The Nuclear/Nuclear Family

Moralities of Intimacy under COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: During the COVID-19 lockdown, as households were kept separate in a bid to contain the coronavirus, morally underpinned dynamics of fission and fusion occurred, privileging the ‘nuclear family’, which is taken here in two senses: the conventional social unit of a couple and their children, on the one hand, and the togetherness promoted by the nuclear industry in North West England, on the other. Whilst Sellafield’s Nuclear family fused with its host community in an outpouring of corporate kindness and volunteering, singles bereft of nuclear families were fissioned off from social life, which led to a corrective debate in the Netherlands. Drawing out analogies from a modest comparative perspective, I posit the nuclear family as a prism affording insights into the corporate, governmental and personal management of intimacy.

KEYWORDS: containment, fission, fusion, household, nuclear family, Sellafield, singles

Over the past three years, I have carried out fieldwork at and around the Sellafield nuclear facilities in North West England. I moved from Manchester, the headquarters of my university, to the remote town of Whitehaven in West Cumbria, ten miles north of the Sellafield site, to be immersed in a region that is intimately familiar with the nuclear. During the months of the first COVID-19 lockdown, I was confined to the house that I rented in Whitehaven. With any ethnographic life happening largely online, I closely followed, from my detached nuclear stronghold, the pandemic’s trajectory in the United Kingdom and, for a comparative perspective, in my native Netherlands, where the virus’ continental impact foreshadowed the havoc it would shortly wreak on the British Isles. Bereft of my usual forms of intimacy, I mused on processes of social fission and fusion¹ and found that the concept of the nuclear family, taken in two senses of the term, suited me as a prism for a modest comparative analysis through analogy: the one concerning the conventional social unit of a couple and their children, widely regarded as a core building block of society, at least in Western settings (hereafter,

the ‘nuclear family’), and the other concerning the togetherness that the nuclear industry, and in particular Sellafield Ltd, has been promoting online, embracing notions of kindness and facilitating volunteering in West Cumbria (hereafter, the ‘Nuclear family’). I suggest that the relationality implied in ‘the nuclear/Nuclear family’ has moralising undertones that have shaped experiences of lockdown and that afford insights into the corporate, governmental and personal management of bodies subject to social processes of fission and fusion. COVID-19 has largely reinforced the Nuclear family of West Cumbria and the nuclear household as cornerstones of social life – and yet in the Netherlands some fissures in the nuclear family’s taken-for-grantedness were revealed as the pandemic took hold.

Sellafield Ltd: A Nuclear Family Extending into West Cumbria, North West England

The United Kingdom’s nuclear history is written into, and closely bound up with, a tight cluster of mostly

decrepit, partly state-of-the-art nuclear facilities wedged in between the Irish Sea and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Lake District. Run by Sellafield Ltd, the so-called 'site licence company' operating as a subsidiary of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (a government body), the Sellafield site is poised to move into full decommissioning in 2021. Its business will henceforth consist in the management of nuclear waste and in environmental remediation, a complex task expected to take another 120 years. The key objective in this business is containment: radionuclides must be contained and kept away from living beings and the environment. Nuclear employees routinely create layers and barriers to keep contamination at bay (Kalshoven 2020), which recently came to resonate oddly and suddenly with the shielding of individuals against the coronavirus by governments, organisations and medical personnel.

The Sellafield site has a long and notorious history. From the late 1940s onwards, scientists produced weapons-grade plutonium here in a bid to keep up with developments in the United States. In 1956, the Calder Hall facility was festively opened by the Queen and became the first plant to commercially generate nuclear power, operating until 2003. In 1957, a serious incident happened, the Windscale Fire, which could have become a major nuclear disaster but was narrowly averted.² The Sellafield site is perhaps best known, however, for its controversial reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel, which is planned to come to an end in 2021.

Socio-economic ties as well as affective connections make for a closely entangled dynamic between the nuclear industry and its host region. Sellafield Ltd is the area's major employer, providing thousands of well-paying jobs and keeping a large supply chain in business. Generations of families have worked in the industry, which has a strong presence in the surrounding communities. When I asked whether employees thought of themselves as working for a 'Nuclear family', respondents were not sure they would use this actual term – but several remarked that part of the workforce considered working for Sellafield Ltd as employment not just for themselves, but for their family and community, going beyond a straightforward employer–employee relationship.

In an interview (December 2018) with a technical manager responsible for waste retrievals from a high-hazard facility, my discussion partner told me a typical 'potted history' about his family's involvement with Sellafield that resonated with many other potted histories that I collected during my fieldwork.

In these stories, Sellafield comes indeed across as a family affair. My contact had joined the company as an apprentice at 16 years of age. His father had worked there for 30-odd years. ('Do you know the story about workers being fetched from the pictures when Windscale [the 1957 reactor fire] happened?' he asked me. 'My father was one of them'.) His son had just started an apprenticeship with the company. My discussion partner was convinced there would be plenty of work in nuclear decommissioning for his son either in West Cumbria or elsewhere in the United Kingdom, but nonetheless, Sellafield work was bound to diminish. Almost all of his friends, he said, relied on it either directly or by working for its supply chain. The Nuclear family overlaps in significant ways with nuclear families and their extended local networks.³

Sellafield Ltd's influence penetrates deeply into the community fabric. The company sustains local initiatives with financial and expert support. Its managers serve as governors on school boards and help manage cultural organisations. The nuclear industry has shaped and served the region for decades. This does not mean there are no fissures running along nuclear fault lines: local pride in a history of scientific enquiry goes hand in hand with resentment amongst those who feel excluded from a lucrative nuclear livelihood through a lack of contacts or education. Generally, however, West Cumbrian feelings towards Sellafield Ltd are warm (Chapman 1997). With the COVID-19 outbreak, work at Sellafield Ltd was paused where safely feasible, and the containment of nuclear waste seemed to take a backseat, at least in the company's communications, to the containment of the virus and its social fallout. Building on existing intimacies and performing its inclusive role in its 'community', the nuclear industry rushed in to embrace its extended Nuclear family.

Sellafield Ltd Fusing into the Community

After worrisome news in mid-March 2020 concerning an outbreak of corona cases at Sellafield Ltd (Ambrose 2020), the nuclear industry in West Cumbria (so very used to rules and regulations) responded by instructing a large part of its workforce to stay home and connect online, with detailed communications about this extraordinary situation conveyed in long explanations and soothing video messages. Almost every day, an update from the Sellafield Ltd website was sent to subscribers containing reassurances about the continuation of essential work to keep the

Sellafield site safe and secure by key workers, whilst many other employees began working from home or were given the green light to spend their time volunteering. On 3 April, Sellafield Ltd CEO Martin Chown appeared in a video expressing his thanks to stakeholders and ‘the community’ for their continuing support (Sellafield Ltd 2020). The next day, the company confirmed that any employee who was not a key worker could fill out a form to ‘volunteer to support their local community during work time’, subject to (as was clarified later) a maximum term of 12 weeks. Chown continued his weekly online presence in homely homilies that urged Sellafield Ltd workers to be kind to one another and to their communities.⁴ The company’s reach-out included a £200,000 donation for personal protective equipment to the United Kingdom’s National Health Service (NHS). Friends in the Netherlands, where health services are privatized, were astonished at the UK government’s exhortation during the crisis to ‘protect the NHS’, which was in danger of being overwhelmed by the numbers of COVID-19 sufferers: ‘The NHS should protect *you* rather than the other way around!’ my friends cried indignantly. Suddenly this expression of community spirit struck me as something particularly British – or perhaps this was how it was made to look through UK government’s COVID-19 rhetoric.

Sellafield Ltd operated within the same discursive, and practical, mode. Suspended activities on-site enhanced extension of its presence into ‘the community’ (a core concept in Sellafield Ltd discourse and practice). The close connections between the nuclear industry and West Cumbria that I have noticed during my fieldwork in the region, often expressed in terms of kinship relations, were reinforced and highlighted: the Sellafield Nuclear family became an extended one expanding outwards into its surrounding geography, bringing kindness and supplies to vulnerable people, a category that gained special significance in times of corona. This was all the more interesting because in the course of the preceding few years, the close relations between the industry and its community had come to be framed as rather problematic. In interviews with Sellafield managers, the community was likened to a child needing to become independent from its ageing parent. The supply chain was encouraged to diversify rather than to rely on nuclear commissions only. This discourse was absent from the company’s COVID-19 communications, where community care was again at the forefront of company concern. The company’s energy and expertise were harnessed to benefit West

Cumbria *in kind*, in a move that resonated in interesting and undoubtedly unintended ways with wider societal calls for a new redistributive politics – many of the webinars I followed during the crisis called for experimentation upon recovery with circular or stationary economies or even a universal basic income. Suddenly, the economy (from the ancient Greek words *oikos* and *nomos*, the ‘law of the household’) had taken on a different hue.

The Household as a Core COVID Concept, Fusing and Fissioning Nuclear Families

Whilst the Nuclear family in West Cumbria spilled out of its physical work sites and homes to embrace the surrounding context of its ‘community’, other social reconfigurations occurred simultaneously. Where Sellafield’s Nuclear family fused with its extended family, a geographical shrinking and consolidating could be observed as a result of the household being declared the primary unit in COVID-19 containment. Key in the UK lockdown (as in most other countries) was the move to isolate households from one another so as to prevent the virus from propagating. As a result, in the personal sphere, both fusion and fission occurred, and much of these dynamics revolved around the very familiar grouping of the nuclear family.

How families are configured and institutionalised has been a central concern in sociology, and anthropology has theorised from its very beginnings what constitutes kin and how social relations of kinship play out in spatial terms – as in, where is the newly married couple supposed to live, with the bride’s or the groom’s parents? In Western contexts, the nuclear family has emerged as a core social unit, first in its conventional configuration of biological parents with children, then criticised for its focus on standard forms of intimacy and reproduction, and more generously interpreted and extended as including single parenthood, same-sex partnerships, or adopted offspring (Cutas and Chan 2012). During the COVID-19 lockdown, the domestic familial unit made a firm comeback: it went without saying that patterns of physical human dwelling would be a key to containing the virus. As the household became the core concept in state measures of containment, the new notion of social distancing came to underlie any engagement outside of one’s own household, understood as a group of people sharing a dwelling. In practice, at least in the Western contexts I discuss

here, this group of people seemed to coincide with the familiar societal unit of the nuclear family.

The nuclear family, either biologically or more-than-biologically constituted, was both reinforced and reconstituted whilst becoming neatly separated from wider social units, including extended families and circles of friends. Young (and in some cases older) adults flocked back to their parents and to a cosy (and probably more spacious) nest, recreating formerly fissioned nuclear families. Grandparents living elsewhere, in their own dwellings or in care homes, became cut off from the company of children and grandchildren. In UK government statements and advice on the lockdown, a lot of attention was paid to the 'shielding' of vulnerable people (with the elderly in care homes, as it turned out later, badly let down), sometimes alone and self-isolating. Most sympathy in the media and in government briefings, however, was conveyed to families bogged down by the constant presence of demanding young children. Juggling home schooling, childcare and working from home became the standard topics of commiseration.

Less attention was paid to singles barred from meeting up with friends or lovers. 'What does the government mean by "a household"?' an English friend fretted in the early days of lockdown, worried about a lack of companionship and physical intimacy, before hastily moving in with his girlfriend after years of conveniently living apart together. In terms of intimacy (even in getting too much of it), the mantra of social distancing privileged couples and the nuclear family living under the same roof.

What about Single Households? A Plea for Fusion from Overseas

And yet a different line of reasoning made itself heard overseas. On 6 May 2020, Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* published an op-ed piece by Linda Duits (2020), a writer specialising in gender and sexuality, entitled 'A Plea for More Flexible Rules for Singles: "Sex Is a Human Right"'. In a strongly moralising tone, Duits argued that physical contact with other people is a life necessity rather than a dispensable treat. With reference to the WHO, she called it 'a human right'. Not having any physical intimacy, she wrote, and being subjected to 'enforced celibacy' is unhealthy. Shortly after (albeit already well into the period of confinement, as measures in the Netherlands were slowly being relaxed), the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment

(RIVM) showed itself receptive to this advice, stating that singles were welcome to find themselves a cuddle or a sex buddy (*knuffelmaatje* or *seksbuddy*). Reporting on this official stance in the Netherlands, *The Guardian* referred to these moralities of intimacy as a 'typically open-minded intervention' (Boffey 2020) whilst *The Sun* spoke of 'randy Dutch' (Huselbee 2020).

RIVM's explicit open-mindedness was short-lived, however (Graaff 2020). In a toned-down version of the advice that now eschewed the term 'sex buddy', the institute wrote: 'Obviously, as a single you, too, long to have physical contact. When engaging in intimacy and sex, however, it is all the more necessary that you minimise the contamination risk. You should discuss together how this is best achieved'.⁵ What remained of interest in this modest welcoming of fusion was the attention paid to human needs and desires that went beyond the conventional unit of the nuclear family – resonating with what *The Guardian* and *The Sun* recognised as Dutch values, each in rather different terms.⁶

Lockdown Easing, with Only a Touch of the Dysfunctional

In the enfolding shadow of Sellafield, we had to content ourselves for months with the new core concept of 'kindness'. As I cycled around Whitehaven, where many Sellafield Ltd workers live, on a sunny Tuesday afternoon in late May 2020, I was surprised at the numbers of anglers neatly spaced out on the North Pier. Men and boys, fathers and sons – more than I had ever seen out there, and I had been living in the town for almost three years. Perhaps they were taking a break from home, or from volunteering. Perhaps they benefitted from a last chance to be out free on a weekday before being called back into work. Perhaps they were dying to be with their mates. A few days later, on the Friday, the lads had turned the same pier into an open-air pub, no longer socially distancing and making the most of a balmy evening whilst the proper pubs were still closed.

Was there a nucleus of presumption⁷ in Sellafield Ltd's bestowing of care on West Cumbrian families? In June 2020, during an online meeting of the local body charged with scrutinising the nuclear industry in West Cumbria,⁸ councillors expressed only warm appreciation of the company's volunteering efforts in support of the 'social welfare of the community'. One councillor, who was also a school governor, went on to ask the Sellafield Ltd representative how the com-

pany, with lockdown easing, would mitigate stress on the education system. Children had been at home with their parents – in some cases, she emphasised, both of them Sellafield employees – working from home. The familiar backup teams of grandparents and great grandparents, family members who were still isolating, would not be available to take care of the children when parents went back to the office or plant. The Sellafield representative reassured her that no great rush back was foreseen, as the company's guiding principle remained that anyone who could contribute to the company from home was expected to continue to do so. In its ongoing professed attention to community well-being, Sellafield would make sure not to 'overburden schools'.

And yet a smattering of familial dysfunctionality emerged, albeit from a rather different angle, when I finally met up again with the Sellafield Ltd technical manager, who had become part of my social circle during my time in West Cumbria. He had his young and affectionate Labrador with him. Fondly embracing the dog, I cried, 'You know what, this is the first living being I have cuddled in four months' time!' He threw me a funny look. I hastily asked him about his views on the 'Nuclear family'. To my surprise, he said that 'the family has become a bit dysfunctional'. It turned out that his remark fused the Nuclear and nuclear families in an interesting way. Elaborating, he explained that the company's currently privileged way of working, from home, and of communicating through virtual meetings had entailed a lack of opportunities to discuss private matters, such as home family life, with colleagues. So to become less dysfunctional, his team had decided to set ten minutes apart at the beginning of each zoom session for informal chat before moving on to the work briefing, allowing Nuclear and nuclear families to merge again.

COVID, Kindness, Kin

Slowly, the Nuclear family will, at least partly, move back into its Sellafield Ltd workplaces, into rear-ranged offices and COVID-secure plants, with some teams fusing again in the real world of work, others remaining fissioned – Sellafield friends and neighbours working from home have told me their offices have been reassigned in the meantime to other teams that require closer connections with operational systems. Slowly, nuclear families will rediscover some breathing room, whilst society's relational building blocks resettle and familiar patterns click back into shape. In June 2020, England came up with the new

unit of the 'support bubble', which meant that a person from a single household could fuse with a family or a single person living elsewhere (Mason 2020) – implying that lovers living apart could now reunite. Somewhere along the line, a human right got suspended for the greater good. Somewhere along the line, the household was taken for granted, the economy seemed poised for change, and kindness was preached, a concept rooted in 'kin'.

In Dutch, the English equivalent of 'kind' is *vriendelijk* ('like a friend') or *lief* – which also means 'beloved' or 'lover'. Not that anything should be read into this too hastily. There will be time and space to ponder how different kinds of kin became rooted and uprooted in the now all too 'familiar' world of COVID-19. Failures at inclusivity (failures at making kin) on the part of the state will continue to be scrutinised as bodies find solace again. There will be analyses of Sellafield's sustained practices of moral engineering in West Cumbria and to what extent, and to whom, the Nuclear family is wont to perform acts of kindness, and how welcome these are. In both national settings I touched upon, broad assumptions were made, and sometimes questioned, about human needs and desires within and outside of family structures, with the nuclear family maintaining its status as the taken-for-granted core unit. As it is, from community involvement in a UK nuclear setting to the calls for COVID-19 'sex buddies' in the Netherlands, 'the nuclear/Nuclear family', through patterns of fusing and fissioning, has thrown regional and national (historically, politically and socio-culturally motivated) moralities and experiences of intimacy into sharp relief.

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Notes

1. Fission and fusion are processes in nuclear energy production, referring to (fission) the splitting of an atom's nucleus that underlies current generation of nuclear energy and to (fusion) the coming together of nuclei as happens in nuclear reactions in the sun, a process that scientists hope to replicate sustainably one day. I thank Jean-Marc Audrin for his sug-

gestion of applying this terminology to the social dynamics I observed during COVID-19 lockdown. My usage here is etic: I have not heard 'fission' or 'fusion' uttered in this context by people affiliated with the nuclear industry.

2. Ironically, it was fallout from Chernobyl that contaminated sheep grazing on the Cumbrian fells in 1986 (Wynne 1992). See Arnold (1992) for a detailed account of the Windscale Fire; Hogg (2016) and Blowers (2017) for histories of Sellafield; Wynne and colleagues (2007) for a study of perceptions of risk in West Cumbria; and Davies (2012) for short first-hand accounts of living with the nuclear in West Cumbria.
3. Cf. Wynne (1992: 299) on Cumbrian sheep farmers after the 1986 Chernobyl fallout: 'The farmers identified socially with family, friends and neighbours who were part of the Sellafield industrial workforce. They recognized their own indirect and sometimes direct social dependency upon the plant – not only neighbours but also close relatives of the hill-farmers work there. Thus, underlying and hounding their expressed mistrust of the authorities and experts, there was a countervailing deep sense of social solidarity and dependency'.
4. In July 2020, when the lockdown eased, Chown thanked the company's employees for their volunteering efforts: 'As we begin to establish a new normal, I wanted to thank all of those colleagues who have worked as volunteers in our communities over recent months and who have now stepped away from this. As we moved into lockdown, we asked for those who were able to contribute to the recovery effort. Hundreds of Sellafield Ltd employees rose to meet this request. From manning call centres, to delivering medicine and packing food, to volunteering in the NHS [National Health Service] and providing project management expertise; your response was fantastic'. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/sellafield-ltd/about/staff-update?utm_source=a7baca7a-e15f-4fc6-8329-cca00f915e18&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=daily (accessed 14 July 2020).
5. My translation from <https://www.loketgezondleven.nl/advies-ondersteuning/coronavirus/seksualiteit> (accessed 18 May 2020).
6. Research published in the Netherlands in early July 2020 showed that singles had had less sex during the corona crisis, with a third of single men and half of single women who had had sex before the crisis not having had any since the virus outbreak. See NOS (2020).
7. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this apt turn of phrase.
8. West Cumbria Sites Stakeholder Group, 17 June 2020. A video registration of the meeting is available at <https://wcsg.co.uk/meetings-event/risk-and-hazard-reduction-and-waste-management-working-group-25/> (accessed 15 July 2020).

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