experiencing* powerlessness. Social psychologists describe perception as influenced by the needs people have to feel good about themselves and to feel that they can affect the world around them.

¹²He refers to TV Aksjon, a major fund-raising event. Coverage of the topic and fund-raising efforts are televised throughout the day on the national station.

¹³The Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Both the narratives about “Amerika” and “Norway is a little land” clearly hold truth. The United States refuses to sign the Kyoto protocol. Moreover, it uses its political power to thwart carbon dioxide emission reductions. And given the size and complexity of global warming, what Norwegians do or do not do may be relatively insignificant. While their plausibility lends to the effectiveness of these tools, it does not change the fact that such narratives are used in a strategic manner for the negotiation of information and the management of guilt.

¹⁴Norway’s footprint is actually the highest in Europe but other nations are close. For comparison: Sweden 5.9; France 4.1; Germany 5.3; Spain 3.8; Philippines 1.5; United States 10.3. From “Ranking the Ecological Impact of Nations (1997).” Retrieved May 10, 2006 <<http://www.ecouncil.ac.cr/rio/focus/report/english/footprint/ranking.htm>>.

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