

“WE DON’T REALLY WANT TO KNOW”

Environmental Justice and Socially Organized Denial of Global Warming in Norway

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Global warming is the most serious environmental problem of our time and a major issue of environmental justice. Yet meager public response in the form of social movement activity, behavioral changes, or public pressure on governments is noteworthy in all Western nations. Existing research emphasizes lack of information as a limiting factor for failed public response. This explanation cannot account for the significant population who know about and express concern for global warming. Ethnographic and interview data from a rural Norwegian community indicate that nonresponse is at least partially a matter of socially organized denial. Because Norwegian economic prosperity is tied to oil production, collectively ignoring climate change maintains Norwegian economic interests. Most environmental justice research focuses on people facing disproportionate exposure to environmental problems. This project examines wealthy citizens who perpetuate global warming as they turn a blind eye. Environmental justice implications of socially organized denial are discussed for global warming and beyond.

Keywords: *global climate change; global environmental justice; carbon dioxide; lay perceptions of global risk; information-deficit model; interpretive sociology; micro sociology; sociology of denial*

A wide variety of leading scientists predict that global climate change will have drastic consequences for human society and global ecosystems (e.g., Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2001). This is arguably the single most significant environmental problem of our time. Yet, despite the extreme seriousness of this global environmental problem, the pattern of meager public response in the form of social movement activity, behavioral changes, or public pressure on governments is noteworthy in all Western nations (Brechin, 2003; Dunlap, 1998). And, it is paradoxical to note, as evidence for climate change pours in and scientific consensus increases, interest in the issue throughout many Western nations is declining (e.g., Hellevik, 2002; Saad, 2002). For example, Gallup polls for the United States show that the percentage of people who “personally worry a great deal about global warming” dropped from

Author’s Note: I wish to thank Jocelyn Hollander, Marit MacArthur, Evtiatar Zerubavel, the editors, and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments in the preparation of this manuscript.

Organization & Environment, Vol. 19 No. 3, September 2006 347-370

DOI: 10.1177/1086026606292571

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35% in 1989 to 28% in 2001, whereas the percentage who worry “not at all” rose from 12% to 17% during the same time period (Saad, 2002). Even more dramatically, biannual national-level survey research in Norway finds a significant and steady downward trend in public interest and concern about global warming, with the percentage of respondents who replied that they were “very much worried” declining steadily from 40% in 1989 to less than 10% in 2001 (Barstad & Hellevik, 2004; Hellevik, 2002).

Public “apathy” with respect to global warming has been identified as a significant concern by environmental sociologists (Brechtin, 2003; Bulkeley, 2000; Dunlap, 1998; Kempton, Boster, & Hartley, 1995; O’Connor, 2002; Rosa, 2001), social psychologists working in the area of risk perception (Slovic, 2000; Stern, 1992), and environmental writers (e.g., Gelbspan, 2004, 2005). Existing research assumes that a lack of information about the causes of global warming is the primary reason for the public’s failure to respond—an orientation that Harriet Bulkeley (2000) calls the “information-deficit model.” Although information-deficit explanations are indispensable, they do not account for the behavior of the significant number of people who do know about global warming, believe it is happening, and express concern about it. Nor can they explain why levels of concern are decreasing as scientific consensus increases and predictions about the consequences of climate change become more severe. Furthermore, as Read, Bostrom, Morgan, Fischhoff, and Smuts (1994) pointed out, only two simple facts are critical to understanding climate change. First, if significant warming is occurring, it is primarily the result of an increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide (and other greenhouse gases) in the earth’s atmosphere. Second, the single most important source of carbon dioxide emissions is the combustion of fossil fuels, most notably coal and oil. If people do not know this, then why not? Certainly there are cases when the public may lack information; however, is this the limiting factor behind greater public interest, concern, or political participation? Clearly knowledge is necessary to generate public response (e.g., O’Connor, 2002); however, is knowledge sufficient? This article uses in-depth qualitative data to unpack the dynamics of public nonresponse by describing a series of strategies one group of people used to normalize information about global warming.

In addition to being a major environmental problem, global climate change is a highly significant global environmental justice issue (Athanasίου & Baer, 2002; Baer et al., 2000; Agarwal & Narain, 1991; Donohoe, 2003; Pettit, 2004; Roberts, 2001). Climate change is an issue of global environmental justice in at least four ways: (a) wealthy industrialized countries of the Northern hemisphere contribute highly disproportionately to the pollution of the common global airshed (IPCC, 2001); (b) low-lying geography and weaker infrastructure mean that consequences of global climate change will be worse in the poorer nations of the Southern hemisphere (Guha, 2002; Roberts, 2001; Watson, Zinowera, & Moss, 1998); (c) climate treaty negotiations have favored industrialized nations in terms of outcome and process (Baer et al., 2000; Centre for Science and Environment [CSE], 1998); and (d) intergenerational equity: Those alive today are negatively altering the earth’s atmosphere and climate, reducing its capacity to sustain life for generations to come (Agarwal & Narain, 1991; Athanasίου & Baer, 2002; Howarth & Norgaard, 1990). Nearly all environmental justice research to date has focused on the experience of less powerful groups who have disproportionate exposure to environmental problems (e.g., Bullard, 1990). Although important, the approach of “studying down” passes over the role of citizens in wealthy

nations in the perpetuation of global environmental problems such as global warming.

THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

The environmental justice dimensions of public nonresponse become most evident if public apathy is not a result of lack of information. The Norwegian economy and present standard of living intimately depend on fossil fuels and oil production. Expansion of oil production in the 1990s contributed significantly to the already-high standard of living in Norway, placing Norway among the few countries in the world that has benefited most from fossil fuels (Norwegian Ministry of Petroleum and Energy [MoPE], 2002). These developments have occurred while the Norwegian government has backed away from Kyoto targets and concurrently, as mentioned above, the percentage of the public who were “very much worried” about global warming dropped from 40% to 10%.

This project began as an examination of how well-informed citizens of a wealthy industrialized nation experience information on global warming. I spent 1 year conducting participant observation, interviews, and media analysis in the rural Norwegian community of “Bygdaby.”¹ The issue of global warming was clearly salient for Norwegians at local and national levels during the period of my research (June 2000 to June 2001). That fall and winter, unusual weather patterns were connected with global warming in the media and in the minds of the public. November brought severe flooding in Oslo and a number of other major cities. Snowfalls were late across most of Norway. The local ski area opened in late December with 100% artificial snow—a completely unprecedented event. Bygdaby did not get its first snow until late January—some 2 months later than expected.

Unusual weather patterns may or may not be evidence of climate change. Regardless, the lack of snow and warm temperatures were tangible happenings that reminded people about scientific predictions and made these predictions feel closer to home, more real. Furthermore, in the minds of community members, unusual weather was often linked with climate change. In Bygdaby, casual comments about the weather—a long accepted form of small talk—commonly included references to unusual weather, shaking of heads, and phrases such as *klimaendring* or *climate change*. I was often impressed with the level of specific information and detail that people were able to provide about past and present weather patterns. People spoke often of the weather being, “less stable” than in the past. Eirik, a community member in his early fifties who worked for the county, voices a sentiment that was commonly heard:

Eirik: And it has been quite clear since the end of the 1980s, early 90s. There is a totally different climate here now than when I was a child.

Researcher: Really?

Eirik: Oh, yes. Much colder winters and more stable (in the past). Even though there have always been small changes, it is clear that there are now significant differences. And at the same time I see a connection with all the things that we hear from Africa and other continents about climate changes, famine, dry spells, I feel that we learned this in school, that these climate gases, they are at a certain level, and we can measure that they are so much higher than they have been.

Although I did meet one person who said he was not concerned about global warming, and a couple who raised the possibility of doubt, I did not meet anyone

who dismissed it as an insignificant issue. Here Hilde, a farmer's wife in her mid-forties, describes her reactions to the issue.

Researcher: I want to ask you about some different things that have happened here in Bygdaby that I have noticed since I arrived in November, and one of them is that there hasn't been any snow. What do you think of that?

Hilde: Yes we think it's a bit odd, you know. The way I remember winters, or winters before, you know there was always lots of snow, and it was cold the entire winter, you know.

Lars, another local political leader, who stated that he believed climate change was happening, expressed some reservation on the issue of whether climate change was of human origins. Nonetheless, he said that caution was the wisest approach:

Researcher: What about climate change?

Lars: Well, it's like politics. You have to choose who you trust. And I surely believe that there is climate change because we are constantly having new records, so that can't be explained away. But whether it is pollution that is responsible, or whether it is happening on its own, that's too difficult to know. I don't know. There are scientists who say that it is coming no matter what. But of course we shouldn't take that chance. We shouldn't pollute more than necessary here in this world.

Regardless of the ostensible seriousness of global warming in the minds of community members, it was not discussed in the local newspaper, or at the strategy meetings of local political, volunteer, or environmental groups I attended. In fact, aside from offhand comments about the unusual weather, life in the community and nation went on as though global warming and its associated risks did not exist. From my direct observations and the reports of community residents in interviews, people were aware of the causes of global warming, had access to information which they accepted as accurate, yet for a variety of reasons they chose to ignore it. This was a paradox. How could the possibility of climate change be deeply disturbing and almost completely invisible—simultaneously unimaginable and common knowledge?

As I became increasingly convinced that the people I spoke with were well informed about global climate change, my research questions shifted. I began asking myself a different set of questions: How did people manage to produce an everyday reality in which this critically serious problem remained invisible? What difference did it make that people who knew about global warming failed to take action?

This article presents evidence that so-called public apathy, or nonattention to global warming in Bygdaby was a matter of denial. In contrast to the dominant, psychological approach to denial that focuses on the individual without social context, I draw on Eviatar Zerubavel's (1997, 2002) work on denial as a socially organized process. Thus far, to my knowledge no research has systematically examined individual responses to climate change within a specific social context. Nor has the organization of information on climate change and the acceptance or denial of that information been studied. With these approaches, the current project makes new connections between research in environmental sociology, social psychology, environmental justice, and the sociology of culture. I begin with a review of literature in these fields, move to an examination of the events in Bygdaby, and close with a discussion of the environmental and social justice implications of socially organized denial for global warming and beyond.

“IF PEOPLE ONLY KNEW”: ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE INFORMATION-DEFICIT MODEL

Existing analysis of the lack of public response to global warming comes predominately from the fields of environmental sociology, risk analysis, and social psychology (e.g., Bord, Fisher, & O'Connor, 1998; Brechin, 2003; Bulkeley, 2000; Dunlap, 1998; Kempton et al., 1995; Read et al., 1994; Rosa, 2001). A dominant theme of this research has been to emphasize the public's lack of information about the causes of global climate change. In his international study of public understanding and concern (that did not report data from Norway), Brechin (2003) lamented the low level of awareness in the United States:

In the most recent international study on knowledge about global warming, the citizens of Mexico led all fifteen countries surveyed in 2001 with just twenty-six percent of the survey respondents correctly identifying that burning fossil fuels was the primary cause of global warming. The citizens of the US, among the most educated in the world, were somewhere in the middle of the pack, tied with the citizens of Brazil at fifteen percent. Even the Cubans, at seventeen percent, were slightly more informed than the American public. (p. 125)

Similarly, in an earlier comparative study of six nations, Dunlap (1998) found the public to be “poorly informed about global warming” (p. 498). Other work described how confusion results from the fact that people relate to global warming through other existing generalized “frames” or “mental models” such as “ecological problem” in general, “air pollution” or “ozone depletion” (Dunlap, 1998; Stern, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995). Environmental sociologists and others lamented the confusion between *global warming* and the *ozone hole* (e.g., Bell, 1994; Bostrom, Morgan, Fischhoff, & Read, 1994; Read et al., 1994) and investigated the role of media framing in public misunderstanding (Bell, 1994; Dispensa & Brulle, 2003; Ungar, 1992). Psychologists have described “faulty” decision-making powers such as “confirmation bias” (Halford & Sheehan, 1991). Researchers have also asserted that part of the difficulty is that knowledge of global warming requires a complex grasp of scientific knowledge in many fields (e.g., Johansen, 2002).

Although useful, such work implies that “if people only knew,” they would act differently—for example, drive less, “rise up,” and put pressure on the government. For example, Halford and Sheehan (1991) wrote that “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” (p. 606). Bostrom et al. (1994) described how effective public response is limited because “lay mental models of global climate change suffer from several basic misconceptions” (p. 968). They wrote that “To a significant degree the effectiveness with which society responds to this possibility depends on how well it is understood by individual citizens” (p. 959). Not only does this work fail to explain the declining interest in global warming in many Western nations during the past decade but it also does not account for the behavior of the significant number of people who do know about global warming, believe it is happening, and express concern (Hellevik & Høie, 1999), as appeared to be the situation for the majority of residents of Bygdaby.

Individuals may block out or distance themselves from certain information to maintain coherent meaning systems (Gecas & Burke, 1995), desirable emotional states (Meijnders, Midden, & Wilke, 2001; Rosenberg, 1991), a sense of

self-efficacy (Gecas & Burke, 1995), and 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 produced within and attributed to specific political economic relations. Thus, alongside the serious threat to democracy posed by industry influence over the production and dissemination of knowledge—for example, the fact that increased corporate control of media limits and molds available information about global warming (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003), and corporate-funded research centers generate conflicting knowledge (McCright & Dunlap, 2000; McCright & Dunlap, 2003) are other phenomena that reinforce public nonresponse: how people cope with that information that 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 that is the focus of my work.

SOCIOLOGY OF DENIAL

The concept of denial is generally considered in the domain of psychology. However, the information individuals find disturbing, and the mechanisms they employ to protect themselves from such information, may also be analyzed within the context of social interaction and the broader political economy. Eviatar Zerubavel (1997, 2002, 2006) emphasized that society teaches us what to pay attention to and what to ignore. By *socially organized denial* I mean that ignoring information about global warming takes place in response to social circumstances and is carried out through a process of social interaction.

British sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001) described three varieties of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory. *Literal denial* is “the assertion that something did not happen or is not true” (p. 7). With respect to the issue of global warming, this form of denial is akin to the generation of counterclaims by oil companies that climate change is simply not happening (see, e.g., Gelbspan, 1997; McCright & Dunlap, 2000; McCright & Dunlap, 2003).² A second variety is *interpretive denial* in which the facts themselves are not denied but are given a different interpretation. Euphemisms, technical jargon, and word changing are used to dispute the meaning of events—for example, military officials speak of *collateral damage* rather than the *killing of citizens*.

Cohen’s (2001) third category is implicatory denial. In this case, what is minimized is not information but “the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow” (p. 8). What I observed in Bygdaby was not a rejection of information per se but the failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action. As Cohen put it,

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. (p. 9)

From my observations, the people I spoke with did believe climate change was happening, expressed concern about it, yet lived their lives as though they did not

know or care about it. This condition is akin to Robert Lifton's (1982) description of a double life, discussed below.

PRIVILEGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

As discussed above, global climate change is not only the most serious environmental problem of our time but also a highly significant human rights or "environmental justice" issue (Agarwal & Narain, 1991; Athanasiou & Baer, 2002; Baer et al., 2000; Petit, 2004; Roberts, 2001). As noted, industrialized nations of the Northern hemisphere emit greenhouse gases disproportionately to the global airshed, whereas lack of resources and infrastructure place poor nations most at risk (Watson, 1998). Although the phrase *environmental justice* was at first applied mostly to domestic situations (e.g., Bullard, 1990), there is increasing attention to a global environmental justice approach that identifies links between human rights and environmental degradation (Athanasiou & Baer, 2002). Global warming will precipitate the most extensive and violent impacts to date against the poor and people of color of the globe.

Within the field of environmental justice, most research "studies down," examining the experience of those individuals and groups who disproportionately suffer exposure to environmental hazards (e.g., pesticide exposure of Hispanic farm workers, community organizing against toxic waste incinerators in African American neighborhoods), rather than the social dynamics among wealthy citizens that reproduce unequal environmental damage for poorer areas. The almost complete lack of work on the behavior of those everyday citizens benefiting from environmental inequity further perpetuates the invisibility of the actions of wealthy citizens in the North. Part of what this article seeks to achieve is to place questions about citizen nonresponse into their global context. Given that Norwegian wealth and way of life are intimately connected to the problem of global warming—not only through individual automobile usage but also through political economic relations that have generated their wealth via the production and marketing of North Sea oil—ignoring or failing to respond to the issue of climate change serves to maintain Norwegian global economic interests and to perpetuate global environmental inequalities.

DATA AND METHOD

My questions about why people fail to respond to global warming are salient for the people of all Western nations. Yet a study set in Norway is particularly useful. Anyone who begins to consider denial in the United States immediately encounters a host of relevant questions: "Do people really know the information?" "Is climate change 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?" Each of these valid questions complicates an analysis like mine. Yet each of these factors is either absent or minimized in Norway: Norway has one of the highest levels of GDP of any nation and a 50-year history of welfare state policies that has redistributed this wealth among the people (U.N. Development Program, 2005). In addition, Norwegians are politically involved, environmentally oriented, well educated,

and tied with Japan for the highest level of newspaper readership in the world.³ If there is a nation that can find ways to respond to global warming, it must be a place such as Norway, where the population is educated, cared for, politicized, and environmentally engaged.

From June 2000 to May 2001 I carried out fieldwork in western Norway in the form of participant observation, media content analysis, and in-depth interviewing. The people I spent time with lived in a rural community of about 14,000 inhabitants. In-depth exploration of relationships between thinking and meaning in everyday life can only be accomplished within a living context. During participant observation I paid attention 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, again paying attention to what was present and missing, and how the information presented was framed.

In addition, I conducted interviews with a total of 21 women and 25 men ranging in age from younger than 20 years to older than 60 years, from a variety of occupations, and from six of the nine active local political parties. I selected informants based on their (a) knowledge of local environmental politics, culture, or history; (b) range of sex, occupations, ages, life experiences, and political backgrounds; (c) ability to articulate their views; and (d) personal rapport. I contacted people for interviews whom I suspected had a variety of insights or experiences relevant to my research questions. From each interview came a range of answers, new ideas, and information. When interviewing people, I sometimes asked if they could suggest someone they knew with very different views on this topic for me to interview in the future. Informants for in-depth interviews were thus selected through a nonprobability, purposive and/or judgmental, or quota sampling strategy (Babbie, 1995, pp. 292-293). I interviewed as wide a variety of people as I could find. They were farmers and students, businesspeople and retired shopkeepers, members of the Communist Party and the Christian People's Party. Interviews were focused on what it felt like to live in Bygdaby, how people created a sense of community, and how the relationships between the community and the outside world were structured. I asked what people felt were the most significant challenges faced by their individual community, their nation, and the world. If global warming was not raised by the interviewee (as it often was not), I asked what people thought about the recent weather (that was widely described as abnormal) and followed with more specific questions including whether people believed climate change was happening, whether they thought it would affect their lives, spoke about it with friends, and what responsibility, if any, Norwegians might have in addressing it. All but two interviews were conducted in Norwegian (in the case of two exceptionally good English speakers). All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed in Norwegian, and key passages translated into English. Interviews were semistructured and lasted from 1 to 2 hours.

It is not, of course, possible to prove that people in Bygdaby failed to respond to global warming because of denial. Furthermore, for community members the experience of denial is about negotiating a slippery zone of knowing and not knowing. It is very difficult to identify exact moments when one is in the act of avoiding something. Rarely is one entirely aware of switching off, blocking information out. Reality is collectively produced in a manner that often feels "natural" or "seamless." This in turn makes for the effectiveness of this strategy, making it easy to forget that one is avoiding something, thereby naturalizing the

process and creating the sense that nothing is going on, reality is just “naturally this way.”

Although, as an environmental sociologist, I had a particular interest in global warming, it soon became clear that the moral questions and dilemmas raised by this issue were not unique. The strategies I observed people using to normalize information about global warming were used in other cases, particularly in relation to issues of global poverty and human rights. Furthermore, as I have described, global warming is linked to human rights and global distributive justice. Thus, in seeking to understand how people made sense of global warming, I did not view the issue in isolation. Instead, I observed how the feelings global warming evoked and strategies that people used to normalize information at times overlapped with, or reinforced, ways of responding to other issues.

VISIBLE AND TROUBLING EVENTS: A WARM WINTER, FAILED CLIMATE TALKS, AND ARTIFICIAL SNOW

Although *lack of information* and *lack of concern* are often described as reasons why people do not respond to global warming, my observations and conversations with residents of Bygdaby do not support the idea that they were ignoring climate change because they naively did not know why it was happening, or were simply unconcerned. Political and meteorological events were connected with global warming in the media and minds of the citizens of Bygdaby during the period of my fieldwork. Among the most significant and tangible of these events was the very late snowfall and warmer winter temperatures. The local newspaper reported that temperatures in the Bygdaby region were much warmer than average. October, November, and December were 4, 5, and 1.5 degrees, respectively, Celsius warmer than the 30-year average. As of January 2001, the winter of 2000 for Norway on the whole was recorded as the second warmest in the past 130 years. In addition, snowfalls arrived some 2 months late (in mid- to late January as opposed to November). As a result of these conditions, the ski area opened late, with recreational and economic effects on the community, and the ice on the local lake failed to freeze sufficiently to allow for the once-frequent activity of ice fishing. That winter a woman who was walking on the lake drowned when the ice cracked and she fell through. Ketil, an administrator of a small cultural institute, described the lack of ice on the lake to me this way:

Like the lake, now there is ice on it this year, but until 15 years ago people came to Bygdaby from eastern Norway, from Hallingdal and other places by train. They stayed overnight at the hotel in order to use the ice. It was completely black out on the ice every single winter. They went out there and fished. It was very good fishing. But you know it hasn't been like that for the last 10 years, now it is completely gone. Nobody comes here any more. It hasn't been safe ice for nearly 10 years now. After a day or two it will rain.

The lack of snow in the community was also an unusual event, although community members had come to notice it over a period of several years. A young woman from Bygdaby, Vigdis told me

It is, well, milder. There has been less change between the seasons. There is less snow and more, like halfway winter, and the summers have been colder. I think

that it comes from climate change. Because it didn't used to be this way. And it's like, known.

Perhaps the clearest community impact from the weather that winter can be measured in dollars (or kroner as the case may be). Late snows delayed the opening of the ski area. The shorter ski season meant that some three dozen resort employees began their winter work season in late December or January rather than November. When the resort did open on December 26, it was with a single long run of 100% artificial snow. Aside from the artificial snow on the slope itself, the mountain was bare. Skiers found themselves on a tiny corridor of "snow" between exposed rocky slopes and trees. The resort owner had just that year invested kroner \$17 million (~ U.S. \$1.8 million) in snow-making equipment and another kroner \$1.5 million (~ U.S. \$170,000) on electricity and labor to create the artificial snow for that season. The process required the installation of 7 km of water lines earlier that fall that were used to pump water some 800 m up the mountainside. In mid-December it was finally cold enough to start making snow. It took people working around the clock for 14 days to produce snow for the one 1,200-m long ski run.

This effort testifies to the importance of skiing to the local community, economically and culturally, and to the fact that unusual weather patterns, whether or not they were the effects of climate change, were very tangible events for community members, including those who owned the ski area, and those who worked there, and all who owned or worked in ski shops, hotels, and other business associated with winter tourism. The shortened ski season affected everyone. In the words of one taxi driver: "It makes a difference if we move from 5 months of winter tourism to only 3. 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."

Related national and international events that made headlines that winter included the climate meetings at The Hague, the release of a major report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in mid-January, and statements by President Bush in March on the U.S. rejection of the Kyoto Protocol. In the same period that unusual weather patterns were observable in Bygdaby (November 1 through January 31) I recorded 34 stories on climate change in the three largest papers in Norway.⁴ Issues associated with climate change made the cover of these papers multiple times during that period. In some cases, these stories were accompanied with dramatic photos. The lack of snow and warm temperatures and political events of the winter of 2000-2001 were tangible and provided opportunities for people to reflect on the possibility and consequences of climate change.

"WE DON'T REALLY WANT TO KNOW"

Norwegians are among the most highly educated people in the world. Global warming was frequently mentioned, and community members seemed to be informed and concerned about it. Yet at the same time it was an uncomfortable issue. People were aware that climate change could radically alter life in the coming decades, yet they did not go about their days wondering what life would be like for their children, whether farming practices would change 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, a local high school student, described how "you have the knowledge, but you live in a completely different

world.” Vigdis, a college-age student who was involved in antiracism work, 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 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. In the words of one environmentally active man in his mid-forties,

I don’t think we can get around feeling problems by pushing it out and pretending that it isn’t there. Everyone says that everything is so sad and sorry that they don’t want to hear about environmental problems. But they know. They know that there are serious problems. And I must say that I don’t know anyone who goes around and is bothered in their daily life due to environmental problems. I don’t do it and I don’t know anyone else who is. But that in between it is discouraging and an emotional weight, I don’t think that can be avoided.

Or, as Marit, a mother in her late 30s put it, “I think that there are lots of people who think, I don’t have that problem myself, I can’t do anything about it anyway.”

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.” Because 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 a state of *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 thirties: “We live in one way and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It’s a skill, an art of living.”

This lack of connect between abstract information and everyday life is also reported by Norwegian sociologist Ketil Skogen (1993), who found that for young people in a rural Norwegian community, “environmental issues in general and global threats like the greenhouse effect in particular, are seen as abstract and irrelevant, and are generally not something young people think about” (p. 232).

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DENIAL: RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES FOR HOLDING INFORMATION “AT ARM’S LENGTH”

I describe what community members told me about why they did not want to know about climate change. Yet how did they manage to ignore this reality

TABLE 1: Strategies of Denial**Interpretive**

Selective interpretation

Narratives of "mythic Norway"

Norwegians are a simple people, close to nature, egalitarian, humanitarian

Perspectival selectivity

"Amerkia" as a tension point

"Norway is a little land"

"We have suffered"

Claims to virtue

"Gas plants are better than coal"

"Increasing production of Norwegian oil will help the climate"

Cultural

Norms of attention

Time: Future is vague, feels distant. Past feels present.

Space: Focus on the local.

Emotion and conversation norms

Optimism, maintain control, patriotism, Be "cool."

in everyday life? If denial is actively produced, in what activities did people engage? *Bygdabyingar* (local term for the people of Bygdaby) had available a variety of methods for normalizing or minimizing disturbing information, what can be called strategies of denial. I have placed these strategies into two broad categories: interpretive and cultural (see Table 1). On the one hand, residents structured their relationship to information on global warming by telling stories or interpretation. *Bygdabyingar* 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 (see Table 1). In addition to the more identifiable strategy of interpretation, *Bygdabyingar* 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.

Elsewhere I describe how community members used an available repertoire of conversational tactics, emotion management strategies, and techniques of shifting attention to follow these local cultural norms (Norgaard, 2006). Here I elaborate on interpretive and cultural denial.

INTERPRETIVE DENIAL

Interpretive denial involved the use of stock stories to frame potentially disturbing information about climate change in a more positive light. I briefly describe selective interpretation, perspectival selectivity, and claims to virtue as three separate styles of framing before providing a more detailed description of claims to virtue as an example of interpretive denial. Social psychologist Morris Rosenberg (1991) noted that to the extent that they are able, "people tend to assign those meanings to events that will produce the desired emotions" (p. 135). This process is described as selective interpretation. For example, members of *Bygdaby* had a set of "stock stories" about who they were, which I call narratives of "mythic Norway." Norwegian sociologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993)

described five elements of national identity that are highlighted or in Goffman's (1959) terms "overcommunicated" in public discourse: egalitarian individualism, honesty and sincerity, a connection with rural life, relationship to nature, and the image of "unsophisticated but practically minded" farmers. 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. Idealized portrayals of Norwegian national identity tell a particular story about who Norwegians really are that, in emphasizing simplicity, purity, and innocence, deflects attention from the fact that Norwegian wealth, political economy, and way of life are intimately connected to the problem of global warming—not only through individual actions of automobile usage but also through the political economic structure that has created Norwegian wealth through the production and marketing of North Sea oil. Notions of mythic Norway were portrayed in official government images and drawn on by advertisers and everyday people in Bygdaby.

Bygdabyingar also normalized information about global warming using what Rosenberg (1991) called "perspectival selectivity." *Perspectival selectivity* "refers to the angle of vision that one brings to bear on certain events" (p. 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—"America 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% of total greenhouse gas emissions, while accounting for only 4% of the global population visibly in their articles. Although obviously the United States must be held accountable for their emissions, framing the figure in terms of total emissions and population makes the difference between the United States 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 Opatow and Weiss (2000) called "denial of self-involvement."

Robert J. Lifton (1982) coined the phrase *claim to virtue* 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 toward the opposite end as they appear (in the case of the doctors, saving the Jews rather than killing them), they are made acceptable. Two such claims to virtue were in use in Bygdaby and Norway with respect to climate change. I present two examples below.

Claims to Virtue: Combating Global Warming by Increasing Carbon Dioxide

Although the Norwegian government speaks urgently of the need to reduce emissions of climate gases, they are currently 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 an attempt to meet Norwegian climate commitments through the trading of climate gas emissions rather than reduction of actual output.

“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 produces less carbon dioxide than sources such as 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 greenhouse gases must decrease, it has used a claim to virtue to argue that by building two new natural gas plants—thereby increasing Norway’s emission of greenhouse gases—it was actually helping to solve the problem of global warming. This strategy has met with criticism within Norway however:

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 CO₂ emission reductions that Norway would have to complete in order to fulfill its international obligations. (Hovden & Lindseth 2002, p. 158)

“Increasing production of Norwegian oil will help the climate.” A second example of claims to virtue, the justification for increasing national oil production, follows a similar pattern. As described above, Norway has increased production of oil and gas threefold in the past 10 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 perceptives, 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 & Lindseth, 2002, p. 153). Hovden and Lindseth (2002) described 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 environmentally 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 CO₂ and No_x. (p. 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.

Selective interpretation, perspectival selectivity, and claims to virtue worked together to reinforce one another. For example, narratives of national identity 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. Finally, members of Bygdaby used the series of justifications for individual and national behavior regarding climate change that were legitimated by perspectival selectivity.

CULTURAL DENIAL

At the same time as they feel “just like everyday life,” norms of attention reflect a particularly insidious form of social control that Steven Luke (1974) called the “third dimension of power”:

is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable. (p. 24)

This third dimension, the control of what people perceive as normal, works together with Luke’s first and second dimensions of power: outright coercion and the ability to set the public agenda. Although outright coercion is a serious matter, it is also more easily recognized, identified, and in (so-called) democratic societies, condemned. As Cohen (2001) noted, “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 publicly remembered and acknowledged” (pp. 10-11). Table 1 lists norms of attention, conversation, and emotion as three cultural strategies of negotiating information. For the purposes of space, I only describe how norms of attention with respect to time and space shaped community members relationship to global warming. Other cultural mechanisms that produced a disconnect between information on global warming and everyday life such as emotion norms surrounding the expression of fear, guilt, and helplessness are described in more detail elsewhere (Norgaard, 2006).

CULTURAL NORMS OF ATTENTION: THE CONSTRUCTION OF TIME AND SPACE

The normative delineation of our attention and concern is one of the most insidious forms of social control. Through a variety of norms of focusing we internalize as part of our “optical socialization,” society essentially controls what thoughts even cross our minds. (Zerubavel, 1997, p. 51)

From the perspective of sociology of cognition, people learn to think through socialization into different “thought communities” (Zerubavel, 1997). In Bygdaby, disturbing information was also held at a distance by following established cultural practices of what to pay attention to. Events occupy our imagination, our conversations, and our hearts, producing the sense of what is near and far, significant and insignificant, personally relevant or personally irrelevant. Social

norms of attention—that is, the social standard of “normal” things to think about—are powerful, albeit largely invisible, social forces shaping what we actually do think about. Just as social norms of attention create the sense of what is real, they also work to produce the sense of what is not real, what is excluded from the immediate experience of normal reality.

The residents of Bygdaby created a sense of community and a sense of reality through what they collectively paid attention to and what they collectively ignored. Norms of attention set boundaries for awareness in terms of time and space. How far into the future or past was it normal to think? How close or how far should one focus their attention? It didn’t take long to notice that norms of attention in Bygdaby that directed attention to local happenings and to the past were at odds with the scales of time and space needed to conceptualize climate change, to make it seem real.

Scales of Time: The Presence of the Past

Environmentalists have described how Western societies’ failure to think on a longer time scale is part of why we have created long-term environmental degradation such as nuclear waste. In contrast, the Iroquois nation is reputed to make decisions from the perspective of how they would affect people living 7 generations in the future. From a sociological standpoint, these are issues of the social organization of time. Although there were many reasons why thinking about the consequences of climate change was not part of daily life in Bygdaby, one of them was clearly the disjuncture between the sense of time as it was normally experienced, and the sense of time necessary to observe climate change or make its consequences seem “real.” Although they appeared and felt “natural” or “inevitable,” perceptions of time were in fact socially produced.

Daily life in Bygdaby, especially for the long-time Bygdabyingar, was marked by a pronounced sense of the past. Within Bygdaby it was much more normal to think about what was happening in the community 200 years ago than to ponder what might happen 20 years in the future. The sense that the past was more real than the future was created through emphasis on tradition and the arrangement of physical space.

Physical monuments, traditional practices, and local institutions each served to orient the collective focus of the community backwards in time. Throughout downtown Bygdaby one finds dozens of *minnesmerker* or “memory markers,” monuments to past events—a stone cross marks when the village became Christian, another stone marker indicates the place where Russian soldiers camped during World War II, a sculpture downtown commemorates a local man who became a famous artist during the 20th century. Tradition was very important to the community. People prepared and ate traditional foods, wore traditional clothing on significant days, and kept to their traditional dialect. All this served to orient the collective focus of the community backwards in time. It was common to remark that people from Bygdaby “*har øyne i nakken*” (literally “to have eyes on the back of their heads”), meaning that they looked more to the past than to the future. Jorn was an administrator with the City, and for him this emphasis on tradition and the past made it harder to do things in new ways, or do them differently: “People are so focused on things that happened 20 years ago. They tell you that you can’t do this or that because 20 years ago that person did x or y.”

Similarly, Norwegian social anthropologist Ann Nilsen (1999) interviewed young people in Bergen about environmental problems and their sense of the future. Nilsen observed that,

The most serious consequences from damaging the environment, are long term. In societies such as the contemporary Western world where thinking and attention span are aimed at the extended present, or the immediate future, environmental problems of the magnitude that climate change represents, for instance, will be difficult to find solutions to, also because of a general time horizon involving less attention to the long-term future. (p. 176)

Bygdaby and Norway as a whole are experiencing rapid social, political, and economic change. Although once Bygdabyingar worried about basic survival, now they faced a new set of threats from the decline of the welfare state and radiation from deteriorating Russian nuclear facilities to the ecological chaos predicted by climate change. As the future began to look problematic, some community members, especially the older generation, have changed their focus of attention and begun to look backwards even more.

Trond, a man in his thirties from the community explained that the emphasis on tradition in Bygdaby served as a *haldepunkt* or “anchoring point” for people in the face of changing times. We discussed the widespread use of traditional images in advertising, and the fact that many so-called traditions are in fact very new. For example, many of the designs of the *bunads* (local traditional costumes) are in fact recently created. And most of the cobblestone streets in Bygdaby had been added in recent times because people liked them. Here it is appropriate to mention Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) concept of *invented traditions*—that traditions are practiced because they serve the needs of the present generations. In the face of uncertain futures and a confusing wider world, ideas of tradition and links to the past served as an anchoring point in changing times, providing a sense of security that at least some people believe helps them to deal with the larger world.

Hiding Under the Nisselue? The Social Organization of Space

Norms of attention not only marked the social experience of time but also marked the proper spatial range of attention. Events that were “close” were considered more real and worthy of attention than those that were “far.” Yet how close was *close* and how far was *far*? How was the social experience of place, this sense of the local, constructed?

It is by managing boundaries of spatial attention that people create the sense of “imagined community” Benedict Anderson (1991) described as forming a nation. In Bygdaby, it was more normal to pay attention to events that happen in northern Norway than events happening in Rome—which was roughly an equal distance to the south—because these occurred outside national boundaries. Despite the physical distance, events in northern Norway felt closer than those in Rome (or even Denmark, which was actually much closer than northern Norway).

Obviously thinking about global warming required not only an ability to visualize the future but also the ability to imagine events that are taking place elsewhere, such as melting polar ice caps or flooding islands in the South Pacific. In

Bygdaby, an emphasis on the local was created through focus on local events and history, maintaining a strong boundary between insiders and outsiders, reading the local newspaper, and the phenomenon of *lokalepatriotisme* or “local patriotism.” Soren, one community member described this sense of parochialism:

As Soren put on his hat and gloves and prepared to step out into the cold May evening, he noticed the small red button that was pinned to the curtain of the house, a relic of the house’s former occupants: “Stem Nei” it declared, Vote NO! [on European Union membership] “That’s just typical Norwegian,” he commented. “Oh,” I replied, ever eager for an opportunity to hear a local person’s perspective on such matters, “how so?” “Well, the sense of just being focused on ourselves, kind of like hiding our heads under the sand, only we have a saying “to pull the *nisselue* [a typical Norwegian hat] down over your shoulders.” It’s like we don’t want to know, we don’t need to worry about what happens outside our borders.” (Except from field notes, May 2001)

Cultural norms of attention made for a disjuncture between what is required to think about global warming and what is normal to think about within Bygdaby. Seeing weather patterns as potentially connected to global warming required the ability to visualize these global events—doing so magnifies their perceived seriousness, and failing to do so made them seem less significant, less real. Bygdabyingar had a collective backwards focus, whereas the consequences of climate change will be felt in the future.

CONCLUSION

How does a wealthy industrialized nation respond to the global environmental problem of climate change? Why are people not responding? How do people manage to produce an everyday reality in which this critically serious problem is invisible? The majority of existing studies on public response to climate change within environmental sociology, from survey work on attitudes and beliefs, to psychological study of mental models, use individuals as their unit of analysis. Studies of perception that focus solely on individuals are unable to grasp the meaning of differences across cultures, subculture, or nationality. More important, a focus on individuals in the absence of attention to immediate culture or economic context leaves out relationships between individual cognition and the larger social context. Durkheim wrote in 1915 that, “social existence determines social consciousness,” that is, that the most basic categories of thought, our “cognitive architecture” derive from the social conditions of existence. Marx’s concept of ideology and Dorothy Smith’s (1979) work on feminist standpoint theory each highlight the Marxist observation that mental structure is determined by social structure. Social context itself can be a significant part of what makes it difficult to respond to climate change. 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.

It is my view that sociological study of the issue of climate change has paid too little attention to the role of political economy on the one hand and social psychology and culture on the other. I attempt to highlight the importance of these dimensions in a way that bridges the troublesome, yet nevertheless artificial,

gap between micro- and macro social processes. In contrast to a focus on individuals, I analyze public response to climate change in the context of this contradiction between environmental values and political economy, between knowledge and everyday life. I describe *global warming* as an issue about which people cared and had considerable information, but one about which they did not really want to know. Rather, community members collectively held information about global warming at arm's length by participating in cultural norms and buy using a series of interpretive narratives to deflect disturbing information and normalize a particular version of reality in which "everything was fine." As such, public nonresponse to global warming was produced through practices of everyday life.

The notion that well-educated, wealthy people in the Northern hemisphere do not respond to climate change because they are poorly informed not only appears inadequate to explain the happenings in Bygdaby but also 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. Although in the vague and 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 the people I spoke with in Bygdaby played a critical role in legitimizing the status quo by not talking seriously about global warming even in the face of late winter snow and a lake that never froze all winter. The absence of these conversations worked to hold "normal" reality in place.

Former Norwegian Minister of the Environment Børge Brende has expressed that "Norway is one of the countries in the world that has benefited most from fossil fuels. This gives us a special responsibility in the politics of climate change, especially with respect to poor countries" (Hovden & Lindseth, 2002, p. 143). Despite its reputation for environmental leadership, Norway has tripled its production of oil and gas in the past 10 years. Under the Kyoto Protocol, Norway promised to limit greenhouse gas emissions to a maximum of 1% above 1990 levels, yet emissions are expected to increase by 50% between 1990 and 2010. In 2001, total Norwegian CO₂ emissions were 42.4 million metric tons—an increase of 7.2 million tons or 20% from the 1990 level of 35.2 million tons (Statistisk Sentralbyrå [SSB], 2002). Norwegian researchers Hovden and Lindseth (2002) noted that "Norway, an already wealthy and highly developed country, built a very significant fortune in the 1990s from the very activity that has made stabilisation of CO₂ emissions next to impossible" (p. 163).

The notion that people are not acting against global warming because they do not know reinforces a sense of their innocence in the face of these activities, thereby maintaining the invisibility of the power relations that are upheld by so-called apathy about global warming. Within this context to "not know" too much about climate change maintains the sense that if one did know one would have acted more responsibly. This can be seen as a classic example of what Opatow

and Weiss (2000) 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” (Opotow & Weiss, 2000, p. 485).

The psychology of “turning a blind eye” or “looking the other way” is a tricky matter. These phrases imply that we have access to reality, but choose to ignore it because it is convenient to do so. This might be a simple fraud: the information is available and registered, but leads to a conclusion which is knowingly evaded. “Knowing,” though can be far more ambiguous. We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don’t know. (Cohen, 2001, p. 5)

Citizens of wealthy nations who fail to respond to the issue of climate change benefit from their denial in short-run 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.”

Until recently, denial has been studied almost exclusively as a psychological phenomenon. 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 to make sense of why people do not want to know about global warming. 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 nonresponse is not a matter of greed or inhumanity. Indeed, if information on climate change is too disturbing to be fully absorbed, or integrated into daily life, this is the very opposite of an inhumane interpretation. At the same time, the perspective of denial draws attention to a new psychological predicament for privileged people, one that is increasingly relevant in our globalized information age.

The global environmental justice dimensions of *denial* extend beyond global warming. Wealthy people are protected from full knowledge of many environmental and other social problems by national borders, gated communities, segregated neighborhoods, and their own fine-tuned yet unconscious practices of not noticing, looking the other way, and normalizing disturbing information. Nonresponse or denial is further fueled by the organizational culture of institutions, social inertia, and social accommodation (Beamish, 2001, 2002). Why and how middle-class and wealthy people perpetuate environmental problems is as important to the field of environmental justice as critical White studies is to the field of race, or masculinity is to the study of gender. For people of color living on low-lying Pacific islands or struggling from flooding in New Orleans, the key questions of the moment may be how to effectively organize to bring attention to their plight and justice to their lives. For middle-class environmentalists living in wealthy nations like myself, the key questions look different: Why are so many people in the first world so willing to live in denial? How is this denial managed? What does it look and feel like? What are its personal and social consequences?

The conditions for denial are only supported by the dynamics of global capitalism. McKibben (1989, 2005) and others asserted that our ability to alter the earth’s climate has fundamentally changed our relationship to nature. Social

theorists from Ulrich Beck (1992) to Anthony Giddens (1991) noted the complexity of technological and institutional forces that mediate the new relationship between society and nature. This relatively new organizational complexity of production and consumption raises questions about the limits of individual human agency in response to global environmental problems including climate change (T. Luke, 2005). Furthermore, ongoing 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. 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 who are most politically able to respond. Environmental problems are kept invisible to those with the time, energy, cultural capital, and political clout to generate moral outrage and take action in a variety of ways. The environmental problem of toxic waste is invisible to those who do not live near hazardous sites, or can move away, hire lawyers, and effectively make a fuss if they do. The environmental problem of contaminated water feels invisible to those who can easily afford to buy their water bottled. Although Norwegians will not escape the consequences of climate change, given their material advantage, climate change will deeply affect (or perhaps now affects) people with less infrastructure long before it will significantly touch the lives of Norwegians to the same degree. There is a difference between the loss of a town's winter tourism as may be happening in Bygdaby, and the outright displacement of thousands of people from flooding as happened in New Orleans or elsewhere in the world. With the protection afforded by material resources, ecological collapse seems a fanciful issue to those in the "safe" and "stable" societies of the North as we buy our fruits and vegetables from South America, our furniture from Southeast Asia, and send our wastes into the common atmosphere. And with the dynamics of global capitalism in which gaps between rich and poor increase, issues of global environmental justice and denial will become increasingly salient for what Stanley Cohen (2001) aptly terms, "educated and comfortable people living in stable societies" (p. xvi). Concern about global warming has dropped in the United States and Norway, even as scientific consensus and the presence of visible events has increased. Will this "compassion fatigue" spread to other issues characterized by disturbing information that happens far enough away that we can appear not to notice?

NOTES

1. I have changed the names of all people and places in this text. The word *Bygdaby* in Norwegian is the term used to describe the size of the community where I lived, a place somewhere between *bygd*, a rural district, and *by* a city.

2. Note that countercampaigns in the United States may in part account for declining interest in the United States (see, e.g., McCright & Dunlap, 2003).

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

4. A content analysis conducted on my return to the United States revealed that there were twice as many stories on global warming in the top four Norwegian papers in November 2000 as there were in the top four U.S. papers.

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