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# “I have not once heard the word *sustainability* since working here”: the underrecognized significance of work-related climate cultures

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the work sphere shapes climate-cultural orientations by looking at the differences in climate-related discourses typically practiced at the workplace. These discourses are based on different normative convictions and result in various practical implications that together form employees' collective climate-cultural orientations. The occupational context plays a decisive role, as most adults invest large shares of time into their work. Yet, thus far, relevant questions have remained substantially under-researched, as the bulk of social-scientific analyses still focuses on the consumption side of sustainability issues, although the potential impact within the work sphere is much higher than the level of efficacy that individual consumers can exert in the private sphere. Based on seven focus-group discussions with different occupational groups, I present diverging climate-related convictions, underlining that society is currently far from reaching an agreement on the consensus formulated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Fusing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social space with Kari Marie Norgaard's observations on the social organization of climate-change denial, the study initially considers the role of different group-specific forms of (not) knowing. Subsequently, it focuses on circulating efficacy expectations and (related) attributions of responsibility to different societal actors. I then show that climate denial is prevalent in all the work spheres I consider, albeit to different degrees, and that it can manifest *explicitly or implicitly*. Even occupational groups whose work is directly related to climate matters and whose socioeconomic situation would allow for more consistent climate action, report that inconsistent information and norms of individual freedom and flexibility prevent action, fostering implicit denial.

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## Introduction

Current debates reveal a growing scientific consensus about the causes of climate change while culturally sensitive, socially just, and politically feasible climate-action measures still remain elusive. The profound cultural blindness of current approaches (cf. Rau 2018) eclipses different understandings of climate change that exist in society: it is in fact “also the complex ‘subuniversa’...within which people organize their knowing, recognize changes in their life realities, practice different forms of application or avoidance, search for and find often competing interpretations” that shape people's behavior, yet these “are by no means ascertainable through natural or technological scientific means” (Welzer, Soeffner, and Giesecke 2010, 16).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important to counteract the current hegemony of the “hard sciences” and the corresponding problematic neglect of

cultural aspects. This I aim to do by analyzing the experiences of diverse social groups within one of these subuniversa, namely the work sphere, to shed light on the differences in how climate change is treated and talked about in each case. “Official” climate communication to date generally stresses the responsibility of individual consumers, under the assumption that they decide “rationally,” given present information levels. As Mock (2020, 228) observes:

If consumers were to make more environmentally conscious decisions, the argument goes, these individual decisions in aggregated form would be a huge lever for a sustainability transformation. A sleeping giant of compounded consumer power could be awakened...primarily through better information or a change in value preferences. Environmental policy measures that belong to this approach therefore rely on individualistic, market conforming and information centrist instruments.

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Yet when it comes to highly complex challenges (climate change being a prime example), this approach remains inadequate (cf. Kessler and Rau 2022). Information provision about how best to combat climate change is often conflicted. Meanwhile, people also hold conflicting motivations: wanting to act on climate change may stand in direct opposition to desires for travel or other forms of self-actualization. This study therefore suggests departing from such individualistic approaches and embraces a climate-cultural perspective. Using Kuckartz's (2012) typifying approach to qualitative content analysis, the collected focus-group material was examined to identify sociocultural contexts on climate matters, focusing on the work sphere. To present as broad a picture as possible, I take Bourdieu's Cartesian coordinate-plane metaphor of social space (Bourdieu 1984) as the starting point to include participants whose work either addresses (e.g., green startup, sustainability department of mobility provider, nongovernmental organization (NGO)) or does not explicitly address the subject of climate change (e.g., teachers, craftsmen, industrial enterprise).<sup>2</sup> I grant particular attention to how groups that are supposedly further away from climate debates address the issue.

As culture is understood here as encompassing "the whole way of life" (Williams 1995, 10) of a specific subuniverse, the study of occupational cultures deserves close consideration when investigating the reasons behind modern societies' *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2013). As much as climate science has been culturally blind, the study of culture, for a long time, remained occupationally blind: "All too often, cultural studies has ended at 9.00, and begun again at 5.30, or missed the structure of the working week altogether in order to celebrate the agency of the weekend" (Parker 2007, 85). Considering that working environments are one of the most central loci for (adult) socialization and experience,<sup>3</sup> this occupational blindness, especially in the context of climate change, left a blatantly problematic vacuum in social science research. Yet, based on the recognition that "[o]rganizations can complicate and manipulate the entire knowledge-production process" (Vaughan 1999, 931), groundbreaking work by Karin Knorr Cetina and Werner Reichmann (2015) and Diane Vaughan (1999) on epistemic cultures and occupational cultures respectively paved the way for closer attention to be directed toward the relationship between occupational culture and environmental practice. For instance, a study by Tom Hargreaves (2011) focused on the nexus between pro-environmental practice and work as it "reports on an in-depth ethnographic case study of

a single behavior change initiative...conducted in a workplace." In line with wider societal developments such as the global climate movement, this interest in the connection between occupation, culture, and climate has recently increased further. As Davidson (2022, 23) underlines, "one of the emerging impacts that warrants further attention entails interlinkages between climate change and labor." Although there now is a comprehensive body of work concerned with pro-environmental behavior at the workplace (cf. e.g., Hargreaves 2011; Goggins and Rau 2021; Hoolohan et al. 2021), an investigation that focuses on the *difference* between work cultures and its implication in the stalling of climate action is missing to this day.

Accordingly, this study aims to advance current climate debates by considering the climate cultures of different work environments, i.e., different occupational climate cultures, by uncovering similarities and differences that emerge through shared work contexts and experiences. Here it counts to differentiate between what is meant by *organizational culture*, *corporate culture*, and *occupational culture*. Generally, in this study, cultural differences relate to occupational culture as this also includes the case of farmers who do not work in the same organization. Accordingly, occupational culture includes professional standards, codes of conduct, and typical approaches to work within each profession. For instance, engineers may prioritize precision and safety, while social workers may focus on empathy and advocacy. Each of these professions develops its own set of values, norms, and practices that members adhere to, often shaped by the skills, expertise, and ethical standards required for that occupation. By contrast, the term "corporate culture" strongly relates to large and profit-driven organizations, which only really reflects the structure of the industrial enterprise and to an extent the mobility provider.

The groups chosen for this study thus grant insight into *different* occupational spheres and their corresponding life realities, interpretational patterns, and work practices. One's workplace influences political support for, and attitudes toward, climate action in many ways. For instance, by (co-)determining which climate-relevant work and everyday practices occur, and to what extent, they are thought and talked about, and what they thus mean for group members. For this, I focus on the triad of concepts of *knowing*, *efficacy* and *responsibility*. More precisely, I investigate different *shared* forms of (not) knowing, *collective* interpretations of people's expected influence on climate matters (efficacy), and related *relational* climate responsibility.

On the theoretical-conceptual level, I connect Pierre Bourdieu's widely cited concepts of *field* and *habitus* with Kari Mari Norgaard's ground-breaking theory of *collective denial*. Complementing Bourdieu's seminal sociological work on cultural difference, Norgaard succeeds in highlighting the key role of *emotions* in the social organization of denial, preventing people from acting on climate change in different spheres of everyday life, including work. I then outline the study's materials and methods and present the results. Subsequently, I argue that society-wide developments such as profound *scientization* since the latter half of the past century have affected different occupational climate cultures very differently, especially in terms of collective interpretations of self-efficacy. When these self-efficacy interpretations diverge from responsibility attributions, this can lead to divergent forms of (explicit or implicit) denial of the climate-action imperative. I conclude by making the case for a culturally sensitive treatment of people's diverging working life realities.

## Theoretical foundations

### *Climate habitus, field, and climate cultures*

The study's core concepts – *knowing, efficacy, and responsibility* – have been extensively contemplated by various scholars (cf. e.g., Shove 2010; Bandura 1977, 1997; Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan 2020). However, traditional perspectives approach these issues most often in isolation, not least because they generally focus on individual-level manifestations. In some instances, authors have discussed relations between (two of) these core concepts. However, a conception that truly integrates these three notions is still missing. There is thus a clear need for an alternative integrative approach that also validates the *dynamic* of social structures and that recognizes the importance of societal influences (cf. Rau 2018, 209), for instance at the workplace. Therefore, I explicitly emphasize the need to investigate *existing* social groups that represent certain subuniversa, or occupational cultures, as this allows privileged insight into the idiosyncratic climate-related dynamics that commonly unfold there as well as the differences between them.

I thus argue that Bourdieu's concept succeeds in highlighting the differences between subuniversa even *when* groups occupy similar socioeconomic positions. He prioritizes cultural aspects over socioeconomic ones and shows how cultural spaces stand the test of time through their representatives practicing *distinction*. To begin, Bourdieu (1990 [1977], 53

as translated by Jurt 2010, 10) writes that social structures and regularities yield different forms of *habitus*:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions,...that is, principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

Connecting to this idea, I suggest that respective forms of *climate habitus* are born out of climate-relevant expectations, social structures, and material realities (cf. Burke et al. 2009, 62f.) surrounding an agent in each specific sociocultural context (one of which is the workplace). These structures include the internalized and often subconscious inclinations people adopt over their lifetime. Such inclinations are “so obvious, and feel so right and proper within a given cultural or social context that members of the group cannot further explain them – they just are” (Burke et al. 2009, 64). This includes “social rules” and also moral questions emerging from people's occupational culture (cf. Burke et al. 2009, 64) that thus provide a suitable starting point for investigating climate-relevant *responsibility* attributions within the realm of work.

At the same time, Bourdieu (1998, 31) emphasizes that it is the *difference* that determines human behavior:

People occupy relative positions in a space of relations which, although invisible and always difficult to show empirically, is the most real reality...and the real principle of...behavior.

One of these relative positions is determined by one's professional environment that Bourdieu considers in his concept of the *field*, a kind of scope for action, defined as “a network or a configuration of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97).

The occupational context thus provides a promising site for inquiry, as most adults devote a significant portion of their time to their work. However, identification with one's occupation varies, as this depends, among other factors, on its perceived function (e.g., economic pressures arising from making a living vs. self-actualization). Further, social spaces (family, friendship circles) also play a varied but pronounced role. Each of these fields is characterized by different interests that are negotiated by means of different investments, rules, and aims. Thus, to an extent, the influence of occupational environments on people's propensity toward and

(lack of) engagement on climate action is contingent, drawing attention to diverse climate-relevant inclinations that arise from different occupational fields. Each occupational group that I investigate thus displays a distinctive climate culture, a system of climate-relevant schemes of perception, appreciation and action that (co-)constitutes and (at least partially) characterizes each respondent's climate habitus.

### **(Not) knowing and practice: habitus as manifestation of practice**

Climate-relevant practices are (co-)determined by the subconscious internalization of social interpretations in everyday occupational life. As such, (not) knowing plays a decisive role. In this vein, Bourdieu rejects the unquestioned significance that is generally attested to *rational* thinking, dismissing rationalist assumptions that individuals themselves determine their fate.

Thus, for Bourdieu, rationality itself is *relational*. What counts as *reasonable* crucially depends on what is perceived as acceptable in one's own socio-cultural context: "Society with its divisions does not exist abstractly, instead it is to be found – in the form of habitus – in the heads and bodies of the agents themselves and thus in this way contributes to the construction of everyday practice" (Bremer 2004, 11). This is precisely why culture is fundamental for climate action. If one agrees that it is the incorporated social and not (primarily) the cognitive individual structures that determine human action, then we have an obligation to depart from conveying (climate) knowledge and concentrate instead on climate-relevant practice. Habitus is expressed through action, not through (cognitive) knowing.

The concept of climate habitus also helps to explain the inefficacy of conventional campaigns that ask individuals to reduce carbon emissions: "These messages are blind to the role that power, habit and routine play in shaping social practices and downplay the myriad structural barriers to green consumption" (Boström and Davidson 2018, 201). Habits and routines are particularly persistent and resistant to change (Sahakian and Wilhite 2014), be it regarding, for example, food (Warde 2016; Godin and Sahakian 2018; Biermann and Rau 2020), or mobility (Mock 2023; Heisserer and Rau 2017). This is the case, for instance, because the location of the work site or the practices of colleagues have the potential to reinforce one's own already climate-harmful practices. It is important to recognize that practices survive in different occupational climate cultures even though the initial reasons for

their introduction may no longer be recognizable. In fact, many practices are only still being enacted because "we have always done it like this" or "because that's how you do it." This opens new avenues for a better understanding of currently stagnating climate action and then potentially counterbalancing it in everyday work practice. As Koch (2020, 11) points out:

Rather abstract appeals to people who tend to be caught up in a range of daily struggles to make ends meet to quickly start thinking and feeling in fundamentally different ways are likely to be perceived as foolhardy or "not for us." Yet if demands are formulated and presented in ways that are sufficiently close to peoples' past experiences and present day-to-day issues and struggles, there is a better chance of being understood and receiving positive feedback.

In this vein, Hargreaves (2011, 93) outlines several ways that inhibit the changing of practices at the workplace. First, practices are often intertwined, preventing the adaptation of a singular practice without unwanted repercussions elsewhere. Second, he uncovers the power and social relations that workplace practices often endorse for their own maintenance and stabilization. These "(micro)politics of practice" imply that "changing practices means changing the social order" (Hargreaves 2011, 93), which helps explain the substantial resistance to change when it comes to pro-environmental practice at the workplace. The following subsection outlines the criteria I use to differentiate between occupational climate cultures.

### **Denial and occupational climate cultures**

Sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard observes how people often neutralize uncomfortable ambivalences. She writes that "in wealthy nations, the key questions related to climate change have to do with denial" (Norgaard 2011, 216). This way, Norgaard extends exclusively psychological interpretations of denial that focus solely on the individual. Building on the work of Eviatar Zerubavel et al. (2010), she shows how this denial of unwelcome information about the threat of climate change occurs initially on the emotional and subsequently on the social level:

[W]hether people notice information about climate change is related to socially shaped systems of perception and attention, whether they remember what they hear is a function of social systems of memory, whether it is considered morally offensive or not is a function of whether it is inside or outside socially defined limits of concern...How we think is part of the culture and marks our participation in the community (Norgaard 2011, 5f.).

We often seek assurance from those people we most identify with that we are still acting acceptably – we seek absolution in the *relational*. For instance, it might no longer seem so objectionable to fly for leisure, when the office-lunch talk regularly revolves around long-distance holiday destinations. What is taken for granted in one climate culture fuses with reality and its contingency will only be visible from the outside.

### **Denial, efficacy, and responsibility**

To make sense of different work-related climate cultures, it is useful to uncover existing intra- and inter-group power relations. These orientations can be related to privilege which may affect people's scope for action: "Privileged people reproduce existing power relations as they enact denial in everyday life" (Norgaard 2011, 218).<sup>4</sup> While it is particularly problematic that some segments in society have a much higher influence on societal outcomes than others, on top of this they have a double incentive to deny: denying shields them from having to contribute to solution-seeking and also enables them to defend their own privileges. Power and privilege thus relate to efficacy – this study's second core concept. Research by, for example, Oehlmann et al. (2021, 14) shows that it is indeed often high-income societal cohorts that show certain denial tendencies with respect to climate action.

Privileged people are protected from full knowledge of environmental (and many other social) problems by...their own fine-tuned yet unconscious practices of not noticing, looking the other way, and normalizing the disturbing information they constantly come across (Norgaard 2011, 219).

By extension, feelings of powerlessness also play a central role. As the psychologist Albert Bandura (1994, 2) writes,

People's beliefs about their capabilities affect what they choose to do, how much effort they mobilize, how long they will persevere in the face of difficulties, whether they engage in self-debilitating or self-encouraging thought patterns, and the amount of stress and depression they experience in taxing situations.

Different occupations, through differences in their respective materiality, instill a different sense of efficacy within their practitioners. For farmers and craftspeople, having "made something with their own hands" may positively impact their collective self-efficacy, while a certain mastery over technological communication tools may instill positive feelings

of self-efficacy within those whose work entails aiming to mobilize others for climate action.

By extension, perceived limited self-efficacy is particularly detrimental to the uptake of climate action. Yet collective action can present an effective antidote against this restriction: "People who have a sense of collective efficacy will mobilize their efforts and resources to cope with external obstacles to the changes they seek" (Bandura 1997, 38). I thus conceptualize efficacy expectations as relational and constituting occupational climate culture.

Furthermore, Buschmann and Sulmowski (2011, 283) state that "responsibility plays a central role for sustainability discourses," pointing to this study's third and last defining element. Researchers have increasingly started to investigate the connection between climate-related responsibility and denial. For instance, in their 2017 nationwide nearly representative (in terms of in terms of gender, age, federal state, and educational level) online survey of people living in Germany, Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan (2020) identified a shift from climate denial toward the denial of responsibility for climate action. While in their analysis almost all respondents deemed climate action to be important, they found a kind of moral decoupling from responsibility:

There is still denial by favoring displacing responsibility or even assigning guilt to others (e.g., government, business and industry, lobbies, "the rich," the "egoistic people"), refusing to be a first mover and to engage in more than just low-cost behavior (Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan 2020, 11).

In line with this, Blühdorn (2020, 112) suggests that hitherto existing pro-environmental political and consumption practices "are not necessarily manifestations of the desire for radical change toward an alternative type of living and society, but can instead be a means for [ecological] distinction [and] identity formation...*within* the current order of competition and unsustainability" (emphasis in original). However, what would be responsible instead would be the actual *questioning* of what is currently perceived as *normal* and *common sense*; as long as this does not occur, departing from unsustainability remains out of reach.

Given my considerations thus far, in this study *denial* relates to the three key notions of *knowing*, *efficacy*, and *responsibility*. It encompasses both outright questioning of climate science/open rejection of climate action (in the sense of climate skepticism or endorsement of conspiracy theories<sup>5</sup>) as well as the more subtle forms of denial (the gap between awareness and action) or *simulation* (cf. Blühdorn 2013). Essential for conceptualizing climate cultures is acknowledging the meaning of the social that

Bourdieu emphasizes in his demand for a relational form of investigation. In this study, therefore, the core concepts of efficacy and responsibility are thus each applied in a relational (as opposed to individualistic) manner.

### **Climate-cultural diversity and (lack of) everyday relevance of conventional climate-action measures**

Leaving behind the current status quo of different forms of denial and related sustained unsustainability (Blühdorn 2020) crucially depends on (climate-) cultural differentiation in reference to everyday reality. For this, attention must be paid to people's (potentially) unspectacular everyday working lives. We must urgently begin to “mind the mundane” (Rau 2018; see also Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993 and work on “ordinary consumption,” e.g., Groncow and Warde 2013 as well as “practice theories” more generally, e.g., Schatzki 2002; Shove 2014). This angle stands in direct opposition to assumptions of universal behavior often adopted in workplace climate-action campaigns, such as one published by the United Nations (2019) that advised, “[m]ake sure your company uses energy efficient heating and cooling technology, and adjust the thermostat, lower in winter, higher in summer.”<sup>6</sup> When checked against the reality of many work environments, we see the impracticability of such appeals, especially when they prove incompatible with the diverse and specific demands and restrictions of everyday working life (e.g., Hargreaves 2011; Heisserer and Rau 2017 for empirical examples).

### **Material and methods**

I conducted seven focus-group interviews from July 2019 to February 2020, with each interview ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were held with existing occupational groups, located in and around the city of Munich.<sup>7</sup> As Munich is known for its strong automotive industry and there are several studies already on its impact on culture (cf. e.g., Mögele 2022), this research considered industry and mobility beyond the automotive sector. As Munich's urban area is under considerable spatial pressure, especially for residential housing, farming and craftsmanship tend to be found outside of the city. This was also the case with the focus groups interviewed in this study, making visible the cultural differences between urban and rural settings.

Participants shared their views concerning issues of responsibility and efficacy in relation to climate change and climate action. Moreover, the study

concentrated on the relative positions of the groups in terms of the development of knowing and understanding of climate change. Beyond this, the research was concerned with whether (and, if so, which) denial patterns could be identified based on the statements made.

As I did not investigate the actual ways that people behave, practices are primarily understood as *discursive* practice. With respect to this point, Pirgmaier (2020, 281) states:

As social beings, people continuously communicate with each other...As soon as we pin something down, we leave other aspects of reality out...This matters, because word as a medium of communication and work as acting on the world are united in praxis – both in the old-to-be-transformed and the new-to-come-into-being. The choice of language and framings is therefore key for reproducing and reshaping reality.

Recruitment took place partly through my own network and partly through Internet research and subsequent cold calling with the help of snowball sampling. One might object here that self-selection may have skewed the group toward a particular stance on climate issues. However, in investigating the *culture* of *existing* groups, it is central to note that all its members, over time and in the collective, impinge upon it just as much as culture impinges on each of its members, who then carry the culture with them. With such a bidirectional conceptualization, the skewing issue loses most of its significance (cf. Fox 2014, 83f.). While group discussions are shaped by each participant's (and to a lesser degree, the researcher's) contributions and will influence the group as a whole, in these discussions, respondents often fall back on references that link the group to the broader community or field (cf. Fox 2014, 85): “the focus group may act as a *portal* to the social space within which much of the participant's life is unfolding” (Fox 2014, 85, my emphasis). Besides,

[T]he focus group method's interactive component offered a means of studying the micro dimensions of societal power relations and regularities in the development of climate change receptivity...[As such,] the research moment is not an exchange of rational positions and perspectives (Fox 2014, 86).

As an “unobtrusive issue” (Schäfer and Bonfadelli 2017, 2), climate change cannot be perceived directly by the human senses. Under such circumstances, visualizations are a useful tool to make this seemingly abstract topic more tangible. Accordingly, I applied six “vignettes” to visually stimulate conversation among members of the focus groups. First, I posed an open introductory question (what are your first thoughts when it comes to societal

responsibility for climate action?). Second, I described four vignettes each corresponding to different societal actors (politics, corporate sector, single consumers, civil society) and their respective responsibility and efficacy.<sup>8</sup> Finally, I outlined one vignette related to the societal creation of climate-related knowing. These stimulus frames were presented to the respondents as pictures (as well as one short and one slightly longer video clip) within a PowerPoint presentation.

Avoiding the pitfall that group discussions end up being analyzed as if they were a series of one-on-one interviews, I focused instead on the work-related social dynamics that took place among focus-group participants through their interaction with each other. As a result, I paid special attention to the aggregate-group opinion rather than individual statements. Care was also taken to select statements that adequately reflected the overall group purport.

Another common criticism of focus groups as an empirical technique is the fear that the results obtained may be biased by a very dominant or opinionated member. More reserved group members may be hesitant to talk. Yet, as Fox (2014, 87) discusses,

[T]hese criticisms overlook the social basis of human existence and how conversations in daily life often feature dominant voices. Such voices can be indicative of the levels of interest in the issues under discussion and/or the differences in embodied capital which reflect power relations in a group setting, and in wider society.

Analyzing whether there were particularly dominant voices and, if so, whether and how the other group members responded to them was important in understanding the operating power dynamics in these social contexts.

## Results

Table 1 presents findings from each of the seven focus-group discussions that, taken together, show that each group operated according to a specific occupational climate culture. This encompassed climate-related thinking, speaking, and references to everyday practice. Perspectives on different ways of knowing diverged substantially between groups. How climate matters were thus collectively noticed, negotiated, interpreted, and then internalized or denied varied significantly, depending on which occupational group was discussing them. The occupational groups each also had very different opinions on who in society could make a difference in climate action and should thus be seen as responsible.

### FG1: Craftsmen

This group agreed in saying that climate action hardly played a role in their lives, neither privately nor professionally, even though members thought that the environment should be protected, and resources should not be wasted. However, reasons for this varied. A relatively dominant member had prepared himself to question the climate movement's motives:

C3: And who is behind this Greta? Club of Rome? That's another association, it's all about the climate, they only do politics.

I: And they're behind Greta?

C3: Also yes.

I: And where did you get that from?

C3: Internet, researched it...[Tichys] *Einblick*<sup>9</sup> (*Insight*) once wrote a big report about it...

Another person said they did not perceive climate change as an issue, while the rest of the group was generally aware of the problematic but was not taking it as a reason to change their everyday practice.

I: And does this environmental issue play a role in your family's decision to fly or not to fly? The interviewee shakes his head. (Everyone laughs).

The respondents expressed a strong affinity for the natural world and the rural environment, while speaking dismissively about "urbanites." This deep identification with the rural locality can also be seen in regionality being the only climate-related aspect that was taken into account when making purchasing decisions. In general, respondents were cautious of rich people and distrustful of political and cultural elites, as they perceived them to be profoundly hypocritical. Furthermore, there was a clear preference for "factual" information:

C5: Well, I think a sensible person who can think a little doesn't care about the polar bear at all.

Modern technology and progress were held high and turning away from them was not seen as an option:

C5: I don't think you need to be ashamed of flying...I think the girl [Greta Thunberg] is quite good. It's a bit of a prompt because it makes you think a bit. But we can't go back to the Stone Age. We can't say we row across the Atlantic again.

The climate sceptic's long-winded statements were not met with criticism from the rest of the group. All in all, members in this group exhibited low levels of self-efficacy, apart from the group perceiving itself as

**Table 1.** Selected exemplary statements from the seven focus-group discussions.

	Craftsmen	Green startup	NGO
Responsibility	<p><i>I like flying!...I really don't care what comes out of the plane in terms of CO<sub>2</sub>. Why is Germany supposed to invest 15 billion in climate projects when this has no benefit for it whatsoever in the present?</i></p> <p><i>Save the bees? Yeah, but who signed this petition? Those who can afford it.</i></p>	<p><i>Of course we can talk about climate change in relation to flying, but we can also talk about how it has brought us all closer together (collective agreement). And as you said, we know so much more about the world since we have this level of connection. And it used to be a major hassle to be able to travel to the US and now you can easily go there for vacation and then you come back with amazing experiences.</i></p>	<p><i>CO<sub>2</sub> compensation is like indulgence trade</i></p> <p><b>N2:</b> <i>There is no right to travel by plane.</i></p> <p><b>N6:</b> <i>I have stopped engaging when friends are speaking about where they went by plane. Because I could not stand it any more when everyone goes: Wow, cool! And I'm thinking, no, that's just not okay...</i></p>
Efficacy	<p><i>Yes, because the "Mr. scientists" simply discover this at some point and then bring it to the public. Someone claims it, somebody else doesn't believe it.</i></p>	<p><i>Politics just has to put things into practice</i></p> <p><i>Of course, we also need people who screen the whole issue in such a way that it becomes measurable, because at the end of the day, numbers are the only truth that we have</i></p>	<p><i>People don't believe in politics making a difference. What was meant to be a climate package was called a small parcel by the press, that's cynical. Everybody knows this is not enough. And somehow, one just takes it as such.</i></p>
Embodied knowing	<p><i>We have to know about emissions, we are energy consultants.</i></p> <p><b>I:</b> <i>But I wanted an answer to what was just said, that it is cumulative and irreversible?</i></p> <p><b>C3:</b> <i>I can't say, I have no idea. There was an ice age, and then again no ice age.</i></p>	<p><i>In terms of flying I find it really telling, because until I started my internship here, I was not very aware of the consequences. At university, I studied International Business, and in my course it was all about who travels the most. That was a completely different mindset and here, it is entirely different, again.</i></p>	<p><b>N3:</b> <i>To a large extent we don't only have a responsibility problem, we also actually have an information problem (overall agreement)</i></p> <p><i>I think this is a really good example for information not being able to change everything. We all know how bad flying is and we still do it (as a society).</i></p>
Denial	<p><b>C4:</b> <i>Ok, but nowadays you can actually buy anything. Because today, you have such strict rules. Like at Lidl, Rewe, they have to...</i></p> <p><b>C3:</b> <i>Yeah, but when half a kilo (of meat) costs two Euros, then?</i></p> <p><b>C4:</b> <i>Yeah, you might as well buy packaged meat at Rewe, Lidl, Penny, that is just as good.</i></p> <p><i>Ok, so if we save the world only with a non-plastic straw, then I like it, then I won't use plastic straws any more (laughs).</i></p> <p><b>C3:</b> <i>And who is behind this Greta? Club of Rome? That's another organization that's all about the climate, they only do politics.</i></p>	<p><i>I also traveled the world for a year and took thirty different flights. I am not proud of these flights but I also did not want to miss having seen the world.</i></p> <p><b>G4:</b> <i>Simply because we are well off, we worry about this.</i></p> <p><b>G6:</b> <i>I also think that it is a luxury to a certain degree that we get to worry about it and that it is a trend ...</i></p> <p><i>Every day we have to think so much about what alternatives there may be as all things that are fun are bad for the environment...</i></p>	<p><b>N6:</b> <i>Every time I read about... the catastrophe, I think, I also still have so many blind spots. But I don't do anything about them..</i></p> <p><b>I:</b> <i>Why not?</i></p> <p><b>N6:</b> <i>I don't know. Because I'm too lazy. I'm informed about the bigger picture. But then I wonder, what was the deal with upcycling? My jeans are ripped.</i></p> <p><b>N4:</b> <i>Where do you go?</i></p> <p><b>N2:</b> <i>But that's precisely the aspect where politics has to do something. Because if the path of least resistance were the most environmentally friendly, then you'd take this laziest and at the same time most environmentally friendly path.</i></p>

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Craftsmen	Green startup	NGO	
	Farmers	Mobility provider	Industrial enterprise	Teachers
Responsibility	<p>Today people...believe every story (...) and yes, the world will end and every farmer is off their head...</p> <p>Climate just exists and cannot be changed..., you can only treat the resources that you have in a mindful way. And this I don't do by going somewhere to protest... I then also have to change my own life. And then it doesn't make any difference if I have a vegetarian. Or if I substist on nothing...</p>	<p><b>M4:</b> Well, society only works as a community and I think these status symbols like SUVs are important for people because they can show what they have achieved,...yes, and it is their right to show when they have achieved something.</p> <p><b>I:</b> So why else are we failing (to adequately protect the climate)?</p> <p><b>M3:</b> I don't think we are failing.</p> <p><b>I:</b> Okay.</p> <p><b>M3:</b> ...it just takes longer, there is a lot of impatience.</p>	<p><b>E3:</b> Okay, that's hard because it is a bit of a chicken and egg situation, because of course the consumer determines what a company produces and at the same time the consumer cannot buy anything the company does not produce. So if the company says, we only produce sustainable things, then the consumer has no other choice. So I think at the end, maybe the corporation has more influence.</p>	<p><b>T2:</b> Flying is indeed something that I don't prohibit for myself, somehow. That's something that I have to admit I do myself. And I love traveling and seeing the world. And I am actually not willing to stop doing so. I would be ok with paying more, but then...</p> <p><b>T3:</b> I think everybody being able to afford flying is actually very democratic and anti-capitalistic...that this now goes into the direction of everybody being able to emit, that is a problem. But I don't think that this democratic equality should be forgotten.</p>
Efficacy	<p><b>F6:</b> ...this hype that this grouping [Fridays for Futur] is getting right now, I don't get it. They are being invited to see the pope ...how politics is paying court to all these young people...</p>	<p><b>I:</b> Aha.</p> <p><b>M2:</b> Exactly, that's what I think. This should not be looked at so one-sidedly.</p>	<p><b>E2:</b> And I mean, politics almost always complies with what industry wants. I mean, success of a government is measured by how well the economy is doing, of course politicians do what large corporations want.</p>	
Embodied knowing	<p>Climate protection for me is a word that doesn't exist, because climate is everything around us, I think you cannot protect the atmosphere..</p>	<p>Many people who are not 100% informed just feel like bashing and then they join those protests.. We need more education on both sides, and have less emotions</p>	<p><b>I:</b> Will the climate cabinet make a difference?</p> <p><b>E1:</b> I think definitely not, but my thinking is of course impacted by the kind of thinking here (in the company).</p>	<p><b>T5:</b> I tell my students that I don't own a car...then they at least have a role model, negative or positive, but they know someone who has no car. And is kind of normal. (laughter)</p>
Denial	<p><b>F2:</b> And the information is being debated very controversially. There is this camp and that camp. How am I as layperson supposed to trust that this really is the problem now...even if we practice 100 percent climate protection, this will also not change the climate.</p> <p><b>F1:</b> So again we cause fear-. So through fear, we fuel something. Maybe it isn't as bad at all as it is being presented. I'm sure, the studies, it is not as bad...</p>	<p><b>M3:</b> ...(if you have a job) that brings a lot of flying with it and you can feed your family because it simply is your job...</p> <p><b>M4:</b> These people also really work a lot. Such people, who have such cards (frequent flyer status)</p> <p><b>M4:</b> You don't get those for free just on the side...I'm not jealous here.</p> <p><b>M3:</b> And maybe this is somebody who offsets each and every single flight. And, ah, eats vegan the rest of the time, and, ah, would never buy fast fashion.... You don't know this, so...</p>	<p><b>E4:</b> So we are going through this radical change. There are initiatives that aim for a better future but right now we are still very dirty. And I think these contrasts are not rare to find...They are already part of the transformation, these contrasts.</p>	<p><b>T7:</b> My parents, for example, I've been shaking my head forever, they've voted Green ever since the Greens came into existence and they go on at least one cruise every year</p> <p><b>T4:</b> I have these friends, they deliberately fly to every Ryanair destination you can reach from Nuremberg; they would never have thought of flying to Riga</p> <p><b>T5:</b> Ryanair junkies, urgh.</p> <p><b>T4:</b> ...But hey, ok, Ryanair flies to Riga for €9.99, I'll take a look!</p>

quite well-informed. Climate-related responsibility was generally diffused and externalized. This translated into pronounced *outright* denial (including conspiracy theories). The imperative to protect the climate was mainly negated and (if at all) treated like a “trivial offense.”

### FG2: Green startup

This group was particularly homogenous.<sup>10</sup> All respondents had extensively contemplated climate change, including its moral aspects. The fact that they worked for a company whose business was directly related to

climate change alone showed that for them, climate action was important. Here, the issue was seen as a challenge that concerned the whole of society. Members of this group were well informed and aware of the climate debate's complexity. Disagreement featured only rarely and if so, in relation to details. To an extent, the group focused on consumption:

Sure, how many parents always dress their children in branded clothes? Always with branded clothes, it starts in elementary school,...where it's all about what does someone have? That's what this consumer society is.

Concerning efficacy, its relational manifestation was recognized here:

But you can still inspire other people...I have friends who have come to feel ashamed when they buy a disposable cup next to me.

Yet, the question of individual efficacy remained unresolved, while high efficacy was ascribed to corporations, although there was overall little trust in *conventional* companies. High efficacy was also attributed to politics, yet politicians were held in low regard because of inadequate implementation.

While individual accountability was emphasized, this group expressed a sense of “elite dilemma” when climate action clashed with “other” (identity-generating) motivations:

I think it’s a total shame, because somehow it’s also part of knowing what this world has to offer, that you can travel and also discover other places, and at the same time it’s obviously stupid.

As a result, flying was considered an almost untouchable “personal choice” for most group members, in connection to which a series of justification strategies were employed (short trips perceived to be even more climate harmful). Thus, fairly substantial, *implicit* denial featured in this group, as its own climate impact remained quite large due to, for example, the continuation of flying.

### FG 3: NGO

Similar to the green startup, this group was very engaged with climate change, both personally and professionally. Its members were well-informed about many aspects of the issue. The use of technical terms and concepts suggested that they were committed to climate action, which was reinforced by its centrality for this particular job. At times, there was an over-emphasis on factual knowledge:

For the most part, we not only have a responsibility problem, but I believe we also have an information problem.

Then again, focus was devoted to practical relevance in the everyday, indicating an increasingly encompassing notion of knowledge that included emotive messages. This group assigned high influence to companies over societal outcomes but thought that especially large corporations mostly failed to adequately employ their efficacy for climate matters. Individuals were deemed efficacious almost exclusively in relational terms:

N2: Because celebrities have a lot of power.

N4: Yes, exactly. But also in the film industry, for example. So that the roles are built in a way that they promote a different lifestyle. That the hero is not the Porsche driver. Or the chain smoker – imagine James Bond as the climate protector.

N5: On his bike.

N4: Yes, but honestly, why not?

The highest influence was thought to reside with politicians, who should regulate corporate actors when they did not meet their responsibilities. The notion of responsibility was similarly nuanced: it was very much seen as a matter of conscience (carbon-dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>)-compensation is like indulgence trade). One’s own responsibility was perceived to be considerable while the group still stressed political responsibility vis-a-vis individual responsibility as the latter was thought to foster diffusion. Thus, the group clearly tended toward regulation. The level of reflection displayed by this group was so pronounced that its members were even aware of their own ubiquitous denial tendencies, which can be seen as the opposite of the denial practiced in other groups. This implies particularly low denial in this group.

### FG4: Farmers

This group was particularly traditional and conservative.

I: Where does knowledge come from in our society?

F6: Definitely no longer from the parents, because in this day and age, I’m speaking from experience... In our town, the nurseries are free...And the kindergarten teachers have received the educational mandate. The children...go to the nursery, then it goes on from the nursery to the kindergarten, from the kindergarten to day school. And the educational task was handed over with the children. It used to be that you brought up your children yourself and taught them about decency and the environment and everything.

Here, the consensus was that the issue of climate change was substantially overblown in public discourse.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the group either trivialized or denied the imperative for climate action while most of the time, its knowledge about the issue did not comply with the scientific consensus advanced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Yet there was a strong emphasis on practical everyday competences and closeness to nature (as opposed to “urbanites”). The group’s trust in decision-makers was low. They also had low faith in both farmers’

individual and collective efficacy, thereby masking the comparatively substantial influence of their own interest group in Germany and with the European Union. Further, they thought that the degree to which young people were holding the public responsible was both hypocritical and exaggerated. As a result, they ridiculed climate change rather than taking it seriously. One attendee, however, was well-prepared and offered an extensive conspiracy theory, which the rest of the group largely ignored. Overall, the members of this group were very critical of different societal elites (politicians, consultants, corporate figures, and representatives of the “Fridays for Future” movement). They were also suspicious of established media, as they thought mainstream media exaggerated and catastrophized climate change to promote a certain political agenda:

**F3:** So always, every message, every single one. There are no good ones [about farming]...And since the knowledge is no longer there in the population,...people no longer understand it. They believe the news and say, yes, this is the end of the world and every farmer is off their head...

Thus, they perceived society to habitually and unfoundedly ascribe climate responsibility to the guild of farmers. Overall, the group displayed pronounced denial and blame of other actors outside farming.

#### **FG5: Mobility provider**

This group had a comparatively complex notion of responsibility as it recognized it in different spheres of life (work, private consumption). Here, like with the farmers, there was strong identification with one's occupation.

Again (like with the green startup and NGO), climate change was at the heart of one's working life but, unlike in the group of the NGO, the moral side of the issue was not internalized nearly as much. Instead, like the green startup, personal freedom was strongly underlined, and climate-related responsibility therefore fiercely rejected. In this group's view, corporations were already behaving responsibly, thus there was no need for further political intervention. The group perceived mobility as a substantial achievement that society had a responsibility to preserve (including flying):

**M4:** Well, I fly a lot too, and I like it. Um, because I think it's an achievement, actually. Flying, that many people can afford to fly, to see other countries

or whatever. So, I think mobility is basically a social achievement.

Individuals and companies were both deemed efficacious when they made a conscious effort to reduce their carbon footprint as substantial resources were already being allocated to climate action (for example, corporate initiatives). The political sphere was also deemed efficacious but should limit its interventions to mitigate the perceived conflict between “jobs and the climate.” Therefore, overall, implicit denial was quite pronounced in this group:

**M3** (in relation to someone's frequent flyer status): And maybe it's someone who has this card, someone who compensates for every single flight. And, uh, otherwise, uh, eats vegan, and, uh, would never buy fast fashion, and, I don't know, otherwise doesn't own a car, and ends up here with his card, but still takes the S-Bahn to the city of Munich because he wants to save the emissions taking his car would cause. You don't know. So,...

The group grappled intensely with the externally perceived contradiction between the mobility sector's particularly high emissions and the nature of the work of the sustainability department the group worked for. Members were quite annoyed over being accused of hypocrisy on numerous occasions. This group held deep faith in technological solutions and innovation. Climate knowledge was quite substantial, especially when sector specific. “Alarmist” and emotional climate messages were strongly rejected, and participants voiced a clear preference for factual and “rational” knowing.

#### **FG6: Industrial enterprise**

This group was composed of students who worked either as interns or part-time in various departments of the company while still attending university. Consequently, the group was homogeneous in terms of age and educational level, but not in terms of cultural tendencies, as different cultural orientations converged in this group: the performance culture of an industrial enterprise clashed with the culture of the transformation division while support for green growth coincided with the questioning of capitalism. The group by and large agreed that the whole of society carried responsibility, most of all corporate and political spheres. The responsibility question's multidimensionality was also recognized. The group thought that differing time scales of climate issues and solutions were obfuscating (cumulative) responsibility attribution. Taken together, climate action played a (at times quite important) role for parts of the group, while one participant

clearly stated that she did not consider herself responsible:

I: ...and the individual consumers...[what about] flying [shows picture prompt of airplane]?

E1: That's me tomorrow (laughs).

I: What is your attitude towards flying?

E3: I love traveling.

This resulted in the airing of a relatively diverse range of views on climate issues. At the same time, the group was aware of being influenced by their own respective social circles. Like the green startup and the mobility provider, this group also found it to be counterproductive to engage in or express opinions on other peoples' climate-related behavior, as it was ultimately considered to be a fundamentally *personal* choice. The group expected their own efficacy to be comparatively substantial, both individually and in relation to their work sphere. One participant delineated that consumers were limited by diverging purchasing power, as one had to be able to *afford* climate action. To approach this dilemma, she herself often bought clothes "second-hand." The group observed that in general, conventional climate-harmful practices were not being challenged by colleagues within the organization (although the working students themselves did so partially).

E1: You also have to say that political framework conditions apply to the general public, perhaps, but not necessarily to industry. Industry has special positions in many, many ways. For example, we recently discussed the issue of not having to pay the EEG surcharge<sup>12</sup> because they [some large corporations] simply consume so much electricity that they don't have to pay it. So, on the one hand, we say renewable energies, but, on the other hand, we say that companies with high electricity costs still don't have to pay it.

The potential efficacy of large corporations was deemed substantial, while demand created by individual consumers was also considered influential. One member of the group referred to the current climate as one of "extreme change" and, this way, attempted to justify that climate action had not yet achieved the necessary standards (emissions as a necessary relic of transformation to a "zero carbon future," indicating deep faith in "green growth"). Someone else stated that insufficient climate action was mainly due to the setup of the current economic system. Altogether, implicit denial was fairly pronounced in this group.<sup>13</sup>

## FG7: Teachers

The group of teachers saw climate action as a task for the whole of society (state, corporations, individuals). Its members acted climate-responsibly only to an extent. For example, they were willing to pay additional costs for clothing that was climate-friendly, however, they found that the supply of such apparel was very limited. Furthermore, this group criticized textile production in countries with lower wages mainly due to inadequate labor conditions, rather than for climate-related reasons. One group member commented that flying was more important to her than the climate, however, her tone was fairly defensive. Thus, by comparison, implicit denial was slightly less pronounced than in some of the previous groups.

This group asserted that their own occupational sphere had a special responsibility due to its relational role in education:

As teachers, we simply have a representative role. And if we are aware of this, then we also radiate it, so to speak. Maybe not always by preaching and so on, but we should actually live it actively. I tell my students that I don't own a car...then they at least have a role model, negative or positive, but they know someone who has no car. And is kind of normal (laughter).

However, the teachers did not consider their students to be truly efficacious as they questioned their motives for attending the *Fridays for Future* student protests and thought that a lot of students were just following along to get out of school. This reflects limited faith in collective action while the expectation of individual efficacy was comparatively pronounced.

The group was well informed and reflective while there was a considerable amount of attention devoted to factual knowledge, indicating the occupational culture of teachers as information-conveyors. Yet members thought that there existed a lot of conflicting information in relation to climate action, rendering its implementation very difficult. There was much debate on the practice of traveling long distances (educational effect/feeling "worldly" vs. consequences for the climate).

## Discussion

### Scientization and (de)valuation

Based on the empirical findings presented, I want to make the following central points in this section: climate-cultural diversity is provided by difference in ways of knowing and this, crucially, manifests (also) along occupational lines. The dynamics of Western

scientization over the last half century has intensified the privileging of some ways of knowing over others, with at times counter-productive implications for climate action. Occupational climate-cultural diversity further depends on variations in efficacy expectations and responsibility attributions. Climate action is most likely and achievable when responsibility and efficacy converge. Conventional socio-economic approaches increasingly fail to explain climate (in)action – here, the key lies in culture. While groups with less cultural capital were the only ones exhibiting explicit denial, implicit denial was practiced almost everywhere in social space (with the exception of the NGO whose members were particularly rich in cultural capital). Yet, even in those cases where work content was directly related to the issue of climate change (thereby contributing to cultural capital), this did not automatically indicate low levels of implicit denial.

The functioning of (occupational) culture is partially dependent on the provision of frameworks of meaning which shape what its members typically and collectively recognize and what, by contrast, is considered irrelevant (cf. Norgaard 2011). Communicative manifestations of occupational culture such as what is being talked about over lunch or in the smokers' corner influence how people handle certain issues. So, first, variations in occupational culture in connection to climate considerations surfaced regarding trust in different ways of knowing: in each of the occupational spheres analyzed, failure of information to reach people was variously pronounced (refer to theory section above). This was also the case with other areas of everyday life (e.g., traveling, everyday mobility, food). At the same time, many participants strongly objected to the employment of *emotional messages* (craftsmen, farmers, mobility provider); for example, it was asserted time and again that one did not wish to be “framed” (craftsman) by the originators of “official” messages (stemming from research and policy), and that the topic of climate change and sustainability was discussed “way too emotionally” (farmer).

This confirms Blühdorn's (2020, 78) point that the continuously expanding scientization and objectification of ecological concerns originally demanded by the activists of the 1970s and 1980s has “driven a wedge between citizens and sustainability politics.” Exponential growth in the societal significance of sustainability science and its intensified abstraction and swelling complexity has, unwillingly as Blühdorn stresses, increasingly alienated the citizenry and “expertocratic” sustainability politics from each other. The crucial point that needs to be added here is that this wedge has been driven between

sustainability politics and *some parts of society* much more than others. Depending on the climate culture, this alienation has been variously pronounced and crucially manifests along occupational lines. Thus, overall growing reliance on expertocratic knowing, along with the growing significance of materialities that are operated “by the head,” have devalued experiential and situated knowing, along with materialities that are dealt with “by hand.” As the occupational spheres of farmers and craftsmen have therefore been devalued by the overall trend toward scientization, they exhibit occupational climate cultures that strongly reject this kind of knowledge, not least because they do not routinely have access to it. This appears to also have affected practitioners' respective feelings of self-efficacy, as confirmed by the group interviews in which farmers and craftsmen exhibited the least faith in their own actions having the potential to make a true difference. In other words, the devaluation of some occupational spheres vis-à-vis others that was brought about by scientization has led to this almost reflex-like rejection of climate-scientific knowledge by farmers and craftsmen, making it particularly unlikely that the provision of such knowing will lead to climate action.

This is also directly connected to the relationship between responsibility and efficacy. For these farmers and craftsmen, being responsabilized to act on climate change, especially through “official” messages that rely on scientific findings and almost always stem from elite figures, directly clashed with their own low levels of self-efficacy, especially when it came to the handling of scientific information. These climate-cultural variations in responsibility attributions and efficacy expectations are crucial because they directly relate to the feasibility and effectiveness of climate action: one central finding of this study is therefore that in those instances, where reported responsibility and efficacy levels were more congruent (e.g., NGO), people tended to engage in climate action.

Paradoxically, it was however essential for both farmers and craftsmen to demonstrate that they were still adequately scientifically literate to participate in the discussion – again reflecting the high social significance that scientific knowledge carries today and the shame that is involved when not “being fluent” in it due to not having regular access to it. This study's results therefore indicate that one should consider different power relations operating between climate cultures, although this may prove diffuse and difficult to capture: for instance, one craftsman's cynical reference to the “Mr. Scientists” hints at the power relations manifesting here in relation to

scientization and the role they, in turn, play in denial. Moreso, the craftsmen were ambivalent about people working in the corporate or managerial world: they admired some of them for having achieved such positions, but also dismissed them as snobs who “needed a jour-fixe [regular meeting] for everything” (statement by one of the craftsmen) and would fly to attend it. They used this kind of ridicule to counteract perceived inferiority and divert attention away from their own responsibility (provided responsibility was recognized first) – both strategies that show implicit denial. This clearly reflects that “it is necessary to locate the source of power in order to challenge it and make changes” (Fox-Keller 1985; Goldblatt 2004, 126).

The farmers also contrasted their own closeness to the natural world and the countryside with those who lived in the city (whom they spoke of with contempt). They juxtaposed the embodied information at their own disposal (in what they called practical “everyday competency”) against knowledge elites who in their eyes were not advancing matters for the better. Moreso, from the farmers’ perspective, this elite knowledge was particularly abstract and intellectualized and thus pestered by irrelevance.

Concurrently, these groups with less cultural capital were more likely to embrace conspiracy theories (that, however, still employed scientific vocabulary and signifiers<sup>14</sup>), which shows, first, that emotions do play a decisive role in these discourses,<sup>15</sup> and second, that one was not actually endorsing the current scientific consensus. I thus observed more subtle forms of denial among farmers and craftsmen on top of the outright questioning of anthropogenic climate change and their endorsement of conspiracy theories.

By contrast, evidence-based knowledge and reason remained paramount among members of those occupational climate cultures that were richer in cultural capital. This is unsurprising as they are well-versed in its handling and also experienced valorization afforded by their own scientific literacy. This furthermore explains why scientific information, in these instances, results in climate action (NGO) – at least to a certain extent (teachers, green startup). Indeed, a strong belief in science and the provision of information as a “silver bullet” was evident here (NGO, teachers, also to an extent mobility provider, industrial enterprise). Overall, knowledge concepts endorsed by the occupational climate cultures in this study significantly differed in the level and quality of their reflections: some groups mentioned information deficits and deemed them problematic for advancing climate action (e.g., NGO,

teachers), while others suggested that participants were shifting away from relying solely on factual information (also NGO, industrial enterprise, farmers) and additionally underlined the need for *practical* information that would reflect people’s needs and daily lives more accurately. Thus, in this instance, the transmission of knowledge involved not only the conveyance of scientific facts, but also the transmission of *embodied messages* that are emotionally and affectively meaningful.

The two occupational climate cultures of farmers and craftsmen, in relying less on cultural capital and providing less emphasis and access to scientific knowing, have been comparatively degraded and devalued by society-wide developments such as scientization (cf. also Beck 1986; Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022), while the members of, for example, the NGO, the teachers group, and the green startup, and to an extent also the mobility provider and the industrial enterprise, can be seen as belonging to a “knowledge elite” and thus having benefited from this scientization. These results suggest that, ultimately, it was the *acceptance* of various types of knowing (see theory section above) that was pivotal in each climate culture. It may thus prove useful to consider factual knowledge as secondary and contemplate instead what is deemed *legitimate* knowing in each case.

### ***Newly emerging fault lines and discursive alliances***

When prompted about emerging responsabilizations related to flight shame, members of the mobility provider (who reported to have regularly been confronted with this issue) and the craftsmen (who were distant from one another socioeconomically) responded with similar levels of irritation. By contrast, the farmers agreed that one should feel guilty about flying (which was probably due to them not habitually doing so), which in this respect is most similar to the responses from members of the NGO group. The farmers’ complaint that air traffic was never seen as negative directly contrasts with views among the mobility provider whose members felt that air travel has become the scapegoat of the climate movement. Within the industrial enterprise, flying was deemed a professional necessity that allowed one to work productively again the next day. Here, climate action played a (at times significant) role for a portion of the group. For one participant, responsibility was however primarily linked to the surrounding corporate structures, indicating the relevance of economic vis-à-vis cultural capital in this

instance. Despite this, some group members, including the teachers, the remainder of the industrial enterprise, and the green startup, were highly defensive of their flying practices, suggesting that they perceived themselves to be at least partially responsible for producing high levels of carbon emissions this way – another climate-cultural similarity. From this follows that cultural factors, rather than solely socioeconomic differences, are also responsible for the fact that members of the NGO demonstrated the highest level of responsibility (even though they certainly did not hold the highest levels of economic capital), while teachers, who are positioned at least as high socioeconomically, only demonstrated medium levels.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, and perhaps most interestingly, this study's results reveal the formation of unexpected climate-cultural coalitions currently forming in society, similar to what has also been observed in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, these findings help to make sense of the failing of late modern societies to escape their status quo of *sustained unsustainability*. Clear evidence of significant climate-cultural diversity in the German workforce shows that occupational groups range from radical pro-climate action to climate-change skepticism and even outright denial – as was the case with both farmers and craftsmen. However, the groups of the green startup and mobility provider (and to an extent also the industrial enterprise), which all consisted of highly educated individuals, also demonstrated high levels of *implicit* denial (e.g., justifying continued flying through the presentation of it as a *deeply personal decision*) in the sense that Norgaard (2011) conceptualizes. This was surprising as both groups' professional areas and work content were directly related to climate issues. In this vein, Blühdorn (2020, 121) argues that privileged segments of society fiercely defend their ways of life against any threat of encroachment for reasons related to climate or global justice: "Debating these understandings of freedom, patterns of self-actualization, and entitlements themselves is entirely out of question" to them. These focus groups' portrayals of any limitation on flying or driving a sport-utility vehicle (SUV) as forms of an entirely unreasonable encroachment on personal freedom supports his argument that Western societies contemplate their ecological strategies only *within* this *non-negotiable* normative realm. Elite denial may thus also be used

to maintain one's own status of privilege. By contrast, a perceived lack of self-efficacy caused by financial and time constraints, as well as a sense of devaluation and inability to cope with the complexities of climate change brought about by continued *scientization*, are all real impediments to (everyday) self-efficacy among those with less capital, especially less cultural capital. This furthers our understanding of why climate action is neither yet adequately practiced in occupational cultures with less cultural capital (as official scientifically based calls to action clash with people's realities), nor even in elite circles that could theoretically (at least financially in some cases) afford to do so.

The emergence of connections between groups that were previously thought to be radically dissimilar, but which exhibit coinciding climate-cultural propensities to deny, has proven to be particularly revealing. Thus, this investigation underscores the need for and relevance of a culturally sensitive treatment of people's diverging working life realities. This is crucial for explaining current structures of unsustainability, especially as work occupies such a large portion of their everyday practice.

## Notes

1. All German to English translations were carried out by the author.
2. Justifications can easily be found to place the seventh focus group of farmers in either one of these two categories, which is why I chose to leave it out at this point.
3. I however do recognize, of course, that a large part of daily work is conducted outside of the workplace, namely in the home, and that this still lacks recognition as "work."
4. It is important to highlight from the very beginning that in this study the labels "elite" and "privileged" refer to Bourdieu's understanding of those rich in (predominantly) cultural capital and those groups in society that hold considerably more power (e.g., in terms of education levels). It is vital to note here, that I scrutinize differences and conflicts within the German population (between those more and less rich in this capital). I explicitly do not use these terms as the opposites of "the elites" and "the population" as the populist rhetoric of the political far right frames it.
5. In this study, I consider conspiracy theories to reflect the misconception that powerful individuals or groups (often referred to as "the elite" by those endorsing such theories) secretly pull the strings over societal outcomes. This rhetoric also often has an antisemitic element to it and must be thoroughly distinguished from what is meant by "elite climate cultures" in this study (i.e., those endowed with considerable (primarily) cultural capital in Bourdieu's terms).

6. From a United Nations information campaign related to the Sustainable Development Goals and titled “The Lazy Person’s Guide to Saving the World” and “What You Can Do at Work.” See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/takeaction>.
7. By “existing groups,” I mean work teams that had habitually been working with each other before the interviews – as opposed to people coming from the same occupational background but not knowing each other before the interview situation. One exception was the group of farmers, as the group was recruited through the local farmers’ association (as there are not usually larger work teams encountered in rural farms in this area) – so, for the most part, they did not know each other beforehand.
8. For instance, to initiate a conversation about the responsibility and efficacy of political agents, the vignette displayed three pictures: one Facebook posting by *Fridays for Future* responsabilizing the then-newly established climate cabinet, one of the cabinet politicians themselves, and one that showed the way in which these politicians were parodied by activists.
9. A German right-wing news blog, according to, for example, *The Guardian* in 2016. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/08/breitbart-looks-to-france-and-germany-another-alt-right-victory-steve-bannon>.
10. Homogenous in the sense that there is a level of agreement (despite the disagreement mentioned) on climate matters among group members that cannot be sufficiently explained by them working with each other; clearly, cultural factors are at play here.
11. As members of this group did not know each other before the interview and recruitment took place through the local farmers association, I grant that the skewing of stances as a result of self-selection may be a slightly more significant issue here than in the other cases.
12. The surcharge set by the German Renewable Energy Sources Act called *Erneuerbare-Energien-Gesetz* (EEG).
13. This group should not be perceived as representative of the industrial sector (as a whole), especially because only a certain subgroup (working students) was interviewed. However, intragroup differences are still less relevant than the diversity between groups because attitudes inconsiderate of climate change were generally not sanctioned by the rest of the group (and this lack of sanctioning contributed to the characterization of this particular occupational climate culture).
14. As they, for instance, still referred to “studies” from alternative publishing or media outlets.
15. See Sanchez and Dunning (2021) and Bessarabova and Banas (2023, 90). Recent research demonstrates that the endorsement of conspiratorial beliefs and misinformation might be an emotional affair rather than a cognitive one. People who are emotionally invested tend to be the most susceptible to the appeal of conspiratorial and unsubstantiated beliefs.

16. However, each group’s socioeconomic status was still closely related to their efficacy expectations.

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Full consent to participate was granted in written form by each focus-group member. The article was developed in line with the guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Data-availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to potential data-privacy infringement but are available from the author on reasonable request.

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