Familial Intimacy and the ‘Thing’ between Us

Cuddle Curtains and Desires for Detached Relationality in Germany, Austria and Switzerland

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ABSTRACT: During the government-imposed contact restrictions in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, older adults feared that they may no longer be able to experience physical contact with family members. They were, however, given hope by a ‘cuddle curtain’, a device that promised to enable familial intimacy while blocking the exposure of older bodies to the coronavirus. Our research team traced how one such artefact was used in nursing homes in Switzerland. Here, we discuss its cultural biography to explore notions of intimacy by relating discussions about the curtain to anthropological discussions about entanglement and detachment. We contrast positive associations between the curtain and familial intimacy with regulations surrounding body fluid barriers in sex work, in order to relate the ‘thing’ to the larger context within which it circulates.

KEYWORDS: care, detachment, entanglement, intimacy, labour, lockdown, pandemic, relationality

A grey-haired woman is seen exiting her house and walking towards a transparent shower curtain attached to a frame. She is greeted by her grandson, who instructs her to push her arms through sleeves attached to the curtain while he pushes his own through another pair. They then hug one another tightly, smiling and laughing. This tender scene of intimacy between erstwhile separated relatives was recorded in England and widely circulated on social media. The young grandson featuring in the shaky video was Antony Cauvin, the creator of what the media termed ‘the cuddle curtain’, and his creation and hug was shared hundreds of thousands of times (Cauvin 2020). Our research team members observed in Austria, Germany and Switzerland how the display of affection, cuddling and chuckling sparked hope amongst many that familial hugs could once again return during the strict lockdowns in these

countries (DACH),¹ which were the countries that our project aimed to study.²

Fears about the End of Touch

For many people the COVID-19 pandemic has put into question what they have taken for granted, including intimacies between friends and kin. ‘Physical distancing’ measures have hit older adults particularly hard in light of how governments and health agencies have homogeneously framed them as an ‘at-risk group’ (Ayalon et al. 2020). This blanket categorising of older people proportionally affected more people in ‘super-aged societies’ such as Germany, where 18.1 million citizens are aged 65 years or older, which amounts to 22 per cent of the population (Destatis 2019). While 800,000 German citizens live

in nursing homes, which is under 1 per cent of the population, nursing home residents have comprised nearly one-third of COVID-19-related deaths (RKI 2020), which has informed drastic measures to reduce contacts with residents in the DACH region. In aged and super-aged societies like Austria, Germany and Switzerland, the children of residents of nursing homes themselves are also often over 65 years old and classified as risk groups for COVID-19.

The apparent and real threat faced by older people, and the accompanying restrictions on their contact with people, has informed a context within which residents of nursing homes and their relatives began to fear the end of physical intimacy with one another and in which the cuddle curtain started to become a much sought-after artefact. The curtain offered the elderly – and the population in general – an apparently simple solution: touch without the troubling risk of contracting the virus. It is this artefact that we examine here by contrasting it with other similar 'things', namely barriers to fluids and viruses in sex work.

Viral Entanglements, the Cuddle Curtain and Detached Intimacy

We can fruitfully examine the cuddle curtain and its role in intimate labour by connecting post-relational arguments to insights from the anthropology of epidemics. By thinking with entanglement, specifically in the analysis of epidemics (Keck 2020; Kelly et al. 2019), we are able to conceive of 'entities' such as organisms, bodies and environments through addressing them in their relationality (Niewöhner and Lock 2018). Entanglement is also a crucial concept in historical, political and economic anthropology (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018; Stoler 2006; Tošić and Lems 2019), where it is often used by scholars to conceptualise how 'things/entities' exist in 'relations' (Strathern 2020). Entanglement foregrounds attachment from a perspective premised on relationality, and therefore allows us to stress attachments where processes or practices are otherwise constructed as disconnected or happening side-by-side. Both building on and departing from this premise, post-relational approaches propose thinking about relationality through attachments and detachments, with their specific arrangements being viewed as crucial for the kinds of relationality they set out to study (Candea et al. 2015).

In his work on epidemics, Frédéric Keck (2020) argues that detachments are crucial where contagion refers to the potential entanglement of a formerly zoonotic pathogen with humans. Indeed, we follow

Christos Lynteris' suggestion to take seriously how political responses to viral entanglements are mediated through an 'apparatus of culling, stamping out, disinfection, disinfestation, separation and eradication' (2019: 2) which corresponds to attempts at detachments that separate or quarantine infected bodies to hinder or block further the entanglement of the virus with humans. This is what we see happening in DACH: entanglements of human bodies and SARS-CoV-2, often caused by touch, physical company and intimacy, are considered a threat to public health and consequently have become a threat to touch, physical company and intimacy itself.

The intimacy that older adults could experience through the cuddle curtain can, therefore, be conceptualised as a way by which care workers at Insiema³ nursing homes have tried to facilitate hugging as some form of attachment while at the same time blocking other forms of attachments, namely between contagious body fluids and other elements of the body-outside-the-body (see also Martin 1994; and Mol 2002) through the foil.

The Cuddle Curtain as Media Artefact of Hope for Detached Intimacy

For some weeks in May 2020, the cuddle curtain was widely covered in social and traditional media reports and postings in the DACH region, and was talked about in conversations amongst family and friends over social media. However, despite its apparent popularity, the curtain itself proved difficult to track down. Our research team tried to locate it in care homes, but found only one in DACH: in the homes of the Swiss private foundation Insiema, which operates two nursing homes with an overall number of around six hundred inhabitants (RND 2020).

The cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986) of this artefact proved very interesting for understanding intimacies during the pandemic. Switzerland, where the foil was used, had introduced lockdown measures in mid-March and, analogous to Germany and Austria, strictly limited visits to residents of nursing homes. Thorsten Khemp, CEO of Insiema, told us in a telephone interview on 19 June 2020 that he had watched the social media video and had decided that it could be an innovative way to address the challenges faced by Insiema at the time. Over the weeks, relatives had mounted pressure upon the nursing home to allow visits, even though contact with visitors was forbidden by law and his staff were fighting to keep the

homes free of COVID-19. A further motivation, he explained, was that staff and management were weary of nursing homes being associated with death, loneliness and cold institutional care. The media-savvy manager saw an opportunity to adapt the curtain both to enable familial intimacy and to generate positive media representations of nursing homes in general and the Insiema homes in particular.

He summoned the staff to discuss how such a curtain or foil could support care personnel in their attempts to enable familial intimacy in homes operated by the foundation. Following a few visits to the DIY superstore and some team discussions, Insiema staff installed the first cuddle curtain in a nursing home in the DACH region.

Familial intimacy, as mediated through the cuddle curtain, has since been an object of media interest during the pandemic. Around early June, as soon as the actual foil had been installed in the Insiema homes, lockdown restrictions in Switzerland were eased, and the actually existing foil has not been used a single time since testing.

The foils are now kept by Insiema as a tested hygiene measure to maybe use during the anticipated second wave in Switzerland. The actual media success of the cuddle curtain does not translate into widespread use, or use at all, a fact that suggests that the success of the foil is closely linked with desire for intimacy as a constituent of sociality in general.

‘Things’ that Enable and Disable Intimacies

The foil may be seen as an artefact promising salvation from threatening fears about the possible ends of touch during the pandemic, as it is loaded with imaginaries of familial warmth and pro-social intimacy. It shows how some forms of intimacies – in this case, mainly between family members – are supported and facilitated by public institutions. Cuddle curtains, however, have other potential functions. Not only can they be used to protect nursing home residents from contracting COVID-19 when hugging their children, but they can also serve to protect people when engaging in sexual relationships, a long-standing yet not much researched and taboo topic in nursing homes (cf. Lester et al. 2016).

To de-centre the focus on the familial in imaginaries of detached intimacy in German, Austrian and Swiss media, it is illuminating to contrast the discursive construction of the cuddle curtain with the current discursive construction of intimacy in sexual relations amongst older people, where this form of

intimacy is deemed as ‘unnecessary’ if not morally condemning intimacy and longing for touch. This particular construction of intimacy holds true for many received or popular opinions and judgements of sexual relationships amongst persons living in any kind of institution, including nursing homes, and it becomes more pronounced when these sexual relationships are not maintained within normative family or at least couple formations, but via sex work.

‘During pandemic times’, the German organisation Hydra, which stands for the rights of sex workers, claimed in a public statement: ‘Society must find new and safe ways to enable intimacy and sexual need for everybody: the elderly, the lonesome, the sick, the healthy’ (HYDRA 2020). Hydra stated this in a context where sex workers were being politically framed as ‘super spreaders’, which misleadingly ignored how many were familiar with and already engaged in strict hygiene measures. The political frames rested on moralised and reductionist imaginaries of what sex work is and how it relates to familial intimacy (cf. BesD 2020).

We can see a double standard when it comes to intimacies during the pandemic. Some intimacies were deemed worthy of support through techniques of detachment, as we have pictured in the arrangement of cuddle curtains, family members and nursing homes, while others such as sexual encounters were clearly not, especially when they took place in institutions like nursing homes or brothels. Compared to the cuddle curtain, body fluid barriers in sex work are still set under the prejudice of being anti-social and socially corrosive enablers of dangerous and contagious intimacy.

The cuddle curtain and body fluid barriers in other contexts share a fundamental function in common: allowing a specific kind of detached intimacy which blocks potentially dangerous and contagious entanglements while allowing touch and intimacy. Both are used in contexts in which the commodification of intimacy and care is highly contested, albeit in different ways. With regard to one practice (family hugs in institutions), the object enabling detached intimacy becomes a widespread media phenomenon despite little actual use, while, regarding another practice (sexual activity in institutions), it sparks different and predominantly contemptible associations, despite potentially high usage.

A critical perspective that focusses on the importance of analysing ‘things’ and their cultural connotations of purity or danger (Douglas 2007) helps discern when intimacies and the things that enable them are considered warm, friendly and tender

within contexts in which they may otherwise appear cold, problematic or tense. This speaks to what Ann Stoler calls tense and tender ties (2006: 44).

The familial cuddling and chuckling in the original social media video, and the installation of the cuddle curtain in Insiema nursing homes as a concession to residents and relatives, appears tender because it omits what is tense about similar 'things' in other contexts. When we think about institutional configurations in which physical proximity and risk work in similarly problematic and contagious closeness – camps, prisons or brothels – the 'thing' has not become a media thing because intimacies would appear 'tense' there. It might seem too problematic to advertise body fluid barriers as warm and pro-social and the longing for touch as a humane longing to be moderated by acquiescent personnel.

Neither detachments nor entanglements appear as innocent or apolitical in their conceptualisation and societal circulation. By considering where and why detachments and/or entanglements are encouraged, as people long for intimacy during the pandemic, we are given key insights into the normative organisation of sociality in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

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Notes

1. We use the German acronym DACH to refer to the German-speaking region comprising Germany, Austria and Switzerland.
2. "Provisioning and Support during the SARS-CoV-2-Pandemic (VERSUS-Corona)", supported by the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt am Main, and the Research Training Group "Doing Transitions" at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. More info see <https://wprn.org/item/452552>
3. Swiss foundation that runs several nursing homes; we use a pseudonym.

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