A Dialog Between Renee Lertzman and Kari Norgaard

In this special interview, psychosocial theorist and Ecopsychology *Editorial Board Member Renee Lertzman (right) speaks with environmental sociologist Dr. Kari Norgaard (far right). They discuss Dr. Norgaard's research on climate change denial and new book "Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Political Economy" (MIT Press), and its relationship to Dr. Lertzman's research on psychosocial dimensions of environmental engagement. In this candid discussion, the authors highlight important themes in their recent work on the psychological impacts and adaptation to climate change and the practical import of these findings for individuals and policy makers and share some of their personal reactions to these daunting issues and how they maintain emotional resiliency and motivation.*

Dr. Kari Norgaard's work on the social production of climate denial has been at the forefront of psychosociological engagement with the human dimensions of climate change, since the publication of her 2006 paper, "'People Want to Protect Themselves a Little Bit': Emotions, Denial and Social Movement Non-Participation. The Case of Global Climate Change." In her study, elaborated in her forthcoming book *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Political Economy* (MIT Press, 2011), Norgaard surfaces and illuminates the nuanced ways in which people living in a progressive, educated community (in Norway) negotiate the distress of climate change, through an analysis of how denial is "done." In so doing, she promotes an understanding of denial and other modes of response as no longer the province of individual psychology, but social and cultural processes. In this dialog, Dr. Norgaard and Renee Lertzman discuss these sticky issues of the psychosocial dimensions of climate change, finding overlap in our respective approaches and orientations and agreeing on the need for the psychological community to engage actively with researchers in related fields in the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. Dr. Norgaard is currently an associate professor in sociology and environmental studies and will join the faculty at University of Oregon in the Fall of 2011. Dr. Lertzman is currently a fellow with the Portland Center for Public Humanities at Portland State University and a consultant. She is working on her manuscript, "The Myth of Apathy: A Portrait of Environmental Melancholia."

RL: Kari, I'd like to start by asking you how you found your way into this topic of denial in a Norwegian community.

KN: I came into this project a bit unexpectedly. I was teaching at the time, and I came across a reading by Joanna Macy. Macy was talking about difficulties that people have taking in disturbing information about environmental problems. I realized that was exactly what was going on in my classroom. From there, I began thinking about the relevance for my interest in how people experience climate change. As you know, there has been a lot of literature from multiple disciplines attempting to answer the question of why so few people are responding to this very serious environmental problem. Most of that literature has followed the assumption that the reason for social inaction is that people don't really understand how serious the problem is. From there I found literature on the social organization of denial (Eviatar Zerubavel) and other sociological work on apathy by Nina

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Eliasoph. I am a third-generation Norwegian/American and have been very interested in that country in terms of their environmental and political engagement. It is also a very far northern country, which means that the impacts of climate change are much more visible than most of the United States. The high level of environmentalism, political participation, and visible climate effects make it an ideal place to think about how people experience climate change.

I decided that would be a unique place to think about how is it that people grapple with very disturbing environmental information. There were many studies that were more experimental or using public opinion surveys, which had asked why public response to climate change has been so limited. There was almost no qualitative research exploring these topics. So I took it to the field.

RL: What would you say your essential research question was when you went into the field?

KL: I was interested to know, first of all, how is it that people just experience climate change? This was in a country and a community that was in the far north. That year the snow was 2 months late and the ice on the lake never really froze adequately; it was really common for people would go ice fishing. There were all these signs of a changed climate in the community.

I was interested how is it that people were thinking about what was going on—whether the unusual weather and other information about climate change was being politicized or not. I became particularly aware of this "misfit" in the sense of what Robert Lifton would call a double reality or the absurdity of the double life. That is, people kind of knew that climate change was happening; they basically believed that it was happening but it was also normalized. It was not integrated into their everyday life.

At that point I had number of new research questions. I wanted to know both why climate change was being ignored, and how people constructed a sense of normalcy.

RL: What did you find that surprised you during your fieldwork?

KN: I was definitely surprised by the extent of silence around climate change.

RL: Do you think that is because climate change is really of a different order, in relation to other political issues where we may expect to see some sort of response? Do you think that perhaps the silence or the lack has something to do with the fact that we are talking about something in a totally different category?

KN: Yes, absolutely. I have been highlighting in my work three central emotions raised by climate change: fear, helplessness, and guilt.

RL: Sounds fun! [Laughs].

KN: [Laughs] Right. The scale of change that climate scientists are describing evokes a level of fear that is very profound, very significant, and much bigger than just thinking about the ozone hole—which we were able to respond to pretty effectively and fairly quickly through the Montreal Protocol. Yet, climate change brings up fear about the future: fears about the viability of our very social organization, the centrality of oil to our economies, and whether the global political order can adequately respond.

Related to fear is a sense of helplessness. What is it that I can do? Is there anything that I can do? I think that exactly as you indicate, because climate change is so large and it challenges our existing lives in so many ways; these emotions become very paralyzing.

RL: Two questions arise. First, is how do you study such complex, nuanced dynamics and how do you know what you are actually looking at, when exploring emotional responses and arguably unconscious dimensions such as denial.

Second, how do approach these topics as a sociologist differently, than a social psychologist might?

KN: I'm interested in both why people are ignoring climate change, and how they are producing a sense of day-to-day normalcy. Both the why and the how have been approached by psychologists, but I am studying them not as individual phenomenon but as social processes. How do people collectively normalize disturbing information? Sociologists study conversation norms: the kinds of conversations that people have in different kinds of spaces. During my field work, I spent time talking with people face to face in interviews, also looking at social settings, and reading the newspaper and looking at the way ideas are framed in the media. Of course with interviews you are working with subjective descriptions of people's interpretations of what they see happening, so there is much that is fuzzy, but over time you can build up a picture of reality where you can see things that are happening in a certain social space. For example, you can observe a conversation shifting when someone brings up climate change, the kinds of jokes and humor that are used around climate change, or the emotions that people themselves describe when you ask them what is happening.

One of the things that I think is very important, and this is one of the areas that our work overlaps, Renee, has to do with shifting the dialog from only thinking about our response to climate change in terms of what has been a more dominant psychological framework and blending it with the social—or in your case also the psychoanalytic levels of analysis.

For example, identity is both individual and collective. Norwegians are very proud, as they should be, of the significant environmental leadership that they have taken. Yet, climate change is a place that challenges some of that sense of being a "good person" or a "good Norwegian." I was interested in the way the government and other social actors justified the threefold increase in oil production that just happened just prior to visit to do fieldwork. Taking a social approach means looking at the larger scale, society-wide discourses that are out there, the particular social settings in which people are meeting face-to-face, are creating meaning around their actions, talking about things or not, and then also talking with people one on one.

RL: A central feature of your work is emphasizing the social production of denial. I have heard you say denial is a social process. What does that mean?

KN: When many people hear that I work on denial, they assume I am a psychologist. But my approach to this idea is very much as a sociologist. What that means is that whether the emotion of guilt is related to both my social location as an American (or a Norwegian as well, it could be), my lifestyle, the wealth that I have, the way that my activities are impacted or impacting climate change. It also has to do with emotion norms. Sociologists talk about the idea of emotion norms, which are culturally shared ideas about what emotions can be expressed, even what emotions are—but especially what can be expressed.

If you have a lot of guilt or fear and yet your emotion norms do not allow for that to be expressed, then it is very difficult to do anything with that and it becomes particularly paralyzing. So there are two sides to the social aspect of emotions here. The emotions are a product of a social location (i.e., we feel guilt as an American who has a high carbon footprint) and what we do with that guilt or whether we do anything with it is shaped by social and cultural norms for emotional expression and maybe existing social scripts we can use to justify our actions.

RL: How is that particular framework productive or useful, for how we are grappling with these challenges of engaging people?

KN: I think without understanding that the reasons that a Norwegian or American person feels guilty is related to their political/economic circumstances, we are not really understanding what is going on. We are thinking about guilt or another emotional response such as helplessness as maybe inherent. Further, I think it is an open question whether there is anything that can be done at this point. Can we shift denial? Certainly as a sociologist I would say that if social change is going to happen we have to understand that cultural norms and social ideas of what is normal and acceptable and what is possible are a big, and I would say, one of the biggest pieces that are shaping whether individuals can feel that social change is possible or different kinds of behaviors are possible.

RL: Have you had idea about practical applications of the outcomes of your study? If you could walk into an organization struggling to engage with a community around climate change, what might you say?

KN: That is a very important question. I wish I had a better answer, but I have certainly been thinking about it. It seems to me that a big piece of what is so paralyzing for people is the sense that they are alone in actually taking climate change seriously, which in turn makes them further convinced that there is nothing really that can be done. One can look at various studies of what motivates social change or what causes people to change behavior. But certainly having a group of people around you who are doing something can make people feel more empowered. Participating in something can make people feel more empowered.

I think we do need to encourage people to be involved in their local communities in figuring out what the impacts of climate change will be in their communities and working together, which will both make climate change more visible and more politicized and create community around it and at the same time—but working on climate change as a local issue is obviously not enough. Local action on climate change needs to be tied in with an understanding about global political change.

RL: But what if you are talking about a community that is dealing with a lot of denial? How do you actually break through the denial—or can you?

KN: This is an area where our work overlaps; if denial is not just a function of people not caring and being crass but instead it is a function of feeling hopeless, feeling that there is nothing really that can be done, and therefore, we do not pay attention to it. Then what we need to do is try to work against that and provide a way that people can feel more personally empowered on the one hand. But then it becomes a political question as well. People have to see that there are real political options that are worth their time or energy investment. Political options that they can feel hopeful about, because that is part of the disempowerment; empowerment in this case is not just a personal characteristic, but an assessment of political options or the lack thereof.

RL: Exactly.

KN: I would love to hear about how you became involved in this topic of apathy, and the psychoanalytic orientation you bring to these issues.

RL: Well it started for me similar to you, actually. I began with the recognition that there was a level of psychic pain associated with ecological issues and degradation. This was back in the late '80s. I was noticing this disjuncture between what we were learning about in our environmental studies classes, where we'd be taught about truly horrific, global ecological threats, and how we were acting as if things were kind of okay and normal. Then, I discovered Robert Jay Lifton's work on psychic numbing. He is somewhat located in a psychoanalytic tradition, and that is where I sensed the traction was for my particular inquiries.

KN: Could you describe a bit about the work that you have been doing and what you have been finding?

RL: The main piece of work I did was my doctoral project, "The Myth of Apathy," which focused on a region in the Great Lakes, Green Bay, Wisconsin, a very ecologically degraded area but also with a very strong, small contingent of concerned, engaged environmental activists, advocates, and scientists. For a variety of reasons, I decided to conduct my fieldwork there.

And like you, I used a combination of methods; I did not conduct a proper ethnography, but I lived there for a few months and I immersed myself in the culture. I was reading the paper; I was participating in various activities; running daily on the trail alongside the Fox River. I was trying to get a temperature of the public discourses around environmental issues, including climate. I was concerned with water-related issues, because water is so central to that region; it is such a huge part of the industry, the way of life, recreation, culture, and identity. And yet we are talking about water that has been degraded severely over time. The Great Lakes, as a whole, have myriad threats facing them; a very fragile, vulnerable resource. I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with 10 participants, three interviews each, following a web-based survey I sent out to a few thousand people in the region. I also incorporated the use of a current Great Lakes environmental campaign advert as a prompt at the end of the last interview for each participant. This helped spark free associations regarding the issues facing the Great Lakes, building on the previous interviews exploring the layers of complex associations with the region, environmentalism and industrialization.

The study helped me understand that there could very well be very high levels of care and concern around particular environmental issues and a lack of engagement, what we would call engagement or action. That does not suggest that there is an actual gap. Rather than a "gap" between values and behavior, or any other sort of "gap," it may be more helpful to think of it as a tangle—a tangle of meanings, associations, almost like rubber bands. We are pushed and pulled in very complex ways where we may simultaneously want to do different things at the same time, and in this sense it is an ideological and political analysis. As you were suggesting, we need to contextualize our responses in broader social and political forces. We may want to protect and prevent climate change from happening but we may also love our car or whatever associations we have with that (such as freedom, a relationship with a parent, and so on) or associations we have with behaviors that we know on some level are damaging.

For example, I once interviewed a bright young man in Wales for a pilot study. What emerged was a fascinating story about his intense commitments to protect the countryside from development, his hatred of cars, and urban sprawl, but also his love of the mass supermarket chain, Tesco. This seems to be a "gap" or a disjuncture. As a teenager his family had relocated from a small village in the Welsh Valleys to the larger city; he dealt with his adolescent social anxieties by spending time wandering in Tesco, where he didn't have to talk to anyone and was surrounded by abundance. It illustrates beautifully how we are all often pulled in different directions, and has nothing to do with our beliefs or values, but our affective investments. That is, how certain things or places or activities make us feel.

KN: So what would "the myth of apathy" suggest in terms of what actions might be taken next?

RL: First, is an acknowledgment of what the problem is, and the difficult dilemmas these topics may bring up. I am taking my cue from psychoanalytic practitioners such as Rosemary Randall, Shierry Nicholsen, Harold Searles, and Susan Bodnar. It is not at all clear how this looks in practice; these are very new approaches.

We can also think about how to facilitate these processes through creativity. This is recognizing that the creative act and being a participant in something that involves others is the source of reparation, the source of what Winnicott calls *concern*. For Winnicott, care and concern are the basis of ethics. His point is that an ethical concern for the world is rooted in our ability to experience ourselves as creative beings. I think that this is a potentially very powerful piece of how this overriding question we are asking—how to support people and community rather than an overriding focus on individuals.

KN: I appreciate how you are conceptualizing acknowledgment.

RL: When we talk about acknowledging the pain of ecological issues, it can sound very touchy-feely. If you are working in the public sector you are not going to want to go out and say, "Hey, this is scary stuff!" But these issues are really scary. We are all in this together.

How we do this work outside of clinical contexts—such as acknowledgement of pain or anxieties—would look very different from how psychotherapists acknowledge their patient's pain. We have to make a leap here. We have to actually translate what those are doing in the front lines of clinical contexts, and do the work to see how that can be translated into social contexts. That is the work that I think lies ahead of us. That is the sort of dialog, the sort of collaboration between psychologists, social scientists, and communicators that is desperately needed right now.

KN: I would agree. There is the cart and the horse problem of what conditions allow people to acknowledge something, and how it becomes easier probably to acknowledge it when other people around you are. And it is difficult to do when they do not. I think that is where we can see very rapid social change. If the acknowledgment could start to happen, it could happen very quickly and very widely. Yet, when it is not happening, then it is dampening it. I think we have seen that to some extent with "The Inconvenient Truth" and the way all of sudden people did start speaking more about climate change. It is not where it needs to be, but the climate discourse has changed in the United States.

RL: Yes. What have you have you learned about social behavioral change that needs to be engaged more by psychology?

KN: First of all, peoples' experiences as individuals are a reflection of the larger social, cultural context. If I myself look at the climate movement it does not look particularly powerful. If I look at the climate legislation, it does not look particularly effective. Those are things that make me as an individual, just using that unit of analysis, say, "well why bother." It is a political question—under what conditions can change actually happen. I think that people at some level get that screwing in fluorescent light bulbs is not the answer, and so why bother. To provide people with real political opportunities, we need to have an acknowledgment of how serious the issues are—as you said—and have an open discussion about exactly what would need to change to get to our climate emissions down to where the scientists at the intergovernmental panel on climate change say they need to be. It will not be easy to make those kinds of social changes, but it is going to be less painful than suffering the economic consequences of not making those changes.

—Interview by Renee Lertzman
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