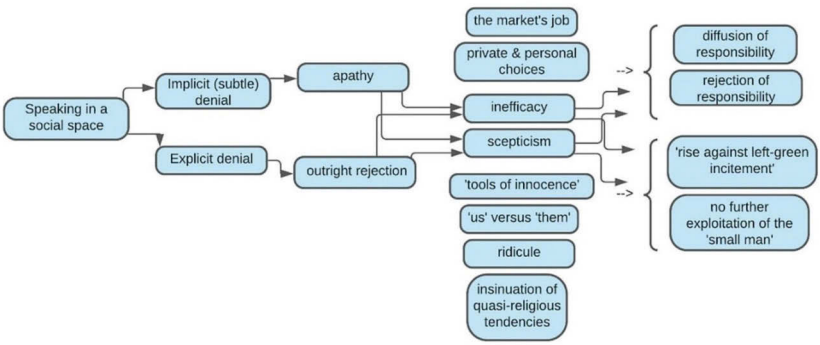
7.4 Differences in denial

Lastly, specific observed climate-cultural combinations of responsibility, efficacy and knowing each translate into different forms of collective denial (cf. Norgaard, 2011, section 2.5). In terms of the focus groups' overall tendencies to deny, the farmers and the craftsmen showed the highest levels and also the only outright denial of climate change, with both presenting elaborate conspiracy theories. In both groups, responsibility was almost entirely externalised, efficacy was expected to be particularly low, and the concept of knowing was very narrow. But these two groups were not the only ones with pronounced levels of denial. The groups of the mobility provider and the green startup (and to an extent also the industrial enterprise), which all consisted of highly educated individuals, showed more implicit denial (e.g., by justifying continued flying through presenting it as deeply personal choice), especially in the sense that Norgaard conceptualises (refer to section 2.5). This reflects Ford and Norgaard's view that "[e]mphases on apathy and scepticism foreground the responses of the most privileged communities" (2020, p. 44). The following diagram illustrates the key features of both types of group specific denial patterns:

Figure 6: Types of Denial, own presentation, adapted from Sutton and Norgaard, 2013, p. 520



This study thus adds to Norgaard's work on the social organisation of denial by presenting instances where groups consider their responsibility and efficacy to be significant, yet they still manage to push this away. As has been discussed in chapter 2, in relation to climate matters, there occurs wide-spread diffusion of responsibility. This is also the case even when agents ascribe responsibility for climate action to themselves. Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan have found this kind of moral decoupling or implicit denial to be on the rise, whilst they saw explicit denial decrease: "This means, compared to [our] 2001 study, that denial is not so much observable in

terms of pronouncing it with words, but that it continues to be existent in terms of instigating climate-change mitigation action" (2020, p. 11).

Culture functions in part by providing frameworks of meaning that shape what its adherents habitually and collectively notice and what, by contrast, is deemed irrelevant (cf. Norgaard, 2011, section 2.5). Expressions embodied in popular culture such as art and music play a key role here. Politics does not exclusively take place in parliamentary debate, it also unfolds elsewhere, for example through satire on TV (e.g., shows such as *extra3* or *Die heute show*) or fiction writing. "Thus, while the coherent articulation of ideas still remains central to political life, political sentiments in the form of dominant and oppositional social imaginaries are increasingly embedded in various modes of cultural expression and resonate in the subjective realm of affect" (Dahlgren, 2012, p. 9). Whilst people who explicitly deny climate change are largely aware of themselves rejecting climate action, those practicing the more implicit denial may actually paradoxically consider themselves quite climate conscious (e.g., mobility provider). They may find climate action important, yet their actual behaviour does not reflect this. Their denial operates more on subconscious levels. Denial by elite figures may also serve the purpose of maintaining existing power relations and securing one's own position of privilege. As Norgaard writes, elites do not only profit financially from practicing denial when not paying extra for the climate-friendly alternative, they also save themselves from troubling cognitive dissonance (cf. chapter 2).

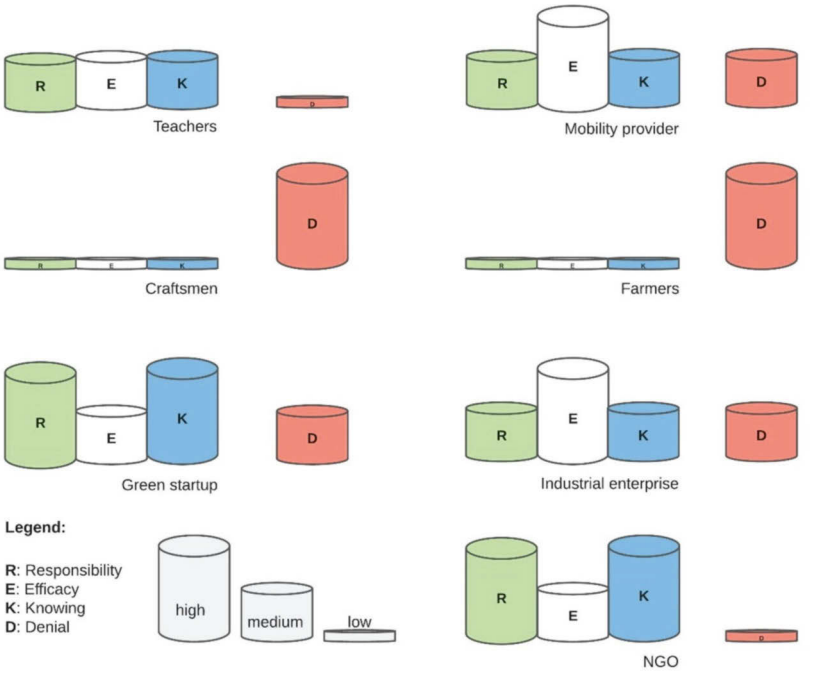
To shed more light onto climate-culturally specific denial patterns, the analysis of the focus groups yielded new insight into whether (and how) the occupational field influenced collective interpretation and handling of the current societal imperative to protect the climate (refer to figure 7). Results reveal that this was especially dependent on how the members of a particular professional field defined themselves.

For instance, the climate habitus of the craftsmen rested upon practicality, as various statements about products being equally strictly monitored and thus enjoyable (mass-produced or not) indicated. Norgaard points to people practicing diffusion of responsibility by employing what she calls "cultural tools of innocence" (2011, p. 146, cf. section 2.5) that are often based on referrals to simplicity as this connotes innocence (ibid. p. 161). This allows participants to deny their own responsibility to escape the negative feelings of, for example, being held accountable or feeling guilty.

Both the farmers and the craftsmen employed a similar strategy. Here, they created an imagination of 'us' and 'them' and thereby implicitly deflected responsibility to those they were setting themselves apart from. The farmers did this by juxtaposing the embodied information at their own disposal in what they called practical 'everyday competency' against those with high cultural capital who in their eyes were not advancing matters for the better. Such knowledge elites' allegedly extremely ab-

stract and theoretical types of knowledge were pestered by irrelevance in these farmers' eyes. Similarly, the craftsmen juxtaposed their own closeness to nature and the countryside against people living in the city, who they referred to dismissively. The employment of such imaginative geographies (refer to section 2.5) served as an avenue for diffusing responsibility. The craftsmen further displayed ambivalence towards people working in corporate or managerial positions. Whilst they expressed a certain level of admiration for attaining such positions, they also dismissed them for snobbishly *needing a jour-fixe for everything* (statement craftsman) and opting to take flights to attain them. This sort of ridicule was also used to deflect attention away from one's own responsibility (in cases where responsibility was acknowledged). As described in section 2.5, humour is often used as a strategy to keep an otherwise threatening conversation light-hearted and maintain control. The craftsmen repeatedly employed this strategy (cf. section 6.2). Overall, they displayed the highest level of denial, followed by the farmers, practising both explicit and implicit denial by rejecting climate change and the need to act and also by endorsing conspiracy theories.

Figure 7: Focus groups' levels of attributions of (own) responsibility and (own) efficacy, comprehensiveness of knowledge concept and tendency to deny (own presentation)



The groups of the green startup and the mobility provider each displayed relatively pronounced levels of implicit denial, which was particularly unexpected insofar as both groups' professional fields and work content were directly concerned with climate matters. One strategy utilised consisted in pointing to others' climate-harmful practices to relativise those undertaken by oneself. This reflects what Norgaard (refer to chapter 2) observed in her study where Norwegians emphasised that the US contributed considerably more to global emissions. Those climate cultures that displayed this type of looking the other way attributed more or less significant amounts of responsibility to themselves (mobility provider medium level, green startup high level) and both had comparatively high efficacy expectations. The knowledge concept of the green startup was also amongst the most comprehensive, yet this still did not result in them escaping denial. Ultimately, each focus group exhibited a certain *climate habitus* (see section 2.4) that also uncovers diverse manifestations of power relations between and within groups.

Climate action and privilege: The fading of conventional socio-economics and the rise of intersectionality

Climate-cultural differences do not surface according to conventional logics of class or socio-economic status alone. Socio-economic status was not related to groups' responsibility attributions (to themselves). Information deficit logic would insinuate that the more educated a group is, i.e., the more knowledge members have about the urgency of acting on climate change, the more responsibly they will act. Yet for instance, the work teams of the mobility provider, the green startup, the industrial enterprise, the teachers and the craftsmen all habitually continued to fly for private enjoyment. With the exception of the craftsmen (and to some extent the industrial enterprise and also the mobility provider), they all struggled to forego flying because of its connection with identity formation. We feel guilty when our different motives collide with each other in cognitive dissonance, showing "how profoundly difficult it can be to be both aware and informed at this point in human history" (Norgaard, 2011, p. 217f.).[12]

This study hence offers a radically different conceptual approach from somewhat outdated conceptions based on lifestyles or milieu models developed by, for example, the German Sinus Institute.[13] Although the concept of the milieu itself is useful, empirical approaches to capture milieu-specific aspects tend to be rather crude: traditional "social milieu or lifestyle theory is mostly descriptive and lacks a strong

12 It must be noted, however, that Norgaard is also very careful not to condone the denial she observes in privileged parts of society.

13 The SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH is a market- and social research institute located in Heidelberg.

sociological mechanism" (Rössel, 2007, cited in Lutz, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, lifestyle approaches in particular rest on the assumption that people can more or less freely *choose* a lifestyle, an idea that this study seeked to refute by emphasising the oftentimes hidden but substantial influence of the social. This said, conventional lifestyle or milieu models that are built upon such socio-economic variables have been helpful insofar as they at least acknowledge profound diversity in society.

Some group members of the teachers, the industrial enterprise and the green startup were however each quite defensive about their flying habits, which indicates that they felt at least some responsibility for contributing to high carbon emissions, despite occupying different socio-economic locations – a clear climate-*cultural* similarity. The employees of the NGO were the only ones who displayed a level of responsibility pronounced enough to give up flying. Socio-economic differences alone cannot explain why members of the NGO displayed the highest levels of responsibility while teachers who earn substantially more only displayed medium levels. Clearly, cultural factors make the difference here.

The farmers did not habitually travel by plane, potentially because they could not leave their work for extended periods of time. Their complaint that air traffic was rarely seen as negative (section 6.5) directly contrasts the view of members of the group of the mobility provider who felt that air travel has become the scapegoat of the climate movement. Interestingly, farmers, in turn, also felt repeatedly being made the scapegoat when it came to climate change, as they had recently received much criticism in relation to animal welfare in the realm of the growing vegetarian/vegan movement.

Socio-economic position was, however, closely linked to the efficacy expectations of different groups: financial means and strong networks tend to translate into high power over outcomes. Norgaard points to this in relation to toxic waste, but the same could be said for climate change. "As a result of the forces of distanciation and denial, the environmental problem of toxic waste is invisible to those who do not live near hazardous sites or who can move, hire lawyers, and effectively make a fuss if they do" (2011, p. 219f.). Opportunities to overcome the invisibility of a pressing environmental problem and to show its impact are also clearly not at everybody's disposal.

Regarding information provision and ways of knowing, some links between lower cultural capital and a certain tendency to reject science and scientific information were observed, whilst in these groups there was also vehement (conscious) rejection of any type of emotional debating and framing. By contrast, the capital-richer groups show a fair amount of trust in science. Only occasionally, the benefit of going beyond the exclusively cognitive is recognised here (refer e.g., to statement by Ulf Poschardt, section 5.2).

Ultimately, higher capital stocks did not necessarily lead to lower levels of denial. While those with less cultural capital (farmers and craftsmen) featured aspects

of outright climate denial and conspiracy theories, the more implicit denial was very present in some of the more capital-rich groups (mobility provider, green startup). Socio-economic approaches alone fail to account for why these climate-cultural differences each result in denial, albeit via different routes, i.e., different combinations and connotations of responsibility, efficacy and knowing. Thinking of the resulting climate cultures instead as manifestations of climate habitus integrates socio-economic with cultural aspects, which represents a promising avenue for future research. This furthers understanding why climate action is not yet adequately practiced in more disadvantaged societal groups (as official calls to action are simply often irrelevant to their realities), nor even in capital-rich circles that could theoretically (at least financially) afford to do so. That conventional socio-economic variables have become somewhat obsolete in straightforwardly predicting climate-relevant behaviour is also confirmed by the most recent nation-wide study about environmental awareness in Germany[14].

Perhaps most interestingly, this study's results reveal the formation of unexpected climate-cultural coalitions currently forming in society, which is similar to what has also been observed in the context of the recent Corona pandemic. For example, the views of members of the non-elite pro-climate action culture showed considerable overlap with those held by the collective elite climate (sub)cultures. Employees of the mobility provider and craftsmen were equally annoyed about the idea of flight shame, albeit for different reasons. Thirdly and by contrast, the farmers agreed that one should feel guilty about flying (which was probably due to them not habitually doing so), which in this respect is most similar to the responses from the NGO.

In sum, traditional socio-economic variables are being complemented or even replaced by other aspects such as cultural influences related to education and socialisation. Elite climate cultures in Germany have been found to also overlook or ignore calls for climate action. Insights generated in in this study that have emerged by triangulating expert interview-, media analysis- and focus group data are therefore in many ways profound and path-breaking. Perhaps most importantly, they show that elite views that dominate public debates around climate change and -action tend to be rather narrow and homogeneous, which clearly contrasts with evidence of significant climate-cultural diversity in the wider population. The latter range from being

14 Environmental awareness study, 2020 (UBA, 2021, p. 45): identifies six different environmental awareness 'personas' or 'types', none of which could be clearly related to a particular lifestyle. Although there are certain sociodemographic particularities for each type, these were not pronounced enough to produce homogenous groups. In fact, the six environmental awareness types can be found in all age groups and segments of society. Environmental awareness types are further to be understood as dynamic concept. The relation amongst the groups can change as much over time as individuals belonging to one of the groups.

radically pro-climate action to climate change scepticism and even denial. The implications of these findings for climate policy and practice are also wide-ranging, pointing towards the urgent need to take seriously diverse views and practices that impact on people's collective engagement in climate action. The following section will now attend to this challenge.

7.5 Policy recommendations

7.5.1 Difference

Evidence of profound climate-cultural difference in German society clearly presents a number of challenges to policymakers engaged in climate action. Reflecting diverging power relations, different social groups reveal markedly varied, if not truly opposing propensities to act on climate change. If corporate culture rewards frequent flying, messages that inform about the climate impact of flying tend to clash with these workplace-based practices. Therefore, both less privileged and elite groups must be considered and addressed differently for climate initiatives to be relevant and effective.

At the same time, societal conflicts around climate (in)action present a real challenge for climate politics. This has so far received far too little attention. A culture- and context-sensitive social-scientific analysis is uniquely suited to present different options for addressing different climate cultures, by better grasping, analysing and presenting their idiosyncrasies. As such, it can contribute to the meaningful and, crucially, differentiated[15] integration of these insights into German climate policy (cf. Norgaard, 2011; Bulkeley, 2019). Research efforts in this direction should be better resourced in the future.

This observed diversity however also harbours significant conflict potential that points to the limitations of conventional democratic and political processes and decision-making. High levels of climate-cultural diversity identified in this study help explain why official assumptions about information provision have so far proven rather un- or even counterproductive, as a public imagined as uniform entity simply does not exist (cf. section 2.5). The assumption that the majority of the population will internalise the imperative for climate action as soon as provided information is just precise enough, catchy enough or alarming enough has proven false. This also indicates the need to develop new forms of participation, for instance by perceiving of science communication as a two-way street between the scientific community and the public(s), instead of mere information transfer from former to latter.

15 group-specific.