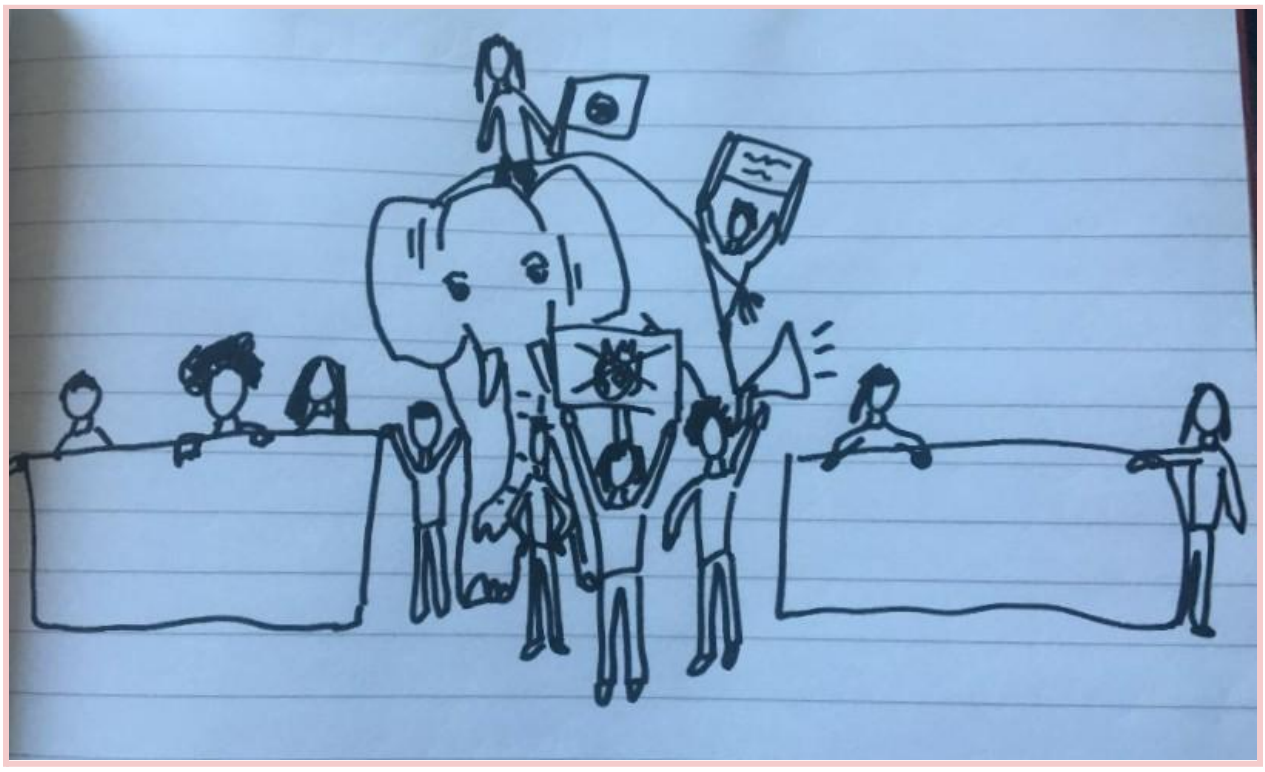
The elephant in the protest march: socially organised denial within climate movements at the UNFCCC



Author's own illustration.

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Abstract:

In 2011, Kari Norgaard detailed how socially organised denial facilitates inaction on climate change, even among individuals who express concern. Here, I expand on Norgaard's theory by exploring how a form of this denial could exist even among those who centre climate activism in their personal or professional lives. I posit that certain streams of activism can allow one to counteract negative emotions such as hopelessness or powerlessness, while remaining in implicatory denial about the severity of the crisis and the efficacy of their activism. I employ an 'extreme' case study of Youth and Environmental NGOs at the UNFCCC in the years since 2015. I use semi-structured interviews, supported by retrospective participant observation at several UNFCCC events, to explore the cultural norms of three civil society networks. I draw on Norgaard's work, supported by compatible concepts such as cultural hegemony and NGOization. I conclude that there are certain restrictive norms in civil society groups, mediated by their funding mechanisms and social psychological processes, that limit more radical stances. Civil society can thereby partially reinforce the same hegemony that blocks meaningful climate action, even while they can simultaneously employ counter-hegemonic strategy in other areas.

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There are countless people without whom this thesis would never have been written.

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Jannek - for your help with the English languish.

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List of abbreviations

CAN: Climate Action Network (More reformist part of Environmental NGO constituency)
COP: Conference of the Parties (Annual UN Climate Conference)
DCJ: Demand Climate Justice (Radical part of Environmental NGO constituency)
ENGO: Environmental NGOs (Official constituency representing environmental NGOs at UNFCCC)
UKYCC: UK Youth Climate Coalition (Youth civil society group)
UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
YOUNGO: Youth NGOs (Official constituency representing youth at UNFCCC)

1. Introduction

In 2011, Kari Norgaard published her seminal book *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. In some ways, she pointed out the obvious - that most of us in the Global North live a life of contradiction. On the one hand, the majority of people, even in countries like the US, believe that climate change is happening, that it will have serious consequences for humanity, and that not enough is being done about it (Tyson and Kennedy, 2020) (Stokes, Wilke, & Carle, 2015). Despite this troubling knowledge, most people continue to live their lives as though this were not the case, failing to take either political action or major lifestyle changes. (Norgaard, 2011).

In this way, Norgaard expanded the concept of climate denial to include more than only those who do not believe anthropogenic climate change is happening at all. She challenges the often-made assumption that if people knew more about climate change, they would act accordingly - an assumption that forms the basis of many climate campaigns. Rather, Norgaard describes how one's everyday actions can fail to reflect what they know on an intellectual level, which she refers to as *implicatory denial*. While some have tried to explain this contradiction in terms of psychological explanations that posit implicatory climate denial as a result of infallible human nature (Schmitt, Neufeld, Mackay and Dys-Steenbergen, 2020), Norgaard takes a more critical and holistic social psychological stance, locating the causes of denial primarily in the interplay between culture and emotions. People are under a pressure to conform to their

community's emotional and conversational norms, and if acting on climate change runs counter to those norms, it becomes challenging.

While she does not explicitly state where the boundaries of this denial lie, she mentions her interview participants failing to join environmental groups, and failing to bring up climate change at political meetings (Norgaard, 2011). Perhaps unintentionally, she then implies that denial ends at the point of taking action. In this thesis, I will investigate the possibility that this is not the case. I posit that socially organised climate denial exists not only within communities where climate change is sidelined, but also within many organisations and networks that centre themselves on the climate issue.

This might sound like a fallacy. However, looking at the mainstream climate movements in the Global North, the majority of action takes the form of the occasional large demonstration, policy advocacy, individual lifestyle changes and - as of recent years - widespread but low-conflict civil disobedience (Malm, 2020). One would be hard pressed to argue that we are all acting as though, as Greta Thunberg says, "*our house is on fire" (*Thunberg, 2019*)*. This is despite the climate movement's own assertions that we have under a decade left in which to completely transform society in order to avoid catastrophic consequences (Laville and Watts, 2019). I argue, then, that we are in the grips of a third kind of climate denial: not that the crisis is happening, not a failure to act at all, but a failure to act *in accordance with the severity of the crisis,* despite the evidence that our current methods are not enough.

Indeed, it has been previously demonstrated that the broad climate movement is subject to its own restrictive norms. For example, as explained by Malm (2020), while recent years have seen the rise of widespread civil disobedience, there is an unwillingness to consider escalating activities to include property damage. It is often claimed that this is a tactical move - see Chenoweth (2013). However, as Malm explains, analysis of previous political movements shows that this is questionable. Rather, it is often just normatively accepted that property damage is not up for discussion.

This is reminiscent of aspects of socially organised denial, including conversational norms which determine which discussions are allowed and where; and thought communities in which dissenters from the prevailing way of thinking are considered morally lacking. Therefore, as Norgaard (2011) describes a tight-knit Norwegian community that co-creates and mutually

enforces denial, I will use this thesis to begin to explore whether one can observe a similar situation within mainstream climate movements and organisations in the Global North.

Of course, it would be far beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to find a definitive answer to whether this is the case for the entirety of civil society. Instead, I will aim to explore whether this is a potential area for further research by employing an extreme case study on one of the largest meetings of environmental civil society globally, and will examine whether there are aspects of socially organised climate denial that can be observed for the climate activists present in that space.

1.1 Introducing the case: civil society at the UNFCCC, post-Paris

The UNFCCC's Conference of the Parties (COP) - in which nation states party to the UN meet to negotiate climate crisis on the global stage - is a conference of extreme contradiction. On the one hand, it is the single largest meeting of people globally focusing on the climate crisis. As described by Cassegard and Thorn (2017), the COP conferences can be understood as rare *global public sphere moments:* events around which an ordinarily fragmented global civil society interacts and negotiates. Whenever there is talk of the climate crisis, it can be expected to come with reference to the UNFCCC's landmark Paris Agreement, which is often presented as an uncontested positive force (Bäckstrand and Kuyper, 2017). Powerful institutions often refer to the treaty as a global consensus on the correct course of action required in order to stabilise emissions - and, conveniently, to also allow us to continue in our paradigm of growth and development (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2016). Indeed, much of civil society takes an uncritical stance on the treaty, including not only more professionalised NGOs, but also grassroots movements. For example, as of 2021, one of Fridays for Future Global's key demands is to "Follow the Paris Agreement" (Fridays for Future, 2021).

On the other hand, the Paris agreement constitutes a highly neoliberal and eco-modernist response to the climate crisis (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017). For example, it facilitates market mechanisms that contribute to the commodification of nature, including the trading of emissions for offsetting - for example, the infamous REDD+ scheme, which is often associated with land-grabbing and the violation of Indigenous peoples' rights (Spash 2016, Parola 2020). Additionally, references to fossil fuels are nonexistent within the text, which highlights the reluctance of many states and the UN as a whole to confront the vested interests that work to

limit meaningful climate action (Piggot et al., 2017). Indeed, in the conference spaces themselves, one can find representatives from the fossil fuel industry, sometimes on state delegations, and sponsorship from some of the biggest polluters and the banks funding them (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2019).

Furthermore is the fact that, despite a quarter of a century of its existence, the UNFCCC has failed to curb the growth of greenhouse gas emissions. In an article by Kinley et al. (2020), four ex-UNFCCC leaders take a critical look at how much the UNFCCC has achieved. While they celebrate the three major treaties it has produced, they do not hold back on pointing out its numerous failures. First, is the ambition gap: the fact that the combined NDCs in the Paris agreement, if achieved, are still projected to lead to 2.6 degrees Celsius warming globally, which could have devastating impacts, including the drowning of entire island states such as Tuvalu (see Riaz Ud Dean, 2020). Second, the fact that governments have thus far failed to even implement these insufficient targets. In their own words:

> There is a very dark cloud hanging over the UNFCCC process and the wider multilateral response to the climate crisis – namely global CO2 emissions are more than 65% higher now than they were in 1990 (Crippa et al., 2020)... The politically-convenient ambiguity endemic to most multilateral processes (on all topics), traceable to the reality of state sovereignty and the ever-present 'anarchy' that famously characterizes international relations, compounded by the retrograde actions of various vested interests, partly explain this sorry reality. However, at the heart of the problem is the failure by states to implement their commitments, all too often paying only lip-service to what needs to be done, as well as the hesitation of too many in the business community to act on the policy signals being sent. While there are some signs of change of late, these are still too few to give confidence that the speed and scale of change will be sufficient to achieve the Convention's objective of preventing 'dangerous interference with the climate system'. (Kinley et al., 2020)

This, coming from some of those closest to the UNFCCC's centres of power, does not lend confidence in the process. And yet, many civil society groups continue to pour huge amounts of money, time and resources into participating (de Moor and Wahlström, 2020). While their participation does not necessarily mean that they support the UNFCCC in its current form, it implies at least that they believe it possible for them to make a meaningful difference in the negotiations or in wider society through their attendance. This confidence is somewhat questionable - considering the history of the UNFCCC shutting out civil society observers when

conflicts occur, the limited opportunities for civil society inputs into negotiations, the need for observers to alter their viewpoints or goals in order to have continued access to negotiations, and the potential of participation to reinforce existing power imbalances among civil society (Thew 2020, Jamil and Maeztri 2011, Buxton 2016, Kuyper, Bäckstrand and Schroeder 2016).

Likewise are the contradictions within environmental groups themselves. While many claim to increase the UNFCCC's democratic legitimacy, most of the largest environmental NGOs do not themselves have democratic governance structures (Bäckstrand & Kuyper 2017). Furthermore, while there is a commonly claimed goal of supporting and amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable among Northern environmental NGOs, in many cases they continue to take positions that are not in line with the demands of said frontline communities (Long, Roberts and Dehm 2010). Finally, while many of these NGOs, for example, challenge the fossil fuel industry at home, according to groups such as the Third World Network, there has been an alleged reluctance on the part of Climate Action Network (which includes many of the largest Northern environmental NGOs) to bring up the issue of Conflicts of Interest - i.e.,fossil fuel lobbyists within the UNFCCC space - at the COP conferences (Corporate Accountability International, 2018).

The nature of the conferences - in which fossil fuel interests are blatantly displayed; governments applaud each other despite having achieved nothing concrete, and thousands of civil society participants, (including both transnational NGOs who aim to influence the negotiations and grassroots groups who aim to expose the UNFCCC's hypocrisy) interact - make this a prime extreme case in which to investigate the potential for socially organised denial (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010). Meeting spaces in which the contradictions of the neoliberal regime's efforts to solve the climate crisis are so visible are rare. As such, I find the UNFCCC civil society space to be an appropriate case study in order to reach my aims.

1.2 A Note on Positionality

Understanding that this work is not unbiased, and that everything written in this thesis has been filtered through my own perspective, I aim to be as transparent as possible about my positionality, which is very much that of an insider within my community of study. Since 2017, I have been engaging in the UNFCCC conferences as an observer and activist. I attended mostly as a delegate with the UK Youth Climate Coalition and briefly also with PUSH Sweden. Both of these are volunteer-based youth climate organisations based in the Global North (UK and

Sweden). Both are recognised members of the youth constituency, YOUNGO, as well as the European node of the Climate Action Network i.e. CAN (see figure 1 for an explanation of these groups). I also took part in various meetings of Demand Climate Justice! (DCJ), and would align myself with them politically. This means that I am entering this research with pre-formed opinions on the UNFCCC space, as well as a normative climate justice stance. Likewise, part of my reasoning for choosing these two networks for my case was the fact that I had previous experience with them.

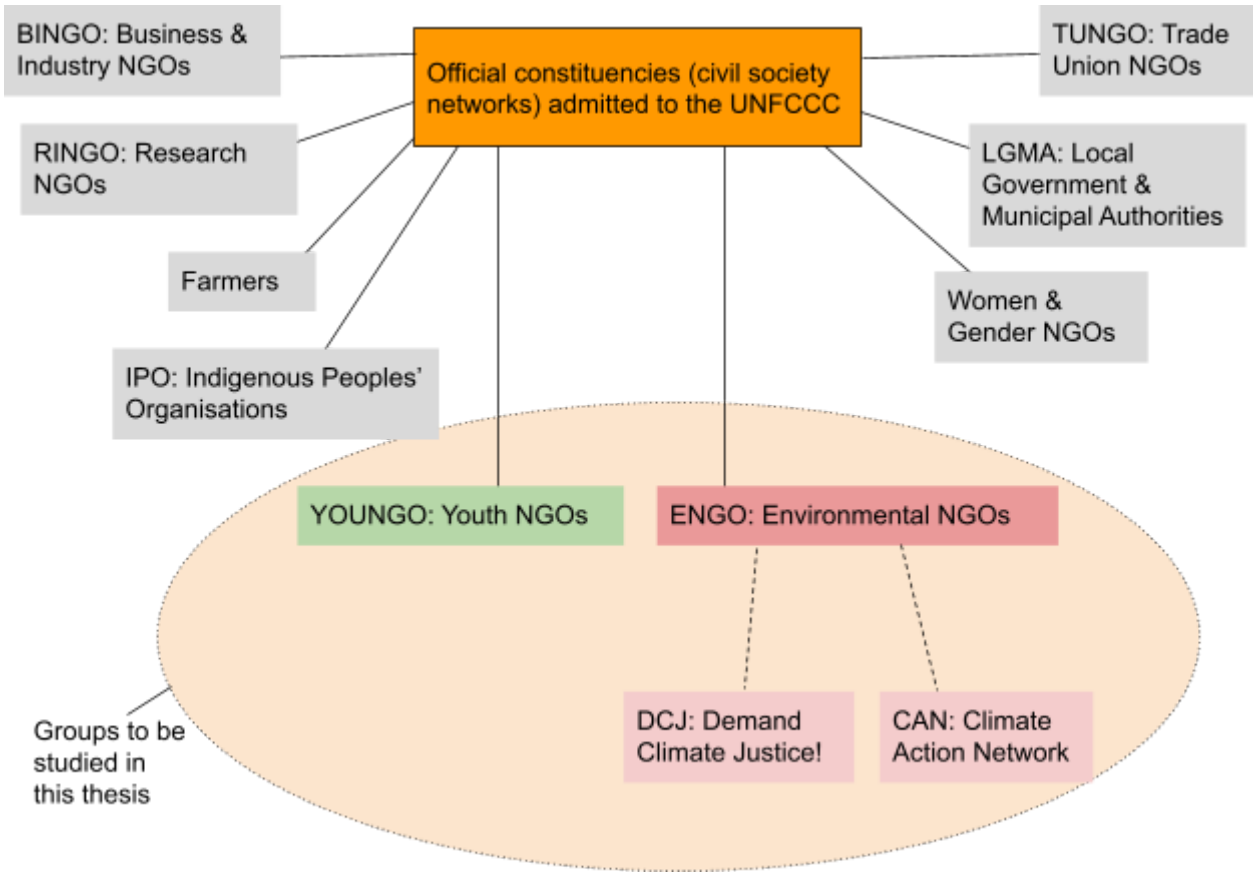

Figure 1: Observer constituencies admitted by the UNFCCC (UNFCCC, 2014). Diagram created by the author.

1.3 Aims and objectives

My aims are both academic and practical. Academically, I hope to expand upon Norgaard's work by investigating whether aspects of her *socially organised denial* are also applicable within a climate-focused civil society space. More specifically, I aim to build on previous ethnographic studies of groups at the UNFCCC by mapping emotional and cognitive norms within a specific subsection of civil society. Building on existing ethnographies of CAN and YOUNGO (Holz 2012, Thew 2020), I will zoom in on those aspects relevant to *denial,* and will try to situate the organisational cultures within these groups at the UNFCCC within a wider political economic context. I take a critical stance, applying the concepts of socially organised denial, cultural hegemony, and aspects of political economy - for example, NGOization - in my analysis.

Practically, I hope to contribute something useful to the climate justice movement. I do not intend to criticise or praise observers at the UNFCCC for the sake of criticism or praise. Rather, I hope to investigate how civil society groups may be constrained by aspects of their organisational culture. I do this, ultimately, with the hope of helping to find a way forward in terms of pushing for the change needed to avert climate catastrophe.

1.4 Research Questions

It would be beyond my scope to provide an account of denial as thorough as Norgaard's, or indeed, to definitively answer whether or not a given group or individual is 'in denial'. I will instead use some of her most central concepts - e.g. cognitive norms and emotions - to answer some more focused questions about my case:

1) How are the civil society groups ENGO and YOUNGO characterized by their cognitive traditions, including their emotional and conversational norms?
2) How do the cognitive traditions of civil society groups, in combination with the emotions experienced by group participants, shape the actions taken by these groups?
3) How does this relate to other factors that affect civil society strategy, such as funding?

1.5 Structure of the thesis

I begin Chapter 2, *Theory, Context, and Literature,* by giving an overview of the UNFCCC civil society space, as far as it is needed for the understanding of this thesis. Next, I outline the different theories I draw upon. Namely, socially organised denial, cultural hegemony, and NGOization. Finally, I conduct a brief literature review, structured around those concepts and how they relate to the networks YOUNGO and ENGO. In Chapter 3, *Methodology,* I explain my data sources and methods, and why I saw them as appropriate in answering my research questions. In Chapter 4, I present my interview results, organised by the themes that emerged from the coding of my interviews, supplemented by my retrospective observations. Finally, in Chapter 5, *Discussion,* I synthesise my results to circle back to the theoretical framework, and discuss my limitations and the wider implications of my work.

2. Theory, context, and literature

2.1 Background on civil society participation at the UNFCCC

The COP conferences are one of the global arenas most open to participation by so-called “civil society”. Despite this collective term, observers at the UNFCCC are far from a homogenous group. Rather, the civil society to which the UNFCCC secretariat often refers officially includes groups (or *constituencies)* as diverse and broad as business (BINGO), environmental organisations (ENGO), youth (YOUNGO), indigenous peoples, women, farmers, local governments, trade unions, and researchers. (UNFCCC, 2014).

These constituencies are given both formal opportunities, e.g. two minute interventions at plenaries and negotiations, and the more open opportunity to roam the conferences where they can speak with delegates, hold side events and press conferences. It is even possible to hold small demonstrations, though these are highly restricted: any text displayed or chants need to be approved by UNFCCC officials, they are only permitted within small ‘action zones’ that are often far from the negotiation spaces, it is not permitted to name specific countries, companies, or people, and in some cases protests must be completely silent (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017b). Many scholars have pointed out how the UNFCCC’s rules effectively restrict the voicing

of more critical stances, especially as any organisation or participant deemed to have broken the rules of conduct can be permanently expelled (de Moor and Wahlström, 2019).

Important for both ENGO and YOUNGO are their internal political divisions. In the case of ENGO, this was formalised in 2009, when there was official split between CAN, the more reformist and policy focused side of the constituency, and DCJ, who focus on countering neoliberal capitalism and calling for justice for most-affected communities (Cassegård and Thörn, 2017). While these groups occasionally collaborate, they usually work separately. For example, the two minute interventions given by each constituency are instead given as individual one-minute speeches.

This reflects long-standing debates within the climate movement over reform vs. revolution, whether to collaborate with powerful institutions, and ultimately, whether it is possible to achieve justice under capitalism. On the one hand, CAN operates mostly within the structures provided by the UNFCCC, i.e. lobbying for policy, engaging with delegates and ultimately showing faith in the Paris Agreement. Indeed, many CAN members play a role in consolidating the UN process. For example, the World Wildlife Fund frequently partners with corporations to implement carbon offsetting projects as part of the UNFCCC's Clean Development Mechanism. (Nasiritousi, 2019).

On the other hand, within DCJ, a more UNFCCC-critical stance is taken. While some engage with policy in order to try to prevent harm caused by projects such as the infamous REDD+ (Long, Roberts and Dehm, 2010), many UNFCCC processes are largely ignored as useless. The focus is on exposing the hypocrisy of the conferences and campaigning for structural changes, e.g. the removal of fossil fuel lobbyists (Nasirouti, 2019). Some DCJ allies, such as La Via Campesina, refrain from sending observers to the COPs altogether, to avoid legitimising the process, instead making use of the political opportunity of the conferences to highlight alternatives and create more democratic structures in parallel. They point to the continued failure of multilateral processes to deliver any meaningful climate action, and often refer to the same policies advocated for by CAN as 'false solutions' (Cassegård and Thörn, 2017).

YOUNGO follows a similar pattern, though divisions are less clear and often go unacknowledged. However, issues such as fossil fuel sponsorship and questions of with whom to collaborate bring these divides to the surface, and they follow similar lines to those that exist in ENGO. Indeed, many people who are active in YOUNGO are also involved in CAN or DCJ.

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 Socially Organized Climate Denial

Central to this thesis is the work of Kari Norgaard, which draws on the sociology of cognition along with extensive ethnographic fieldwork in order to give a novel account of climate denial as a cultural phenomenon. Here I will provide an overview of Norgaard's 2011 book, supplemented by Zerubavel's (2006) more general work on denial.

Norgaard (2011) first questions the *information deficit model* that is often assumed to be the cause for the lack of public outrage or mass action on the climate crisis. She points to studies that show, rather paradoxically, that the more information a person has on the climate crisis, the less concerned they feel. Indeed, many of the people Norgaard interviewed were informed and expressed worry about the climate crisis, and yet continued to act as though it were not happening. Norgaard refers to this as a state of *double-mindedness:* both knowing and not knowing at the same time, and finds an explanation in sociology of emotion and cognition.

As Zerubavel (2006) explains, the norm is to think of ourselves as independent and rational actors. However, the things that we notice, think, and feel are highly conditioned by the *thought communities* in which we find ourselves. A thought community is a group with shared *cognitive norms*, which we learn as we are socialised into that group:

> As she listens to her mother's one-minute account of an entire day they spent together downtown, a young girl tacitly learns what merits social attention and what can actually be ignored. Seeing nobody around her ever mentioning her father's drinking, she likewise learns that it is something one is not supposed to notice. (Zerubavel, 2006, pp 21.)

One example of a cognitive norm, as Zerubavel illustrated, is where to direct our attention. Another is which emotional reactions are appropriate in which contexts in terms of intensity and duration. Once socialised into a thought community, the cognitive traditions there seem natural or common sense, and it becomes challenging to see them from an outside perspective.

These norms and their social importance can lead to conspiracies of silence, or as Zerubavel calls them, *elephants in the room.* For example, we may learn as a child that pointing out a homeless person in the street results in disapproval. By the time we are an adult, we have learnt to turn a blind eye to homelessness in our everyday lives, and we accept it as socially allowed to ignore a homeless person talking to us in the street, while it would be considered rude to do so to most other people.

That is not to say that we are unaware of homelessness, or other issues. We are in what Norgaard (2011) calls *implicatory denial.* We know, perhaps, that we have a spare room, and our ethical values state that we should help those in need. But in that situation, we do not feel either a moral obligation or the expected emotional impact of seeing someone in need. It is not that we lack the information or morals, but that we do not do the right thing with the information. Thus, implicatory denial*,* pushed on us by our communities, and in turn reinforced by us continuing to turn a blind eye.

The causes of denial are manifold. First, from a psychological perspective, it allows us to avoid troubling emotions. For example, thinking or talking about the climate crisis can spark feelings of guilt, helplessness and fear, but we can avoid that distress by avoiding the conversation. It is often easier cognitively to redefine the focus of our thoughts than to re-organise our sense of order and a just world by confronting huge issues of injustice. Likewise, talking about climate change can bring disapproval or shunning from our communities, due to sparking negative emotions in others, or simply for not following the cultural norms of what to talk about and where. These negative emotions can be even stronger because they threaten our identity as good and ethical people by making us confront the ways in which we contradict our own moral codes. (Zerubavel, 2006, Norgaard, 2011). As one of Norgaard's participants said:

> There were many things that we felt that we should have done, but we did like the others anyway, right. Because you have to fit into normal society. It is difficult. You can't just sign yourself out, right? If you did everything entirely ideal, you would be an outsider in the society, and then you wouldn't get anything done either." (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 122).

Of course, norms depend on the situation. For example, while it may be frowned upon to bring up heavy topics such as climate change in a workplace or at the bus stop with an acquaintance, it might be acceptable at a small social event with trusted friends. Unfortunately, the rare

situations in which climate change can be discussed are often private, and therefore unlikely to break the denial of wider society (Norgaard, 2011).

In terms of research, observing denial can be difficult. One cannot simply look at what is being discussed, but must also think about what is *not* being discussed (Zerubavel, 2006). This poses obvious difficulties, but there are a few situations in which denial can be exposed.

Firstly, newcomers to a thought community often have a better insight into how the culture operates, compared to those who have integrated. As Zerubavel puts it:

> "It is hardly a coincidence that the very first person in "The Emperor's New Clothes" to note that the emperor has no clothes is actually a child, who has yet to learn what one is socially supposed not to notice." (Zerubavel, 2006, pp. 20)

Therefore, by speaking to newcomers or outsiders of a community, we may be able to gain some useful insights by seeing what aspects they find unusual or contradictory. Secondly, we can understand whether a given topic or behaviour is a subject of denial by seeing how members of a community respond when it *is* brought up, as people will often respond disapprovingly when one brings up a topic considered taboo or inappropriate. (Zerubavel, 2006).

Finally, we should think about how cultures of denial can be broken. According to Norgaard and Zerubavel, there is weight in numbers. One person speaking out can be ignored, while many speaking at once have more power. Likewise, people are more likely to trust their experiences when they are confirmed by others. However, overcoming denial is still a cognitively difficult process. As Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) describe, activism often means shifting from one set of emotional norms to another, which is not a cognitively easy process.

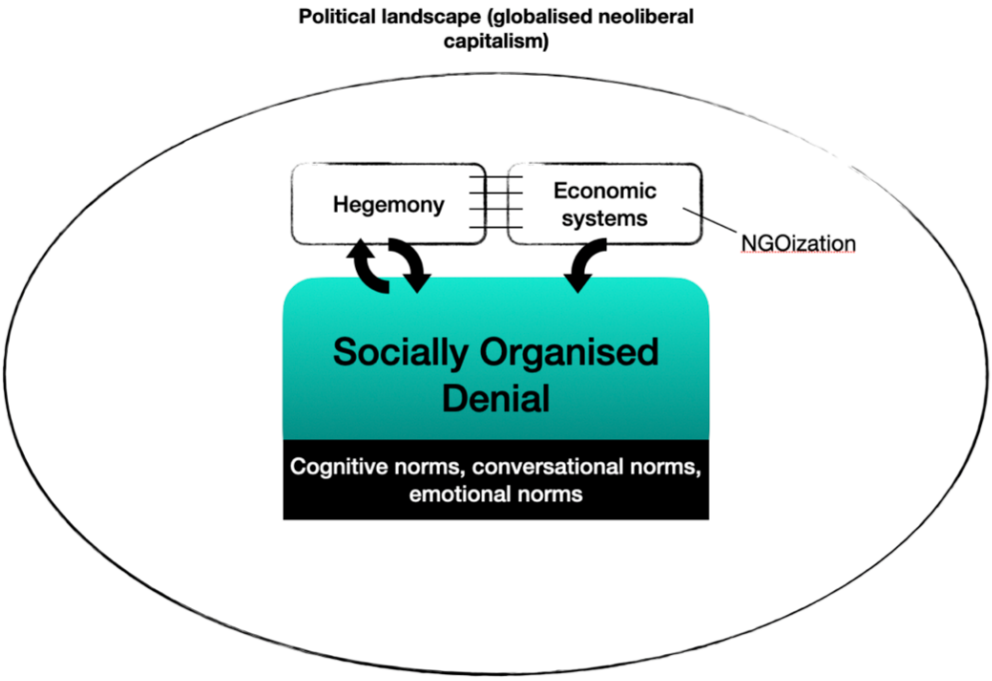

Figure 2: Visualisation of theoretical framework.

Socially organised denial does not occur at random, but relates to a wider political and cultural landscape. In Norgaard's (2011) study, she took into account, for example, Norway's vested economic interest in continued fossil fuel extraction as an economic incentive for climate denial. Likewise, she writes about cultural hegemony, and its symbiotic relationship with denial. As can be seen in figure 2, in this thesis I centre socially organised denial, but see it as a product of economic circumstances and the prevailing cultural hegemony, which it also feeds into. Therefore, I will also make use of the notions of cultural hegemony and NGOization (an economic analysis of NGOs under capitalism) to relate denial in the UNFCCC space to the wider world.

2.2.2 Cultural Hegemony

In order to link the norms of my case groups to wider society, I will draw on the concept of cultural hegemony, which was famously developed by Gramsci in the Prison Notebooks (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 2008). Cultural hegemony refers to the way in which one economic class exerts subtle control over another through cultural, organizational and discursive practises. Power is thus exercised over the masses not only by force (or coercion),

but also through the manufacturing of consent. While coercion is exercised in the political arena, consent is continually discursively reproduced within the realm of civil society - not only through organisations and the mass media, but also through everyday beliefs and activities. The worldview of the ruling class thereby becomes so normalised as to become invisible, being broadly accepted as common sense by the people, and opposing positions are seen as nonsensical or irrational. In this way, hegemony makes it difficult for people to imagine alternatives to the current order. (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 2008)

However, hegemony is not universal, and can be challenged and ultimately overturned. Gramsci referred to counter-hegemonic movements as historical blocs. Here, a lower social class exercises their own discursive practices and wages them against those of the dominant class in a war of position, often alongside an economic power struggle. This is particularly common, for example, in crises where the current social order's shortcomings and contradictions are exposed. At these times, the ruling class may engage in a passive revolution whereby they neutralise counter-hegemonic forces through a bargaining process. They may concede certain aspects of their ideology as long as they do not threaten the core of their power or ideology. This can result in small reforms within the economic system, but ultimately upholds existing class and power relations and prevents more radical change. (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 2008).

2.2.3 NGOization

As membership of a formalised group with a certain level of bureaucracy is needed to gain access to the UNFCCC, I find NGOization - a framework for the critical analysis of how NGOs and social movements are pressured and shaped by a capitalist society - to be an appropriate springboard for the economic aspect of my analysis.

NGOization describes a process in which a grassroots movement incorporates into a more professionalised 'NGO'. Typically, the movement becomes formalised and bureaucratic, and creates stronger ties with government and sometimes business. The NGO *professionalises,* beginning to employ paid staff and turn over higher amounts of money, rather than relying on voluntary work. (Lang, 2012).

Arundhati Roy (2004) gives a more loaded description of the process of NGOization, describing it as a way in which dissent is tamed under capitalism:

> NGOs give the impression that they are filling the vacuum created by a retreating state. And they are, but in a materially inconsequential way. Their real contribution is that they defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance. NGOs form a sort of buffer between the sarkar and public. Between Empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators of the discourse. They play out the role of the "reasonable man" in an unfair, unreasonable war. (Roy, 2004, pp. 43).

Indeed, there have been many accounts describing how NGOs become co-opted and deradicalised over time by their funding structures. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (INCITE, 2007)*,* the authors go so far as to describe a *non-profit industrial complex.*

The NGO phenomenon has been understood by some as an example of Gramsci's passive revolution. Spash (2020a) argues that NGOization is not a passively occurring process, but is often intentionally wielded by corporate interests. They employ the language of environmental movements, 'buy off' the less principled people, isolate the more radical members, and ultimately co-opt the movements that threaten their business model. As NGOs become reliant on receiving funding, they must tread more carefully in order to avoid upsetting their funders. Likewise, they undergo a process of *rationalisation,* i.e. they are under pressure to conform to work that can be quantified under common evaluative standards, resulting in little experimentation, creativity, or work pursuing longer-term change. Professionalisation and rationalisation processes result in more moderate goals, crucially, while individual members or staff may continue to hold radical views (Hwang and Powell, 2009) (Roy, 2014). In this way, the institution becomes the problem.

Of course, the effect large NGOs have on the climate justice movement is debatable. There are radical theorists who would say that more moderate groups are needed in combination with a radical flank of grassroots activists (see Ellefsen, 2018). Likewise, Erik Olin Wright (2019) called for a strategic eroding of capitalism through top-down, state-based interventions (e.g., those pushed by NGOs) in tandem with prefigurative bottom-up solutions. Others, such as Quinn-Thibodeau and Wu (2016), rather take the position that NGOs speak in place of grassroots movements and people affected most by the issues they work on, therefore pushing them out of the discussion. We can see, then, that this debate is far from settled.

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 Hegemony at the UNFCCC

The UNFCCC is widely lauded as the solution to the climate crisis by global powers, including states, business, and intergovernmental organisations. By examining, for example, the text of the Paris agreement, it is clear that the UNFCCC subscribes to the wider discourses of neoliberalism, ecological modernisation and sustainable development (Spash, 2016). The hegemonic position is that climate change is a technical problem: not a result of economic structures, human-nature relations, or even the burning of fossil fuels, but a matter of managing how much carbon dioxide is in the atmosphere (Aho, 2020). The solution is to incorporate greenhouse gases into the market. Climate change is merely one aspect of the global economy, and in the unspoken hierarchy of intergovernmental institutions, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is positioned above the UNFCCC. Under WTO rules, governments can be sued for implementing carbon taxes, for example, which can be deemed discriminatory against corporations. It is assumed that by trading carbon and investing our money and hope into dubious new technologies, such as carbon capture and storage, we can fix the climate crisis without having to make any fundamental changes to the economic system. (Aho, 2020).

As is well-documented by Swyngedouw (2011), climate change is presented as an apolitical issue, and technological and market solutions a win-win for the economy and the planet. Legally binding emission reduction targets and structural changes are off the agenda, and the normative prioritisation of the economic growth paints alternative approaches as irrational or even immoral (Quinn-Thibodeau & Wu, 2016b).

Authors such as Aho (2020) and Spash (2020a, 2020b) describe sustainable development discourse as an example of Gramsci's passive revolution. Market mechanisms give the illusion that polluting industries are taking climate change seriously, pacifying public concern, while empirical data shows that those mechanisms do not actually impact on the amount of carbon energy companies emit. In this way, companies do not have to stop burning fossil fuels, but can claim sustainability, sometimes even gaining additional profits from carbon trading schemes (Aho 2020).

This passive revolution historically worked to polarise the environmental movement, which was until then fairly united. Certain environmental organisations were absorbed into existing hegemony, and began to partner with businesses on greenwashing projects, thereby protecting corporate interests. On the other hand, this also sparked the development of a counter-hegemonic *climate justice bloc*. Frustrated by the developments at Copenhagen in 2009, this radical faction of the climate movement became more confrontational and began to more forcefully reject the reformist strategies and technical language that had previously been the norm within environmental advocacy groups. Instead, they rallied around the concept of climate justice, and worked to re-politicise climate change, diagnosing capitalism as the problem and pursuing outsider strategies such as civil disobedience alongside more traditional lobbying. (Hoffman, 2020).

These blocs can be largely seen in CAN and DCJ. However, it is not as clear-cut as large NGOs reproducing hegemony and grassroots climate justice movements being counter-hegemonic. Indeed, groups such as 350.org do challenge hegemony in that they work to keep fossil fuels in the ground, and sometimes employ climate justice language. However, this could potentially be understood as a further passive revolution in which large institutions aim to incorporate aspects of climate justice into their discourse in order to neutralise the concept.

2.3.2 NGOization at the UNFCCC

There is a well-established discrepancy between NGOs based in the Global North and those from the Global South. While the UNFCCC space is technically open to any environmental organisation, each group must fund their own delegates. Transnational groups such as the WWF and Greenpeace are thus consistently able to send a large delegation, whereas Southern NGOs, which are often more radical, often struggle to raise funds and attain visas. Wealthier (and often more professionalised) groups are then the most well-represented, while less professionalised groups can struggle to access the conferences, despite technically being allowed in. (Long, Roberts and Dehm, 2010).

See figure 3 to get an idea of the uneven distribution of observer organisations as of 2017:

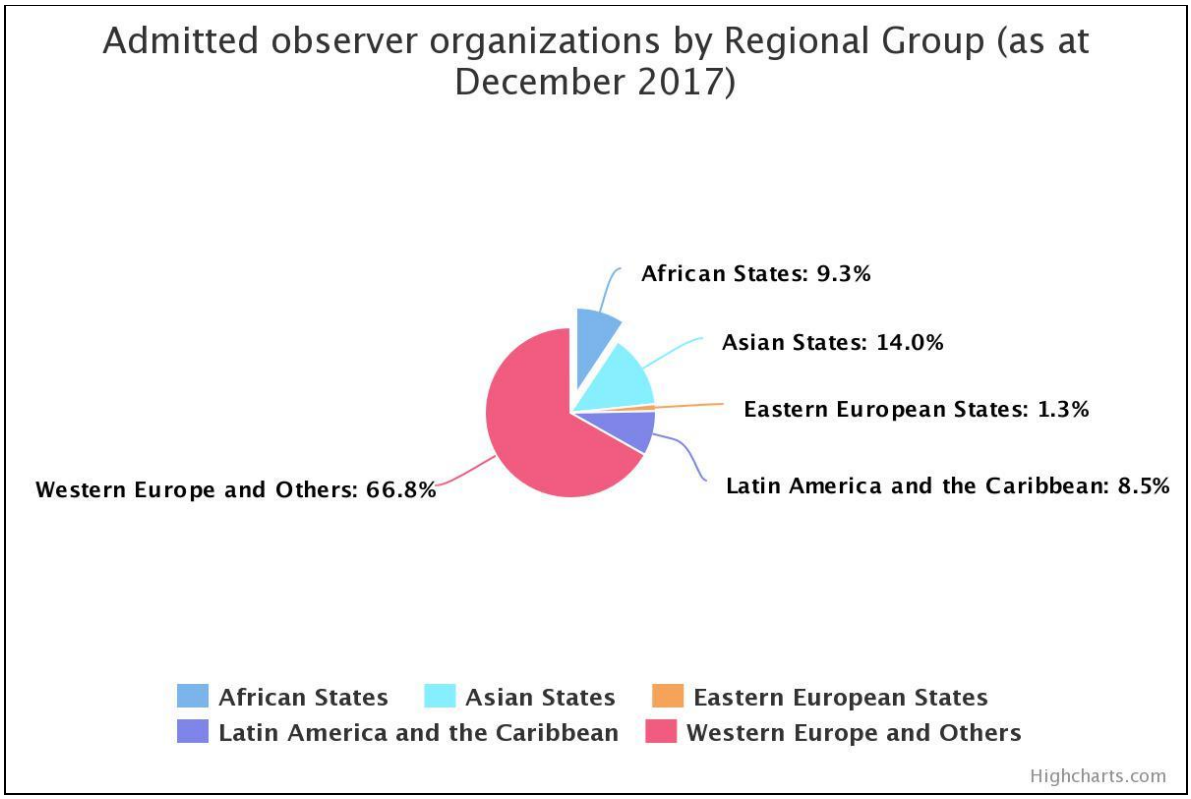

Figure 3: Geographical distribution of observer organisations as of 2017 (UNFCCC, 2017).

2.3.3 Socially organised denial at the UNFCCC

Literature on conversational and emotional norms specifically within the UNFCCC is relatively sparse, besides some mentions in ethnographies of, for example, CAN and YOUNGO (Thew 2020, Holz 2012). However, these specific case studies can be supplemented by more general literature on cognitive and behavioural norms within environmental groups.

Spash (2018) describes vividly the pressure under which environmentalists are to present information in a positive light. One is expected to leave an audience hopeful, to emphasise the positives, and to avoid appearing too angry. Environmental advocates are expected to employ techniques from marketing in order to subtly manipulate the public:

> We should not mention being anti-capitalist and for degrowth, but nice things like doughnuts, that avoid scaring the Davos elite. Presumably opposing the nasty side of humanity – slavery, violence, torture, rape, pollution – should also never be conducted in oppositional terms (e.g., against, anti, non) for fear of empowering the perpetrators? (Spash, 2018).

Likewise is the emotional experience of individual activists:

> ...Activists go through a series of : an exciting revelatory awakening to the issue, immersion in it, crisis (e.g., being overwhelmed, disillusioned, disempowered) leading to the need to rethink the meaning of their lives, and resolving personal issues (e.g., action as antidote to despair, finding a way to live with the knowledge they have obtained). The resolution may involve suppression of some basic facts, or even avoiding discussions about the topic of climate change, and the authors agree there is truth in Carter's (2015) suggestion that this is in order to avoid depression. (Spash, 2018).

The final sentence is strikingly similar to Norgaard's (2011) accounts of people shifting their focus or avoiding information in order to avoid distressing emotions, and, indeed, the COP conferences are often described as emotionally charged (e.g., Thew, 2020).

Others have described how emotions in the UNFCCC sphere are associated with irrationality, and how this can lead to individuals changing their position on policies, even when it relates to strong values such as intergenerational equity. For example, Kleres and Wettergren (2017b) carried out a thorough account of emotions in the UNFCCC space in their pre-Paris ethnography of YOUNGO. They describe the emotional norms in different settings, and broadly identify two emotional regimes: one of solidarity and one of rationality. Youth were particularly associated with one side of a dichotomy, being emotional, irrational, and conflict-oriented or politicised. On the other side was maturity, which is seen as rational, reasonable and apolitical. The authors describe youth suppressing their anger to fit in with the dominant 'feeling rules', i.e. emotional norms at the conference. However, they describe how those who push for climate justice reject those rules and push for emotions that foster a sense of solidarity, i.e. anger, antagonism, community, and the empathetic sharing in the suffering of others.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

Here, qualitative methods are appropriate. These methods are useful when one wishes to gain a holistic understanding of a phenomenon or process, which entails taking context into account, and in situations where one wishes to understand complex social realities and the lived experience of participants. Given that I want to explore culture, emotions, and group interactions, this fits well (Bryman, 2012).

I would describe my research design as a hybrid of ethnographic and case study research. Given that I aim to explore aspects of a shared culture, including cognitive and emotional norms, it is inevitable that this study in some way draws on ethnography. However, it was beyond my scope to holistically capture the culture of my sample in the timespan and words given. My aim, then, was rather to hone in specifically on the aspects of culture important to socially organised denial, rather than to provide a full ethnography. For example, while I provide some of the requisite *thick descriptions* of conversational and emotional norms, my descriptions of beliefs and language are surface level. I align most closely with critical ethnography, given that I focus also on power and hegemony (Bryman, 2012).

I also draw on case study research, given that I use a case to explore and illustrate a specific issue or problem. Case studies are appropriate when there are clear spatial and temporal boundaries to a situation that a researcher wants to explore in detail (Swanborn, 2010). Here, I draw the bounds of my case around the spaces - both physical and virtual - in which the civil society constituencies ENGO and YOUNGO operate in order to participate in UNFCCC meetings. This constitutes mainly the physical COP venues, but also includes, for example, email lists and social media groups. Time-wise, I focus on the conferences since Paris and up to the time of study. This is both practical - I have only personally engaged and followed civil society at the UNFCCC since Paris - and due to the fact that I wish my findings to be as relevant as possible to the current context. Additionally, in the years since 2015, the COP conferences have moved into a new era in terms of negotiations and wider context, as the policy focus moves into implementation and wider society sees the rise of unprecedented grassroots social

movements (Nasiritousi and Bäckstrand, 2019). Therefore, it makes sense to draw a line in 2015.

As described above, I chose the UNFCCC as I expected it to be an extreme case, i.e. one where the phenomenon to be studied is most pronounced. As quoted from Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010):

> For organizing and presenting the study findings, it is often useful to apply the extreme cases approach to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the nature of the phenomenon under study. By using extreme cases, the researcher will more effectively demonstrate the main points of the study. (pp. 379)

It deviates from the classic case study given that I only use two forms of data, rather than the many used in most case studies. This was due to the fact that analysing, for example, documents and video material would have limited the depth of analysis of interview and observational data given the scope. Therefore, I describe it as a case study- ethnography hybrid.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

In the spirit of ethnography, I use both semi-structured interviews and participant observation to explore my case. These are most useful in understanding culture, as they provide in depth and holistic accounts of, respectively, the lived experience and observable behaviour of participants of the study (Bryman, 2012).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no physical UNFCCC sessions were held during the period in which I wrote my thesis (autumn 2020 - summer 2021). Therefore, my preferred method of participant observation was not possible. However, I had already attended three UNFCCC sessions and had taken part in three years of organising around the conferences with civil society groups (see Appendix, 1). Therefore, I found a compromise, by using what Bulmer (1982) refers to as *retrospective participant observation.* This refers to a situation where a researcher has been completely immersed in the community of study prior to developing a research interest, and later uses their recollections as data in a study. Clearly, this to some extent compromises the quality of the data. I took no focused field notes during my time as a participant, and it is likely that I forgot many things I observed. However, given that I had these

experiences, I found it inevitable that they would in some way influence my interpretation of data collected later on. Therefore, I find it more transparent to incorporate it into my study in an open way and with a self-critical stance. I use my previous observations primarily to triangulate and contextualise the interviews, and I only use observations of major and ongoing events, rather than specific conversations. This should reduce the effect of cognitive biases associated with memory recall (see Muggenburg, 2021).

My main source, then, was semi-structured interviews, which are also a preferred method in ethnographies (Bryman, 2012). These were conducted on Zoom, due to the pandemic, during April and May 2021, with informed consent to use the data in this thesis. I initially used convenience sampling, reaching out to my existing contacts within ENGO and YOUNGO, and continued with snowball sampling (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019), asking my initial interviewees to recommend further participants. This was with the intention of reaching a broad range of people, including both insiders and outsiders for each community. However, I found that, given the civil society space is very interconnected, I had already met the majority of those referred to me. However, of ten interviewees, six had been active in YOUNGO, three in DCJ, and four in CAN, and most had interacted in some capacity with all three groups. Some had been involved in all three, and two had entered the COP space with no prior experience, simply observing. Therefore, I found that I had a sufficient mix of insiders and outsiders for each civil society group. However, given my involvement in youth movements, and the rates of positive response I got from my interview requests from different groups, people in their twenties and early thirties were disproportionately represented in my sample, which I consider a limitation.

I generally allowed participants to steer the conversation as long as it remained relevant, using a flexible interview outline as a backup (see appendix). This was appropriate given the explorative and broad nature of the topic at hand. In many cases participants anticipated my questions, and brought up themes of social pressure and emotions without prompting. This was encouraging, as it showed that the interviewees already themselves found these topics to be important, and did not only say so due to the power dynamics often found in these situations. (Brinkmann, 2013).

Finally, to analyse the interview transcripts I used a thematic approach, as is recommended for both case study research and ethnography (Bryman, 2012). I used the data analysis spiral described in Creswell and Poth (2018), in which one slowly moves from managing data to

reading the data, to describing and analysing it, to presenting. During the ‘describing, classifying and interpreting’ phase, I did not proceed linearly but rather used a ‘zig-zagging’ process between theory and the codes that were emerging from axial coding in order to organise my data into themes. This allowed me to establish themes that related to the topic of socially organised denial but were also important to the participants (Bryman, 2012). While I did not carry out a discourse analysis, I did note down any ideas that were particularly recurring. For example, many participants brought up that the COPs were ‘the best that we’ve got”. I considered these within Norgaard’s framework, as part of a *cultural toolkit of ideas* that facilitate denial (Noorgard, 2011).

3.3 Ethics

Any social study involving participants has the potential to cause harm (Bryman, 2012). Given my personal relationship with several of the participants and the nature of the UNFCCC space, it was necessary to consider ethics thoroughly.

3.3.1 Anonymisation

One issue I explored in detail was anonymisation. The UNFCCC is a high-stakes and stressful environment in which how one is perceived by others can affect one’s opportunities, alliances, and ability to affect change. Therefore, I tried as far as possible to avoid revealing my participant’s identities. For many studies, anonymising their quotes would be sufficient in order to protect their identities (Bryman 2012). However, constituencies such as YOUNGO, CAN and DCJ are tight-knit communities, and several of the positions with these organisations - for example, leading a given working group - are only held by one or two people at a time. Therefore, certain quotes they gave in interviews, which only made sense given their position, could not be used without risking revealing their identity to others.

On the other hand, I wished to be transparent about how often each interview was used in the analysis. I wanted the reader to be able to fairly judge whether my evidence was sufficiently triangulated among participants in order to draw my conclusions, through knowing which quotes came from a single participant.

Thus, I eliminated any quotes that may reveal a person's identity, and randomly assigned pseudonyms (based on tree species).

3.3.2 Covert observation

Given that I was a full participant during my time of observation, my participants were not aware of their involvement in any study. Informed consent of participants is a key part of ethical research, though some scholars make an exception for retrospective observation (Bryman, 2012).

Here, I take a *situation ethics* approach - I try to take the context into account, rather than applying black-and-white thinking (Bryman, 2012). For example, I consider it acceptable to use covert observations made at large and open public meetings (e.g. YOUNGO daily meetings). Given that the speakers were addressing sometimes hundreds of strangers, I do not think participants would expect confidentiality. Small private meetings and informal occasions, however, I considered off limits, given that I was present based on the trust of other participants. Instead, I try to draw only broad pictures of situations or conversations that I had repeatedly across groups, in order to avoid implicating specific people.

3.3.3 Personal relationships

Out of ten participants, I had met six, while four were complete strangers. I tried to reach out equally to people who held similar and dissimilar views to my own based on previous interactions, in order to allow for each 'faction' to represent and explain for themselves. Knowing participants personally can be seen as both a pro and a con. On the one hand, it could be expected that participants may be less likely to be honest about any views that they know to contradict my own. Conversely, people may be more open with someone they feel comfortable with. From my experience, it seemed to be the latter, as there were many instances in which participants openly disagreed with me.

4. Results

4.1 Thought communities

For there to be socially organised denial specific to the UNFCCC, it would require the existence of one or more thought communities in the space that propagate this denial. Everyone within the space, by definition, would need to belong to at least one thought community in order to take part in society. As Zerubavel (2006) states, most people are members of several different thought communities in their everyday lives, and there are also layers of social organisation. On the other hand, as described earlier, observers come from every nation state in the world, often in small delegations and stay for one or two weeks, up to three times a year in the same physical space. Then, either thought communities would need to be internationally relevant, or new people would need to be socialised into new thought communities rapidly. First, then, I will examine the evidence for whether the groups mentioned - YOUNGO, CAN and DCJ - do constitute communities with shared cognitive norms.

When asked about their experience of attending their first UNFCCC session, there was a near-universal theme of overwhelm, confusion, and imposter syndrome:

> You know how COP when you first go, it's so overwhelming, like it's so much. (Pine)

> Yeah, I mean, every time I've been, I've always noticed, like, how exclusionary the whole thing is... or just the feeling of “you don't really belong here.” (Oak).

> [The] first, two or three [conferences]... you just run around and you have no idea what's going on, and you try to wrap your head around it. (Apple)

> [On new participants] As always, just the look of like “what the hell is going on here?”, and I think everyone tried to, pretend like they understand and like they’ve got it under control but then when you talk to them they’re like “I don't understand anything, why is everyone else on top of it and I don't understand?”… That was my experience as well. Yeah, everyone feels that way (Ash).

This was true even for those who had undergone training with their delegation on what to expect, or who had studied the UNFCCC process, for example, during a Master's degree. From my observations, there was sometimes a difference between those who were attending in a paid capacity and volunteers. In general, paid employees (mostly from NGOs) had a more set agenda compared to unpaid delegates who were usually more free, and thus more lost. However, people from both groups brought up the confusion and overwhelmingness of the first UNFCCC session.

As Norgaard (2011) describes, feelings of confusion or lacking understanding, which link with helplessness and powerlessness, are uncomfortable, and people will generally seek to resolve them. Maple elaborates on how uncomfortable these feelings could be:

> It also felt we had to do the most we could, we couldn't just go for the sake of going along, we really had to take advantage of that opportunity as we were so lucky to have it…// You don't want to be the one stopping that action, or the person who doesn't understand what's going on and keeps asking questions. And I think it's both social anxiety, of being with new people and wanting to fit in, and productivity anxiety, of not wanting to hold people back. You want to be useful, not detrimental to a group. (Maple).

As she describes, for some, these uncomfortable feelings of confusion and helplessness are multiplied by the pressure of the space, both on an individual level and on the level of wanting the conference as a whole to progress.

We have established that newcomers to the UNFCCC observer space often find themselves in a vulnerable emotional position, and it is well-studied that feelings of belonging to a group or movement can help to mitigate feelings of anxiety (see Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013, Hickman, 2020). Indeed, many participants described getting help from long-time conference go-ers and in some cases integrating themselves into existing groups:

> I felt a bit lost at that [first] COP… I think it's a very strange process, that you kind of rely on other people in order to help you. (Ash)

> Obviously they're always very helpful in terms of… when they're explaining to new people, like myself, that sort of came into things very clueless in terms of the whole event space. (Spruce)

> In my first COP I think, [long time participant], he kind of explained, like "they say this when they mean this" and I was like "huuuuuuh?". (Cedar)

Here, we can see how experienced participants pass their ways of understanding to those who were new in the space. These included ways of interpreting the negotiations, for example, in Cedar's case an older participant helped her to make sense of euphemisms used by negotiators. Being in the vulnerable position of confusion and overwhelm, while often being under pressure to perform, the more experienced participants have a level of power over the newer people in shaping their understanding of the conferences.

The passing down of culture can also take a more tacit form:

> The people who have the most experience are usually the people who are also using it for their personal goals. So, that permeates the whole culture of it and people think, "Oh, this is how I'm supposed to operate in the space. I'm supposed to be thinking about myself and whether I'm going to certain meetings, or what I'm doing". And then it just, yeah, trickles down. (Elm)

> For me it's important first of all to think about… how do we behave in that process, how is that behaviour conditioned? (Birch)

Here, Elm alludes to people replicating the behaviour of those seen as the most experienced, and Birch goes further, referring to people's behaviour in the space as 'conditioned'. Maple continues to explain how groups can accept or reject participants from their ranks, despite officially being open to anyone who is part of an organisation that is part of their network.

> I think it's… it's a clique. Like, particularly YOUNGO and… actually no. All of civil society based in COP is a clique. If you're in DCJ, people assume a certain thing about you. And to gain access to DCJ, you have to be trusted. So you have to come with recommendations or be friends with someone who is willing to vouch for you, so that makes it a clique. Same for CAN, you need to be able to talk, to understand the language, to follow the emails, all these things. And that requires a level of integration to the clique. YOUNGO's the same, in the two divisions of YOUNGO, the more radical and the more… kind of… let's say conservative. But the thing is, you need access to a clique to perform. You cannot be a lone actor in that space, that's very hard to do. To make the most impact you need to attach yourself to a group of some sort... And to do that you have to fit in. Which means you do have to subvert some of your values if they don't fully align with that group. (Maple)

According to Maple, access to a group is not only important for mitigating negative emotional states, but also practically in terms of achieving one's goals. She describes how there is a need to fit in by emulating the group's way of talking, and subverting one's values if they do not fit the mould.

This is echoed by Hazel and Oak, who highlight how even organisations or people who have different values, worldviews or behaviours in everyday life may conform to dress codes and ways of speaking in an effort to be taken seriously at the conferences.

> It takes so much effort, wanting to do things differently to the mainstream… It's tricky when everyone is trying to be taken seriously. Conforming into a certain way of being… // So [Hazel's organisation] tries to work in a more holistic way... We would have regular check ins and attunements and would really try to question how work is normally done, but within this space, I found that the way in the delegates were talking to government representatives, for example, would then be very different … for me it just felt very contradictory suddenly entering the space wanting to change things and then still following the dominant pattern. (Hazel)

> Yeah, you know, there's many activists there who are in their everyday lives extremely radical people, but they dress up in suits to blend in. (Oak).

In Hazel's case, we can see mention of the emotional rationalist regime, and the pressure to conform faced by all of civil society. Even those who are not aiming to sway government delegates, such as the radical activists described by Oak, learn a way of behaviour that caters to those in power. Hazel gives the example of an organisation that practises attunement, a highly spiritual practice associated with alternative medicine, at odds with the modernist regime prevalent at the UNFCCC. Even some of those who could be reasonably expected to follow a different epistemology than the one that prevails are still subject to the influence of the dominant culture.

4.2 Emotional and conversational norms

We have established that there is a pressure to conform to the norms of groups at the UNFCCC. Next, I will outline some of the emotional and conversational norms associated with these groups. Above, a few participants already drew lines that are reminiscent of the solidarity vs. rationalist emotional regimes mentioned in the theoretical framework. During my analysis of cognitive norms in the space, CAN and the institutionalised part of YOUNGO mostly fell onto the rationalist side, while DCJ was more in line with solidarity. There was a quite blurry line between youth climate justice activists and adult DCJ activists. Therefore, I will roughly group CAN and the more institutionalised part of YOUNGO together, and DCJ will encompass both official DCJ and aligned youth activists. I will begin with the reformist groups here, and will later refer to DCJ, for the sake of flow.

4.2.1 Emotional norms

Many participants alluded to CAN and YOUNGO acting in line with the dominant culture at the conferences:

> [On emotions] The interactions I have with CAN are very much that same exclusive vibe that you feel in the whole conference. (Elm)

> So yeah, I guess we in YOUNGO are very different from [other groups] but we still try to be professional, of course. (Cedar)

> I mean if you look at CAN, like CAN does so much amazing work and they really have an influence on the negotiators...// I think it's also because they're seen as, like, an authority. (Ash)

There was a pressure within these groups to appear serious, adult, unemotional and informed about the technical negotiations (observations, 2018). As can be seen above, words like 'professional', 'authority' and 'exclusive' were common within the interviews. Many brought up the huge numbers of acronyms 'flying around' (Spruce) that make it difficult for outsiders to understand what is happening without learning the highless technical and unemotional 'UNFCCC speak', as Maple refers to it.

The atmosphere of seriousness and lack of emotion around the negotiations themselves, reinforced by the technical language, is so strong that Ash even described feeling surprised at state delegates having personal bonds with each other.

> Sometimes, negotiators are a lot more informal than I thought, you know like when they're meeting at the beginning of the negotiations and like (*more animated voice*) "hey how are you, how was your holiday or your kids... " and I just didn't expect that from negotiators... personal bonds. (Ash)

The idea that people wouldn't form friendships, or would be consistently formal for the whole conference shows how deep the sense of 'seriousness' and lack of emotions around the negotiations runs.

Counter to this was a sense of disapproval at people who were perceived to be acting "childishly", for example by organising actions or demonstrations, or making demands perceived to be unrealistic. This was sometimes the case even for those who took part in actions themselves. For example, It is interesting to contrast several quotes made by Pine:

> [On an action she took part in] It just felt so powerful to sit there with them that I actually started crying. (Pine)

> [On the UNFCCC's rules restricting demonstrations] No, I actually think it's good. I do like the rules. Purely because the UN isn't a playground. It is a very, very serious place where huge world decisions happen. (Pine)

First, Pine talks about the emotions that came up for her when taking part in an action, and feeling that the action was 'powerful'. We can see here that actions are a space for the release of emotions that are considered inappropriate in other parts of the conference. This was also brought up by other participants, who associated actions with feelings of power or emotional release (Spruce) (observations, 2017).

In the second quote, however, we can see how she also associates actions with childishness. They are no longer presented as powerful, as contributions to the decision-making process, or legitimate displays of discontent from civil society. Rather, they are 'play' that distracts from the important discussions. We see here how two viewpoints that could be considered as contradictory can be held at the same time by one person - perhaps similarly to the state of *double-mindedness* described by Norgaard (2011).

Furthermore:

> UN officials might start looking at you in a different way and the whole point of us being at the UN is that we want our voices actually listened to and accounted for in the decision-making process... and I definitely do think the radical stuff is good but I remember like [*member of secretariat*].... After he saw me doing so many actions and being really radical with [*organisation*] he would look at me a bit funny and I could feel that change in vibe. (Pine).

This gives a hint as to how those who want to take part in actions - or 'be radical' - may face subtle negative consequences from other members of the conference - in this case, a member of the UNFCCC secretariat.

Indeed, many of those who engaged with YOUNGO or CAN spoke of controlling or suppressing their emotions. For example:

> ... in the beginning you are so frustrated and so angry, and like, "it doesn't happen, nothing happens". But as you understand more, you understand we have 200 countries with super different possibilities and just super different in many ways. And they have to agree on this text. Then you're surprised how much they have achieved. (Cedar).

> ... you have to train yourself to not let your emotions run away and not kind of want to scream out, because as youth people that's what we want to do because it's frustrating. But, I guess you have to remember that it is a diplomatic space where you have to be a bit more calm if you want things to move forward. (Pine).

Here both participants describe moving from negative emotional states such as frustration to a more calm or positive disposition over time. Pine's quote shows on some level a naturalisation of the culture of the UNFCCC - it is a diplomatic space where shows of strong emotion are not appropriate, and this is not problematised.

Cedar rather rationalises the UNFCCC's slow pace of progress by finding explanations for why it is difficult for the negotiators. This fits well with Norgaard's (2011) observation of participants talking themselves into the normal emotional response by redefining the situation or changing their focus. Cedar's focus was initially on the concrete outcomes of the COPs, and now is on how much the COPs have achieved *relative to the difficulty of solving the situation*. This allows her to mitigate her anger at the negotiators by reasoning that the job is just inherently difficult.

This is in contrast to Birch, a long-standing member of CAN, who described his public criticism of CAN's strategies, as "a massive emotional vomit about what's been going on for so long". He paints a picture of emotions that were always present, but suppressed. Indeed, those who were less critical of CAN used noticeably less emotive language in both interviews and observations.

For example, only Oak and Birch, who both gave thorough criticisms of CAN, swore frequently during the interviews.

We can also see how this emotional suppression, associated with supporting the reformist groups, might mute people's reactions to events they experience at the COP. For example, when describing the fact that the Business NGOs constituency often received more tickets to meetings than the other constituencies, Pine said:

> But when I used to get the tickets for the UNFCCC events, I would always see that they would get so many more and it's just annoying. (Pine).

She did not describe the situation as unjust or unfair but rather said it was 'annoying', implying that it was not of major importance. This was in contrast to people engaging on the DCJ side, who often brought up strong negative feelings about the inclusion of fossil fuel companies.

4.2.2 Conversational norms

Like emotions, conversations were also restricted. Many participants brought up that certain discussions are discouraged within certain groups, and this was something I observed frequently.

> [On CAN] You're not given the freedom to talk truth to power because that's not going to sustain you in that community… People don't want to have that conversation, but I see the COP process as a process in crisis. // [On criticising CAN's strategy/ the COP] I had a wealth of people saying "thank you, that's really helpful, I felt the same". And I would respond back to them saying "that's great but you need to be talking about this, we need to be having this discussion." And I think people felt that they couldn't. (Birch)

> [About Fridays For Future] It became clear that YOUNGO wasn't the sort of space that they wanted to operate in, it was too structured, it didn't allow for proper discussions, in their opinion, around climate justice…// They're the people facilitating the meetings, if they don't want to talk about it, it won't get talked about. (Elm)

In both YOUNGO and CAN, then, certain conversations were restricted. For CAN, as is illustrated by Birch, conversations critiquing or questioning either CAN's overall strategy or the effectiveness of the COPs are frowned upon. YOUNGO is similar, and those who bring up these issues face backlash. During my time, there was often controversy over whether YOUNGO could bring up the inclusion of fossil fuel companies in the negotiations, because it was well-known that the secretariat disapproved of the discussion due to it 'slowing down' the process. Likewise, during one COP, several youth participants tried to create a YOUNGO 'system change' working group in which broader discussions on the economic system could happen. This group faced pushback from other members of the constituency, and several large and tense meetings took place until the group eventually petered out (observations, 2018). For Maple, this represents a culture of fear:

> YOUNGO has bullied individuals who challenge and slow down and question some of the decision-making. Which was fully within their rights of consensus, but because someone didn't like it, or it was making YOUNGO seem too difficult or too radical, the response to that has been pretty publicly nasty. Which creates this sense of fear. And you have to be willing to literally stand up in YOUNGO and take a microphone and speak out in front of a room full of people you don't know, which is not an easy thing for anyone to do. So I think fear is a lot of it, which is really a shame. Because we create that for ourselves. (Maple)

Birch gives a similar account of what happens if one goes against conversational norms in CAN:

> You also, you don't want to upset people like [*CAN member*] or other people because you'll be outside, right… It's dangerous if you step out, if you speak out against the herd. (Birch).

The word 'dangerous' implies not only disapproval, but major consequences for those who go against the norms.

This is not to say that conversations about the effectiveness of the COP or of constituency's strategies do not happen *anywhere* within CAN or YOUNGO. Rather, they are relegated to private conversations, and are not allowed to happen publicly, or on the record:

> I mean if you get people on their own, they'll all have conversations about how broken the process is. (Birch)

Indeed, it is common when attending the COPs to, for example, go to a bar with other delegates in the evenings, and this is often where both restricted emotions and conversations are allowed to be released (observations, 2017, 2018). Likewise, participants brought up that they had *thought* about whether the COP was effective (Apple) (Maple), but often had not successfully been able to start a conversation about it in public meetings.

The extent of this sense of unspoken rules on what can be discussed is most dramatically described by Birch:

> When I was deep inside it I would sometimes think, "is there a real conspiracy here?"... And I think there may be... structures and power structures… close to the people who have the power, who are manipulating the voices and the activities. And in that context, it becomes co-opted or coerced. (Birch)

Here, Birch alludes to the possibility of an intentional wielding of social pressures by vested interests in order to tame dissent among the NGO community.

4.3 Double-mindedness

The state of mind created by the above described norms is interesting, and my interviews revealed many parallels to Norgaard's (2011) *double-mindedness* - both knowing and not knowing, or believing and not believing - within the UNFCCC space. These were not necessarily on the topic of climate change itself, but rather on how the COP functions, how civil society functions, and how much power civil society has. For example:

> [Fossil fuel companies] trying to preserve business as usual, and then civil society trying to call them out on it, but at the same time having to toe the line, just enough so that they don't get chucked out. So the whole thing is a little bit ingenuine in that sense. And I think so many people know it but they still go anyway because it's the only thing we have and it's important to maintain the space because if we don't then our voices are gonna be completely overlooked. (Oak)

Here, Oak describes how people on some level understand their lack of power or agency in the COP space, and know that ultimately they can be pushed out if they do something deemed

unacceptable by the UNFCCC. However, Oak describes this as a ‘back of the mind censorship’, implying that they may not consciously acknowledge it. They rationalise their continued participation by drawing on the idea that the COP is the ‘best we have’, which also perhaps implies a lack of ability to visualise alternatives, a testament to hegemony.

Many other areas of double-mindedness emerged from my analysis, including but not limited to: YOUNGO members, many of whom are in their thirties, subconsciously ‘playing up their youth’ while acknowledging that they are adults in their everyday life (Elm, Spruce); people maintaining the illusion that networks such as CAN and YOUNGO have no hierarchy despite informal hierarchies being abundantly clear (Maple, Elm); people meeting with state delegations hoping to radically change their policy positions on the ground despite knowing that they set their red lines in the months leading up to the COPs, and that the negotiators themselves are civil servants with little political influence outside the conferences (Ash, Maple).

For myself, a very interesting example of denial or double-mindedness was how the more institutionalised groups viewed their relationship with the radicals. Many of the participants who had been involved primarily in the reformist groups presented the two sides as working together, but with different strategies. For example:

> DCJ hold a lot of actions, and then members from CAN will be there… A lot of CAN people are really good friends with DCJ. (Pine).

Pine speaks of how many people who engage mostly in CAN attend DCJ actions, seeing themselves as being able to work without both networks. This is interesting because many of those aligned with DCJ view their positions as fundamentally incompatible:

> So [CAN] are following these mainstream development paradigms that fail to suggest that perhaps the way we're going about tackling climate breakdown is not the right way. So it's very difficult to collaborate with them on a system change level, so they’re very separate. I think they're just on a completely different page, you know.... These big NGOs, I just really see them as being kind of these assistants in distracting, or like perpetuating this mirage of green growth. And in that sense, they're very much upholding that system. (Oak)

Here we see that individuals in CAN are often sympathetic with the causes and worldview of DCJ. They take part in DCJ actions and have personal friendships with people from the more radical factions. This is despite the fact that many of CAN and DCJ's positions run counter to each other, often on a fundamental level, with CAN in general refusing to take a stance on issues such as capitalism and the fossil fuel lobby at the UNFCCC, while DCJ are openly anti-capitalist and many members campaign against conflicts of interest. While we can see this as pragmatism (again, the 'best we've got' narrative), it is still difficult to understand how one can believe in DCJ's principles including climate justice, while continuing to take part in an organisation that is reluctant to challenge, for example, the existence of market mechanisms that major networks of frontline communities oppose (Long, Roberts, and Dehm, J., 2010). Perhaps, then, we see a denial of the role of CAN in the negotiations in consolidating the dominant hegemony and power structures, and double-mindedness in both supporting critical climate justice movements while also supporting the structures that run counter to them at the same time.

4.4 How emotions inform strategy

We have looked at how emotional norms, mediated by the community, may affect what one is willing to do in the space. Here, we will expand on that further by examining the role of emotions in guiding strategy on a more individual level.

As described by Norgaard (2011), activism is one way to cope with feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness associated with climate change. It seems reasonable to assume that, in order for feelings of powerlessness to be alleviated, one must believe that the strategy and actions one is taking could potentially make a meaningful difference. On the contrary, accepting that one's actions have failed to effect change could be reasonably expected to lead to increased feelings of powerlessness. On a broader scale, if one places their faith in the COP process to solve the climate crisis, beginning to question or lose faith in the COP process would lead to increased feelings of hopelessness, unless one could see a way to change it.

Several interviewee accounts touched upon these ideas. For example:

> [On discussing whether one makes a difference] No, because if you do have that honest discussion, it's really hard to motivate yourself to do another one…. (Elm)

> There's definitely an issue that you walk away feeling like you haven't done anything... I remember having a similar reflection with people that have come back like five years in a row. They were discussing what meaningful action they've made happen. And although you've put in so much work, has anything…? It's not like they've got something. // It's not like they've got anything like that to show for it… So I think it is definitely a problem in terms of just keeping that morale high. (Spruce)

Here, we can see that participants may avoid critical discussions about their efficacy or power in the space in order to avoid feeling 'demotivated'. While feelings of powerlessness are not explicitly named, parallels can again be drawn with Norgaard (2011). Here people are *changing their focus* by not discussing or thinking about their lack of concrete achievements. It is assumed that their presence at the COPs is something that needs to continue, so these conversations are avoided.

This is possible due to the fact that, in the UNFCCC space, it is extremely difficult to determine the effects of one's actions. Negotiations are secretive, power is relatively diffuse, and it is in the interests of the UNFCCC to keep up the idea that participation is meaningful. As Cedar explains:

> It can be very abstract, because you look at these documents and you don't know really what effect it will have, if it's only something on the paper. What are you actually fighting for? Like this small word, will it actually have a difference in reality?...// I mean, it's probably as far away from concrete action as you can come.... //… But, I just continue and fight and believe that we do make a difference. And I've heard that, like, from different people in power ... they say that young people make a difference and civil society makes a difference.// So it's just like "okay well if they say it, okay." I just continue to fight here, even if you don't see it yourself. (Cedar)

It is possible to keep engaging as a matter of faith, because one has no way of proving that one's actions do *not* make a difference. Indeed, Cedar describes believing those in power, who claim that they do take civil society's views into account.

On the flipside is pursuing certain activities due to the *positive* emotions they spark. One theme that occurred repeatedly was feeling 'empowered' and 'cool' when interacting with people perceived to be powerful or important.

> The UN on the ground is super glamorous, it's a very exciting and intensive event, whereas the daily activism outside the UN is not really like that. (Pine)

> [About meeting a UN official] I don't actually know how much she listened to YOUNGO, or if we were just like a photo opportunity… But yeah, as a new person to the process... we went because it was really cool. (Ash)

> Is it really worth it, what we're doing here, or is it just for fun? (Apple)

Here, participants bring up various facets of feeling 'cool', 'fun', or 'excited' as motivations for taking part in activities in which powerful or influential people are present, despite in some cases being unsure of the strategic purpose of such activities. While 'cool' may seem to be a trivial feeling, Cedar lists 'because it's cool' as part of the motivation for attending the COP as a whole:

> I mean, if you reflect upon it, like "why do I actually participate?" and so on... Yeah, it's hard to motivate yourself. But often I have only participated because you know, in a way it is cool or obviously we should be there, or it's nice to do it together.... (Cedar)

There, we can see, then, that positive emotions may also play a role in participants' continued participation in the conferences.

Related to this was an unexpected theme that emerged, which was individual *ego:*

> There's a lot of righteousness in climate change and you're saving the planet, right? What more trip could you be on with your ego? // We're not free of our egos right? People are there because it's interesting and they want to make a change, but they're also directed by the ego. (Birch)

> There's this very self-driven, self-promotion, ego trip of, like "I am well known in the UN space", and that's completely disconnected to their achievements. I think, if you're there for self congratulation and gratification, there's a lot you can turn a blind eye to, to be in favour of the people in power. And I think the more you go, the less you see. And even if you see it you won't want to address it, because it could create a challenge in that relationship… [On ego] I really recognise it in myself, and I think there's almost like … quite a lot of individual agency if you get yourself into [a leadership position]...// It's also why we get stuck in these cycles of power, and ego and all of that comes into play. Because it's hard to give them up. (Maple)

> There are some people like myself that were a bit newer and less clued up about how everything works. But then there's people that have been there for years, every year, and that's almost solely their life now. (Spruce)

Here we can see how people's egos and identities can get mixed up in their activism as the UNFCCC, which, as Maple describes, can lead them to 'turn a blind eye' to issues that may otherwise spark anger. We can see, then, that the hegemony of individualism, as opposed to solidarity, runs deep, even in morally charged movements. Indeed, changing one's behaviour, putting oneself first, or using the UNFCCC space as an opportunity was often naturalised:

> What surprised me was the sort of focus on power that I just wasn't expecting. So, yes, I know they're UN negotiations. So there's obviously always going to be people that want to go to certain meetings and things, but I was surprised by how much of the focus of YOUNGO was on "who gets to go to this high level meeting thing" rather than like "how can we push together for this thing". (Elm)

While Elm is critical of ego-centrism, she on some level accepts that some people are 'always' going to prioritise their own desires to be close to centres of power. Not only does this reflect the hegemony of individualism (see Nafstad et al., 2007), but also the reverence of powerful institutions.

4.5 Funding

As was expected, many participants brought up funding and money being a constraint or a motivation for NGOs, consistent with many scholars' observations on NGOization. This was especially relevant for CAN:

> [On CAN] The only reason that they exist is because people perceive them as an entity that can influence that space positively. So obviously they would always try to spin the narrative that they're doing exactly that. Also in terms of like, securing funding and all that... (Apple)

> If you want funding you tell your funders you've done a good job, you don't say, "we've not really shifted the dial"... [On CAN's funders] I've seen documents and emails coming back and forth that basically say "we don't think you should be campaigning on this issue. It's not important at this time, we want you to focus on…" (Birch)

> [On who CAN gives power to] It's definitely a conscious decision, because they know who in their network is most likely to share funding with them and share opportunities. Well it's not the youth groups who, you know, "I'm vehemently anti capitalist". (Elm)

Apple and Birch touch upon the need to present one's previous actions as a success in order to secure further funding. In this way, questioning your network's 'modus operandi', as Birch puts it, is discouraged. This could be an incentive for collective denial of an organisation's own failures, as it may be an uncomfortable position to knowingly lie on funding applications, as opposed to convincing oneself that previous activities *were* a success. Elm relates it to power dynamics within the CAN network, stating that wealthier member organisations of the network are given more weight within decision making.

This is all a fairly well established phenomenon within the NGOization literature. However, something slightly more novel was that people saw this not only on an organisational level, but also for individuals:

> But what's happened is that the whole process has become a… it's a career, it's an industry. (Birch).

> I mean they see it as a networking space, they see it as an access to key people or groups. And it's about getting a job or it's about being recognised by someone that they consider to be influential… … Their motivations are true and accurate but the weight on achieving change versus communicating that you are in a space where that happens... is slightly out of kilter. (Maple)

Here, well-meaning individuals may follow a similar trajectory to NGOs with regard to funding. The good motivations are there, but it can be at odds with the individual's need or desire to attain paid work. From my observations, it is common for people to find paid work via the UNFCCC space, and indeed many do see it as a networking opportunity. And, while an unpaid activist can to some extent follow their values, a paid worker must follow the norms and guidelines of their organisation. Often, youth may take a job at an NGO that is not completely in line with their values or theory of change, because it is so difficult to find work in the non-profit sector (observations, 2017, 2018). As with the COP, it is a 'best we have' situation, and can lead an individual to follow a similar trajectory to that documented with 'NGOization'.

4.6 Breaking denial and radical factions

We now have an overview of how denial is reinforced by emotions, community, powerful organisations and funding structures in the UNFCCC space. Next, we will look at the potential for countering or avoiding denial within the UNFCCC.

4.6.1 Emotional and conversational norms of radical factions

DCJ and radical YOUNGO fit well with the *solidarity* emotional regime described earlier. As we can see here, displays of emotion are much more accepted in this community compared to the ones previously described:

> "The interactions I have with DCJ are... always a lot more passionate [compared to CAN]." (Elm)

While in CAN there was a pressure to be taken seriously and a disapproval of things perceived to be 'childish', the radical faction rather take pride in breaking the 'serious' nature of the

conferences and embrace their role in disrupting the status quo. For example, Oak jokingly self-describes herself as a 'ruffian' when speaking about several disruptive actions she had been involved with:

> [On big NGOs] If they aligned with, you know, the same ruffians walking out of talks and trying to put pipelines into the security I think that they would definitely, you know, it would undermine their foothold... [It is] a very strong one within the COP space… (Oak)

Indeed, many of the radical activists actively use humour as a tool to point out the perceived hypocrisy of the COP processes. Elaborating on one action, Oak says:

> The act of them taking a pipeline through, and seeing a bunch of activists like negotiating with these police outside before they even got into the building as to why they want to take the pipeline in... I don't remember exactly what he said but there was some quote that was extremely hilarious... Something about "you know, if these dirty fossil fuel lobbyists are allowed to go in with their metaphorical pipelines, then we bring our own real one". And I think that really classically kind of undermined the COP format, the formal kind of process of it all and kind of just... yeah just mocking it there. (Oak)

Here we can see how the group did not attempt to fit in or be taken seriously within the hyper formal regime of the UNFCCC, but rather tried to challenge the notion that the COP process itself was a serious response to the climate crisis.

They were also consistently described as more willing to take risks or to say something relating to the wider world, rather than speaking within the given confines of the COPs (i.e., in technical language and sticking to the narrow UNFCCC agenda):

> [On radical youth] I guess they're more willing to go out there and put themselves on the line and sort of say something. (Spruce)

> I think there are those who make a conscious effort to kind of tear down that charade that like the COP is only for those who know about it. And they actually bring it down into, you know, real examples and real stories and real realities. (Maple)

While several interview participants acknowledged that members of DCJ are not free from their egos, it does seem to be the case that people are willing to sacrifice their attendance at COPs for a cause:

> Obviously, like, there's also the possibility of this sacrificial lambs kind of thing... like saying I don't mind my badge being taken off of me, because if we do this stunt, and it gets a lot of media attention, which did happen… So, like, there's potential you know kind of subverting your privileges of being able to access the COP. (Oak)

4.2.6 Fridays for Future at COP25

While DCJ can be understood as counter-hegemonic, following the *emotional solidarity regime,* many described them as being relatively small and somewhat isolated from the other constituencies in a way that makes it tough for them to break denial (Maple, Birch).

As Norgaard (2011) and Zerubavel (2006) both state, the possibility for counter-hegemonic actions to break a culture of denial is amplified when many people break the norms together. Elm's account of Fridays For Future's attendance at COP25 is a good example of this:

> COP25 was a significant shift in my opinion, because we had all the Friday's for Future people who haven't been to these things before. Coming in not having the experience in those acronyms, going to YOUNGO and ENGO meetings, and just deciding, well no, if that's how they're going to operate we're going to operate separately... I'm not saying that it changed everything. But in the youth space I think it did, and I think that's partly why the protests at COP25 got so huge. FFF people were pushing it… I thought maybe like they'd sort of walk through and chant a bit and then we'd get told off a tiny bit and that'll be it. But when we were in the meeting with [*state delegation*], it suddenly erupted… So, it was like some really loud noise. Everyone was a bit like "should we stop the meeting, like, what's going on?"// A lot of people will try and focus themselves on a couple (of topics at the COPs). Fridays for Future were like "no, we're protesting the whole thing". (Elm)

Here, she talks about how a large, already international network that was new to COP shook up the status quo. Rather than integrating into the existing structures, they created their own spaces and maintained their radical outlook. Perhaps the fact that they all arrived as a large

group who had not been to the COPs before meant that they did not rely on previous participants to shape their understanding of what was happening, but rather made their own interpretations, relying on each other to confirm their own perceptions and emotions, rather than suppressing them to fit in. As Zerubavel (2006) states, outsiders often have the highest chance of breaking denial, as the longer one remains in denial the harder it becomes to break the silence. Here we can see that FFF people broke not only the emotional norm of remaining calm and 'sensible', but also the conversational norm of not discussing the COP process as a whole in public settings.

Indeed, Elm hints that this could have been the beginning of the breaking of denial for ENGO when she describes the effect FFF's radical actions had on COP25, when all observers were temporarily barred from the conference:

> It just seemed to me that the UNFCCC didn't care, and that was very unifying between CAN and DCJ, like when they went to that meeting in the evening there was no split in the same way as normal. Everyone was a lot more communicative in ENGO than they normally are... and I honestly think COP25 may have been a *good* thing because it did, once again, put it as like civil society together against the terrible things that some of the negotiators and countries are doing. (Elm)

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Discussion

We have covered only a small part of the labyrinth of social pressures, rules, norms, power struggles and strategic dilemmas that civil society observers find themselves facing in the UNFCCC space, and indeed there were many interesting discussions that were beyond my scope. However, I hope that my results have painted a nuanced picture of my participants, and here I will try to draw the different themes together.

In terms of my aims and research questions, I have demonstrated at least that aspects of socially organised denial can be observed within civil society. Within CAN and the institutional side of YOUNGO, more critical perspectives and the emotions that facilitate solidarity (Kleres and Wettergren (2017b) are suppressed in formal public settings, but may be released in

private. Publicly, there is a focus on technical aspects of the negotiations, associated with maturity and intelligence, which is encouraged by those in positions of power (e.g., meeting facilitators). Activities are mostly organised around lobbying within the structures provided by the UNFCCC, and the secretariat's rules are followed. Both groups organise some actions, which in CAN remain negotiation focused, whereas in YOUNGO act as a space for emotional release and more radical perspectives. In both groups, fear of backlash and losing one's position in the group, facilitates conformity to the norms.

On the other hand, DCJ follows the emotional solidarity regime, with shows of emotion - particularly anger and despair - commonplace. Conversations are less shaped by the UNFCCC agenda, and criticism of the process is common and encouraged. Loopholes in the UNFCCC rules are exploited, or the rules outright broken, as a way to undermine its power and regime of rationality.

The behaviour of individual participants is then shaped by a combination of their values outside the UNFCCC; the cultural norms of the communities in the space; the UNFCCC's bureaucratic power, e.g. the observer code of conduct; material constraints such as funding; wider hegemony; and cognitive and emotional processes at the individual level. This means that their motivations are complex and sometimes run counter to each other, and indeed, we can see evidence for Norgaard's *double-mindedness*. For example, the people who operate in both CAN and DCJ, or were both for and against 'radicalness', which can be considered taking part in both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic sides of a war of position simultaneously. Likewise, the individual struggle between self-serving (e.g., career opportunities and ego boost gained from being in favour of those in power) and self-sacrificing behaviour (which often results in little reward, or even social punishment by one's own group). Indeed, we can see many participants both employing hegemonic ideas (such as naturalising a certain level of selfishness) and counter-hegemonic ideas (e.g., solidarity) within a single interview.

Funding plays an important role for organisations, in line with the literature on NGO-ization. For example, many said that CAN's rigid structure and restrictive conversational norms were due to its funders. YOUNGO members were often volunteers, which in theory could give them more freedom. However, this also meant that they were in a less stable financial position, and therefore very aware of the career opportunities of the space.

I would refer to this as an NGOization on the individual level, whereby a single person, like an organisation, becomes co-opted by the need to secure funding. One must be seen favourably by potential employers within the tightly knit environmental NGO world, one must present one's previous work as successful in job interviews, and avoid 'rocking the boat' for fear of being 'blacklisted' (as mentioned by Birch). In this way, one may be under pressure to professionalise, conform to the rationalist emotional regime and perhaps make measurable their personal goals and achievements (e.g. on a resumé). Therefore, many are acutely aware of how they are perceived by others at the UNFCCC, and adjust their actions accordingly, sometimes in a way that contradicts their values. The double-mindedness is facilitated by hegemony, which allows one to draw on naturalised discourses of the need to put oneself first, for example, without considering whether it runs counter to one's values of community support (because it is 'only natural'). This way of acting is then passed down to new participants within the UNFCCC space, and therefore reproduced and further enforced. We can see how deeply hegemony affects us when we see even those who consciously oppose the establishment drawing on hegemonic ideas. This is relevant too in political ecology or social movement research, which can, in my opinion, sometimes present climate activists in a one-dimensionally positive light, not taking into account their contradictions and complexities.

I do not wish to blame individuals, but rather argue that the contradictions that are imposed on us by the hyper-competitive neoliberal system, in which we need to earn money to survive, make it extremely difficult to completely abide by our values. This is especially true because, as Spash (2018) mentioned above, it is exhausting to maintain negative emotional states such as confusion or helplessness over time. Given the social mediation of denial, it may not be possible for the individual to change this, but rather groups need to develop mechanisms by which people can sustain themselves economically and emotionally. As shown by the FFF example, being in a large group with a shared experience could help immensely. Likewise, we know that it is possible to put the group ahead of personal gain in the space through the 'sacrificial lambs' mentioned by Oak, who gave up their access badges in order to make political gains for the whole group.

As Arundhati Roy says (2014), we can see how hegemony is reinforced by NGOs. Newcomers may come with more unique and nuanced viewpoints, but are often in a vulnerable emotional position, which means that they are easily socialised into the existing thought communities and *modus operandi* of the conference. The conferences are difficult to navigate alone, and

confusing to understand. It is not that CAN or YOUNGO people as individuals who make up the organisation or community are not radical in their outlook - but the cultural norms within the groups prevent individual radicalness from manifesting. Then, the existence of these NGOs could consolidate the hegemonic position by restricting individuals from using their time to work against it.

Either way, the results have added to the evidence that it is not a matter of individuals being either *in denial* or *not in denial,* but rather the extent to which the wider social organisation of denial affects their actions in specific circumstances. Even the most engaged, radical or critical among the climate community still compromise and maintain some state of denial in order to protect their emotional and psychological wellbeing, financial situation, or position in society. Perhaps then, we can say that the question of whether our strategies are working, or the fact that greenhouse gas emissions continue to accelerate despite our best efforts, is an *elephant in the room* for civil society at the UNFCCC.

The evidence presented here has implications for the wider climate movement, as it shows that it is indeed possible for some form of socially organised denial to exist within our own movements. Perhaps, then, it would be useful to have an honest conversation within our movements on our own internal contradictions, in order for us to find a way forward together.

5.2 Limitations and future research

As mentioned earlier, this research faced many limitations, and perhaps was ambitious for a master's thesis.

In order to more fully understand the dynamics of the UNFCCC civil society space, one would need to take more into account the other groups present, e.g. negotiators, politicians, other constituencies, media. Likewise, non-retrospective observation would have been extremely useful, as I could have cited specific interactions between people during specific events in the COP space, as opposed to using somewhat faded memories from times when I was more focused on effecting change than on recording culture. I could have also conducted more interviews, which may have been easier in real life situations as opposed to online. Indeed, the relatively small number of participants also limits this study.

While my positionality was useful in that I already had a fairly good understanding of the UNFCCC rules, processes, and civil society spaces, it was also a limitation. As Zerubavel (2006) states, those who are already embedded in a thought community may not be able to see all of that community's norms. Perhaps, had I been a complete outsider, there might have been more aspects of my communities of study that would have struck me as unique or worth noting.

As described above, the UNFCCC conferences are a unique space. This makes it hard to generalise any results to wider environmental NGO communities. I consider this research to be a small glimpse into the ENGO and YOUNGO communities, and perhaps a stepping stone toward a more full ethnographic account of denial within those groups. For future research, it would be interesting to look into the norms of environmental NGOs and grassroots organisations outside of the space, in order to understand how much of what I experienced was due to the specifics of the UNFCCC, and how much relates to the wider political landscape. For example: is it more common for environmental groups to critically examine their own strategies outside of COP conferences? Are the emotional and conversational norms similar when these groups operate on a day to day basis? With more research, I hope that we can begin to critically examine our own movements in a way that allows us to more effectively fight for climate justice.

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7. Appendix

Appendix Item 1: Previous engagement with UNFCCC/ related events used in retrospective observations.

Event/ location of retrospective observation	**Timespan of observation**	**Notes**
YOUNGO Conference of Youth 13, Bonn, Germany	2-5 Nov, 2017	General participant, co-organised/ facilitated workshop *Do we Need to Take Down Neoliberalism to Address Climate Change?*
UNFCCC COP23, Bonn, Germany	2-17 Nov, 2017	Observer/ civil society participant. Engaged with YOUNGO, and attended meetings of DCJ. UKYCC delegate.
UNFCCC SB48, Bonn, Germany	4-10 May, 2018	Observer/ civil society participant. Engaged with inter-constituency working group on Human Rights (CAN, YOUNGO, and others), DCJ, YOUNGO. UKYCC delegate.
YOUNGO Conference of Youth 14, Katowice, Poland	30 Nov - 1st Dec 2018	General participant.
UNFCCC COP24, Katowice, Poland	2-9 Dec, 2018	Observer/ civil society participant. Engaged with inter-constituency Human Rights working group (CAN, YOUNGO, and others), DCJ, CAN daily meetings. PUSH Sweden delegate.

Appendix Item 2: Flexible Interview Outline:

Flexible Interview Outline

Bold = most essential questions

Introduction:

- **Are you happy for this to be recorded?**
- **Do you want to be anonymous and to what extent?** (E.g., I can obscure details that may give you away, such as organisations you were involved with, which COPs you attended).

- **Explain interview method: It is semi-structured/ conversational, so I will ask questions but don't be afraid to go off-topic**, ask me why I am asking questions, and don't feel the need to be formal, you can speak freely. Feel free to not answer anything that you don't want to.
- **Explain research**: COPs bring up important strategic questions for the climate movement that are relevant also to wider society. I'm interested in the dynamics and culture within the civil society space, who collaborates and who doesn't, whether different groups reinforce or undermine each other, and individual experiences. Feel free to talk about anecdotes, emotions, more concrete aspects, anything you feel is important.

<u>INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS (examples):</u>

- **Could you tell me a bit about your involvement in the UNFCCC so far?**
- Why did you go to COP?
- What were your aims (organisational and personal)? What would you say was your theory of change?
- How did you try to meet those aims? What did you do at the COP?
- Is it similar/ dissimilar to what kind of activism you do in the wider world? Why?
- Was your attendance dependent on anything?
- How would you describe the space to an outsider?
- What was the emotional experience of attending COP?

<u>PARTICIPATION/ UNFCCC (examples):</u>

- **How would you describe participation at the UNFCCC?**
- **What opportunities and barriers does the space represent? For you? For others?**
- Did you interact with the secretariat? What was your experience?

<u>OTHER ENGOs (examples)</u>

- How would you describe the culture (language, norms, etc.) within civil society at the COPs?
- Are there differences in culture between different civil society groups?
- Have you collaborated with any other civil society groups?
- How was your experience collaborating with them?
- Were there any disagreements? Were there compromises? Who made them?
- Who do you think has power at the UNFCCC?
- Do you think it is worth engaging as an activist?

Appendix Item 3:

	RQ1: *How are the civil society groups ENGO and YOUNGO characterized by their cognitive traditions, including their emotional and conversational norms?*	RQ2: *How do these norms shape the actions taken by these groups?*
CAN	Largely follows the rationalist emotional regime. Shows of emotion are discouraged / considered irrational, in line with UNFCCC hegemony. Conversations restricted to the text of the negotiations, wider discussions (i.e. on effectiveness of the COP) frowned upon in public settings. Highly technical language used.	Ways of working are very rigid and policy-focused. Mostly lobbying state delegations and published policy positions/ use of official UNFCCC channels. Some actions are organised, but less common than for YOUNGO and DCJ. Actions/demonstrations are often formal/ non-playful and focused on the negotiation text. UNFCCC restrictions and rules are followed.
YOUNGO	Mostly follows the rationalist emotional regime. Shows of emotion are sidelined to actions and restricted within official statements. Slightly more pushback on this regime than for CAN. Conversations restricted in the more institutionalised faction, but again with pushback. Technical language is used in statements, not always in actions.	Part of the constituency works to emulate CAN's ways of working, i.e. lobbying and formal statements, UNFCCC channels used. Actions are common, and can be emotional/ can make more radical demands than official statements. Ways of working are slightly less rigid. UNFCCC restrictions are mostly followed. Activities that are perceived to anger the UNFCCC are controversial and often avoided.
DCJ	Follows the solidarity emotional regime. Shows of emotion, especially anger and despair, are commonplace and acceptable. Conversations are less focused on policy and outside of the UNFCCC's agenda (i.e. the wider world). Informal language used, with some technical language. Criticism of UNFCCC common and accepted.	Opportunities provided by UNFCCC less centered (e.g. interventions), statements published, often with emotive language/ reference to wider world. UNFCCC restrictions can be broken/ loopholes found. Many actions, often an intent to disrupt/ ridicule formal processes or expose hypocrisy. Focus often on media attention rather than lobbying negotiators.

Table 2: Summary of answers to research questions 1 & 2