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# Donor Conception and Unknown Kin: Reconsidering Identity and Family Through Anonymous and Deanonimized Relations

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## Abstract

This thesis, based on a fieldwork conducted in California during the first half of 2018, explores what it may mean to discover that one is “sperm donor conceived” – that is, what are the effects of learning that one was conceived and born as a result of a sperm donation? Through a distinct conceptual framework, this thesis explores how knowledge about one’s donor conception is negotiated and employed in various aspect of life. These are aspects that most notably pertain to one’s identity and familial relationships. The thesis attempts to provide answers to how contemporary donor conceived individuals conceptualize the anonymous genitor, and how knowledge of the existence of unknown genetic kin affects and is affected by the dynamic of the person’s identity and social world. Through negotiating the terms of knowledge of conception, donor conceived persons explicate, confront, and employ certain fundamental ideas about Western personhood, genetic heredity, and family. Moreover, through a process of identifying anonymous kin, family-relationships and identity may be reconsidered, and the cultural connection between “parent” and “genetic heredity” confronted. Finally, this thesis serves as a contribution to the ongoing debates about donor anonymity.

## Acknowledgements

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The idea of a genetic parent [...] brings together what is known about human heredity and the fact that a relationship is entailed, because, for Euro-Americans it is virtually impossible to talk of a parent in a human context without evoking the idea of potential social relations. (Strathern, 1992b, p. 3)

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Knowledge about how persons are related to one another is acquired from, among other things, information about biological process. With the new technologies have come new techniques of verifiability. Now such knowledge is integral to the recognition of persons as kin and has its built-in impact on personal identity. (Strathern, 1999, p. 65).

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Further research is needed to understand children's views on their donor-assisted conception, information sharing about their DI [Donor Insemination] origins, the significance of social and biological ties, how they conceptualize donors, and whether or not they might want to identify them or consider them part of their family. (Konrad, 2005, p. 279)



# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	II
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	III
<b>Table of Contents</b>	VI
<b>Introduction</b>	1
Research Question	2
Activating Knowledge	3
<b>Chapter 1 Location, Analytical Perspectives, Methodology</b>	5
Location	6
Analytical Perspectives	9
Methodology	12
<i>Positioning</i>	13
<i>Methods of Observation</i>	13
<i>Selection Bias</i>	16
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	17
<i>Structure</i>	17
<b>Chapter 2 Activation of Knowledge</b>	20
Learning of Donor Conception	21
Genetic Testing	28
<i>“Matching”</i>	30
Terminology	36
Not Just DNA	40
Identity	41
Relationships	46
	VI

Chapter 3 <b>Transilience</b>	50
Agency and Community	52
(Re)Production and Effects	58
To Be, or Not to Be, Transilient	64
Cancellation	71
Chapter 4 <b>Deanonimization</b>	77
Contacting Unknown Genetic Kin	80
Complete Deanonimization	89
A Reconsideration	98
<b>Conclusion</b>	101
On a Personal Note	105
<b>Figures</b>	106
<b>Literature</b>	107
Appendix A <b>List of Interlocutors</b>	114
Amanda	114
Douglas	114
Jessica	115
Julie	115
Karen	116
Kimberly	116
Laura	117
Lily	117
Madeleine	118
Marie	118



Molly	119
Naomi	119
Paul	120
Phoebe	120
Rachel	121
Robert	121
<b>Appendix B My DNA Test</b>	<b>123</b>



## Introduction

Late in 2014, when I was 23 years old, my parents, to my utter surprise, told me that I had been conceived by means of a sperm donation. The sperm sample had been provided anonymously, and there was, and still are, no records connecting the sperm sample number to the person who provided it. The donor's anonymity, by St. Olavs hospital's account, is absolute and irreversible. Many times, I have been asked how I reacted when my parents told me about my donor conception. My answer often depends on who asks, but if I was to answer here and now, I would say that I was, in a word, surprised. If asked to elaborate I would say that I had an immediate and inexplicable sense of... opportunity. It is hard to explain but I sometimes imagine it as the dye of a painting disappearing, exposing the blank canvas beneath – or as a door suddenly ajar that leads into a vast empty space – not empty as in hollow but as in free, as in, this space may be filled with anything. Although, in saying this, I wonder to what extent I am romanticizing this moment of revelation. Have I retrospectively adorned the memory? Moreover, is my own remembrance of this moment persuaded by what I learned during my fieldwork? Has my story been shaped by my interlocutors?

Fast forward to 2017. It was time for me to pick a topic for my master's thesis project. Up until this point, aside from my initial surprise and sense of wonder, the knowledge that I was donor conceived had been, mostly, latent. The sudden and immediate sense of astonishment had regressed, and the knowledge that I was donor conceived was – just that – knowledge that I was donor conceived. The implications and the effects of knowing this about myself, were undefined and ambiguous. What does it mean? The question stayed with me – not as a pressing matter, but rather as something dormant, something vague and inchoate, a question that was hard to even articulate. Perhaps this inherent ambiguity was why I, for at least a year, did not tell anyone of what I had learned about my conception. Yet, whenever there was talk of parents, genetics, heredity, DNA, nurture versus nature, and so on, the knowledge would activate, so to speak, a curiosity about the significance of knowing this, while simultaneously accentuate its inchoateness. During the first semester of the master's program of Social Anthropology, we were advised to pick a topic that was meaningful to us. Something that we

were curious about; a topic we knew we would stay interested in and not grow tired of. Thus, I asked myself: What topic is important to me? What am I personally invested and interested in?

### Research Question

The research question for this thesis took shape by asking myself the very questions that manifested as a consequence of learning of my donor conception. Questions like, how and why does knowledge of one's donor conception matter? What aspects of life are affected? How does one think about one's parents, one's identity, and one's unknown genetic kin in light of learning of one's donor conception?

In narrowing these questions down, I employ a famous term introduced to anthropological kinship theory by Marilyn Strathern. This is the proposition that kinship knowledge is *constitutive knowledge*. In Strathern's words, for the "Euro-American", "...because of its cultural coupling with identity, kinship knowledge is a particular kind of knowledge: the information (and verification) on which it draws is constitutive in its consequences" (Strathern, 1999, p. 68). Information, according to Strathern, becomes constitutive knowledge when it is "embedded in the way one acts towards others and perceives the world" (Strathern, 1999, pp. 77-78). Following this, the information that one is donor conceived, and the concomitant information-turned-knowledge that there are unknown genetic kin "out there", is constitutive knowledge of self. The information is constitutive because it is incorporated into one's life; it is transformed into knowledge: knowledge about self and about family. Moreover, and this is crucial, "there is no choice about it" (Strathern, 1999, p. 75).

I find Strathern's concept of constitutive knowledge a fruitful entry point into answering some of the above questions. However, a concern that is immediately prompted is how do the effects of constitutive knowledge manifest themselves empirically? Janet Carsten has suggested that "although kinship knowledge is constitutive of the self, kinds of knowledge and what people do with them are infinitely variable—just as selves are never finitely constituted entities." (2007a, p. 423). From Carsten's observations, I developed an analytical perspective to conceptualize the different ways constitutive knowledge plays out. This perspective is what I term: *activation of knowledge*.

I employ this term to effectively produce answers to what it can mean to know that one is donor conceived, and to discern what – and how, and why – aspects of life are affected by this knowledge. Activation of knowledge pertains to both the consciously and explicit, and the subtle and unwitting ways and degrees to which constitutive knowledge is negotiated and employed. Activation of knowledge includes any effects constitutive knowledge might engender, be they mild and seemingly inconsequential, or intense and overtly life-changing – whether these effects manifest as explicit considerations and actions, or whether they remain unacknowledged by the donor conceived person herself. After gaining knowledge of donor conception, and the concomitant knowledge about the existence of unknown genetic kin, what aspects of reality are reconsidered and reassessed? What effects are produced by this knowledge? And, to complicate the equation, what is the role of donor anonymity in this activation?

The task of this thesis is to discern some of the “infinite variables” (Carsten, 2007a, p. 423) of what people do with knowledge of unknown genetic kin. Indeed, the question is – as I, and many of my interlocutors, asked, and what has been requested by several scholars researching empirical effects of Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ART) – what does it mean to be donor conceived? And further, why does it mean what it means?

Basically, my research question is:

*How does the donor conceived person activate knowledge of donor conception and knowledge of the existence of unknown genetic kin?*

### Activating Knowledge

*Knowledge of donor conception and knowledge of unknown genetic kin* are ultimately entangled and inseparable. Knowing that one is donor conceived necessarily entails knowing that there are unknown genetic kin “out there”. Unknown, then, until they are identified – something which does not necessarily happen, either because it proves impossible despite the donor conceived person’s best efforts, or because it is not desired. If these two aspects of knowing, for the purpose of clarification, *may* be separated and isolated, then the main effect of knowledge of donor conception *itself*, would be the rise of issues related to secrecy around

one's mode of conception. That is, learning of one's conception late in life is often viewed as the adverse to the preferred scenario: learning it as a child<sup>1</sup>. Very few accounts (neither of my interlocutors nor of those I observed online) expressed a desire to shut down donor conception as a praxis as a whole. However, nearly all accounts expressed a disagreement with the praxis of donor anonymity and disputed the notion that the donor conceived person should remain unaware of the nature of his conception (for any time past childhood).

My findings suggest that for donor conceived persons whom attribute trauma to aspects of life related to their mode of conception, it is usually the unknowability of genetic kin that is the central issue. Moreover, as I will show, it is this unknowability – anonymity – of genetic kin that spurs imaginaries of genitor and half-siblings, and that fuels reassessments of self-identity and family. Thus, this thesis' primary focus is on the activation of knowledge about the existence of unknown genetic kin.

To answer the research question, the thesis will explore some of the varied and unpredictable ways donor conceived persons may act and think in the wake of acquiring knowledge of their mode of conception. Moreover, despite variation, I will stress that knowledge of unknown genetic kin, first and foremost, is about self-identity, more than it is about selecting between families and family members or favoring genetic links over "social links" as such. This is not to say that knowledge of a genetic link does not often imply a relationship – it certainly does – and this is precisely why the idea of a donor conceived person reaching out to their genitor is contentious. Moreover, activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown genetic kin may manifest in other ways. If the knowledge is activated explicitly, then, in addition to ideas about identity, ideas about family and heredity may also be confronted. Further, the axiomatic connections between these ideas may also be explicated, negotiated, and employed. Lastly, donor anonymity will be shown to play a central role in certain donor conceived person's lives, particularly in their (re)assessments of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Such sentiments correspond with research done on when best to tell donor conceived persons of their conception-circumstances (E. Blyth, Crawshaw, Frith, & Jones, 2012).

## Chapter 1

### Location, Analytical Perspectives, Methodology

This thesis may be seen as exploring a largely unexplored local dimension of what Marit Melhuus (2007) has called a “new procreative universe” (also see Melhuus, 2012). This is a procreative universe created by astounding scientific breakthroughs in ART – previously called New Reproductive Technologies (NRT) – including Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID), and In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), and “the production of embryos *ex utero*” (Melhuus, 2007, p. 37, emphasis in original). Moreover, these technologies have quickly “become naturalized and incorporated as acceptable reproductive practices to overcome conditions of infertility.” (Melhuus, 2007, p. 39). These practices and technologies produce and circumscribe Melhuus’ procreative universe – a universe producing its own “diasporas of hopes and fears” (Melhuus, 2007, p. 37).

The main scientific approaches when exploring this universe have been on sperm bank/clinic practices, on legislation of these practices, on “recipient parents”, and on persons donating gametes. The individuals born as a result of these new technologies have either been omitted or been considered second-hand only through the accounts of their parents (i.e. Golombok, 2017; Konrad, 2005). Because a significant portion of the persons conceived and born through ART has only recently reached adulthood, their absence should not be blamed entirely on oversight, but should also be understood as having a temporal cause. Still, this thesis presents a hitherto rare exploration of the imaginings, hopes and fears, and actions of donor conceived persons.

In line with Melhuus’ observation that the “relationship between what the imagination produces and what produces the imagination is a dialectical one” (Melhuus, 2007, p. 38), this thesis is also a dialectical account of not only what effects are produced by constitutive knowledge of genetic kin, but also what pre-conditions allow constitutive knowledge to

produce the effects that it does. Thus, this thesis will serve as an account not just of the thoughts and actions of the interlocutors considered throughout, but also of some specific cultural ideas that allow for the production of these thoughts and actions. In other words, this thesis considers its main participants both as producers *and* products of the procreative universe in which they act, and act upon.

## Location

The ethnographic research for this thesis was done in California, USA. Research was carried out primarily in the cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, from January 6<sup>th</sup> to July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018. During the Fall of 2017, I shared a short presentation of my project on several Facebook groups and websites for and about donor conceived persons. I also shared the fact that I was donor conceived, a fact of indispensable value when establishing connections with my interlocutors (more on the significance of my donor conception in establishing the field under “method”). In the project presentation that I posted online, I encouraged anyone interested in participating to contact me by e-mail and to briefly explain their situation and where they lived. Most replies were from persons who lived somewhere in California – mostly San Francisco and Los Angeles. Accordingly, in the hope of recruiting more people, I altered my project presentation to specifically address persons from California. Soon, I had booked a plane ticket for Los Angeles. Moreover, I had established a correspondence with a donor conceived woman who offered to pick me up at the airport and a place to stay for my first week in the city. When I arrived, I had already set up vague dates with about seven donor conceived persons in California. Seeing as some lived in San Francisco, others in San Diego, and everything in between, I decided to acquire a vehicle. After a few days of looking, I purchased a used Toyota ‘94 in which I could easily get around between the cities. When I had purchased my second car, due to the Toyota’s breakdown within a week of me buying it, I was finally mobile.

As of today, there are no reliable numbers of how many people have been born as a result of gamete donations, neither worldwide nor for the US. Typically, estimations rely on dated or questionable sources. It is difficult to assess just how many persons are born as a result of assisted conception, not only because of insufficient follow-ups, underreporting, and wanting record-keeping by clinics and sperm banks (Pi, 2009, p. 387), but also because many sperm



donor inseminations occur outside the jurisdiction of such institutions (e.g. “friend-donations”). Moreover, in the US, there are no federal regulations pertaining to ART. Sperm banks are,

...to a certain extent, self-regulating in that some choose to place limits and rules upon themselves. [... However, as this is] self-regulation overseen by no one, many banks choose to become members of private organizations, which have their own policies. [... Again,] these are institutions that sperm banks may choose to be associated with. [As such, the] guidelines [of the private organizations] are effectively non-binding and merely suggestions. (Pi, 2009, pp. 386-387)

In fact, the US is one of only two UN countries that have not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – a convention that recognizes and stresses the importance of the child’s “right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”<sup>2</sup>. “To know his or her parents” is an ambiguous statement and may be interpreted both as implying the right to know birth or genetic parentage, or the right to know one’s “social parents”. Either way, the lack of federal regulation contributes to much controversy in the American realm of ART. Problems of donor anonymity, of numbers of donations and births per donor, consanguinity, and other, but related, ethical issues were also quite frequently mentioned by my interlocutors.

California houses more than 10 sperm banks and is home to the California Cryobank, one of the world’s largest sperm banks. California Cryobank reports having 549 sperm donors<sup>3</sup> and “350+” egg donors<sup>4</sup> available, exporting samples worldwide. In other words, California is a major player in the global fertility market. Moreover, because of its “current laissez-faire approach to regulation” (Pi, 2009, p. 395), California is source of many different fates that have been produced by the fertility industry. Despite a lack of reliable numbers, certain deductions have

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>, article 7, point 2 (Accessed March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

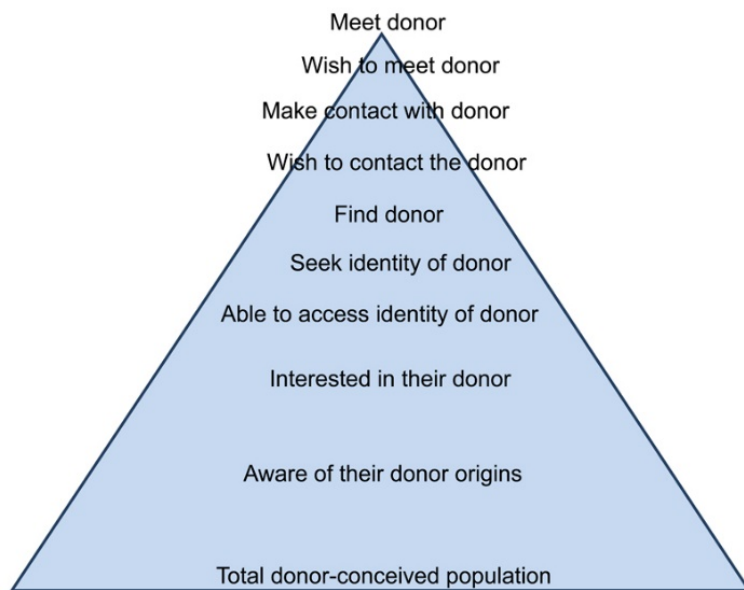
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cryobank.com/search/> (accessed March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cryobank.com/services/egg-donors/> (accessed March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

been made about the proportions of the total donor conceived population, as seen here by Tabitha Freeman:

...only a proportion of the donor-conceived population are aware of their donor origins, of those only a proportion will be interested and able to seek contact with their donor and so on, leading to a very small minority who go on to meet this person. (Freeman, 2015, p. 12)

This idea has been illustrated thus:



1: Illustrative Estimate of the Proportions of the Population of Donor Conceived Persons<sup>5</sup>

This thesis' empirical data is based on the accounts of 19 donor conceived persons in California, USA. Most of the interlocutors are mentioned in this thesis (see appendix A for a list of interlocutors), however I also draw upon data gathered from those left unmentioned. All interlocutors are persons whom are "aware of their donor origins". Out of the 19 participants, only three were males, and only two had known about their donor conception since childhood. Moreover, all of my 19 interlocutors were, at least mildly, "interested in their donor". A smaller proportion had been "able to access identity of [the] donor", and an even smaller number

<sup>5</sup> Figure taken from Freeman (2015, p. 19)

wished “to contact the donor”, and so on. All this is in line with the matryoshka doll-like effect suggested in the figure above. However, there is an interesting insight missing from this figure. Most pressingly, the figure leaves unmentioned one of the most pivotal observations I made during my fieldwork in California – namely, the activation of knowledge.

### Analytical Perspectives

What constitutes kinship depends upon vaguely delimited temporal-sociocultural contexts in which practices and meanings of kinship are to some extent locally particular (see Melhuus, 2012, p. 4). In the case of the West, or Euro-America, there has been no shortage of observations on blood, biological ties, and genetic heredity as crucial characteristics of what constitutes kinship (Becker, 2000; Modell, 1994; Schneider, 1984, p. 84; Strathern, 1992a). In the past few decades, with the rise of ART and biotechnology in general, the permeance of genetics in Western society is understood to be escalating (Finkler, 2017). This is a tendency which has been described as a “medicalization” (Finkler, 2001), or “geneticization” (Lippman, 1993) of society. In turn, such descriptions have been criticized due to their implied passive subjection of personhood and their neglect of individual agency<sup>6</sup> (Carsten, 2007a, p. 407; Novas & Rose, 2000, p. 489).

Observations on the permeance of genetics have also been made with regards to Western identity and sense of self – e.g. that which Melhuus has described as “biologizing discourses of identity” (Melhuus, 2007, p. 43), which, of course, are not isolated from local kinship practices. Importantly, Melhuus stresses the individual, and, specifically, individual imaginations, as responding to- *and* producing the(ir) procreative universe (for a similar take, but on the practice of genetic disease testings, see Novas & Rose, 2000). Elsewhere, the contemporary Western individual has been recognized as one that self-reflexively “structure[s] self-identity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5), one that strives for “completeness” (Carsten, 2007a, p. 407) and regulates and disciplines itself through methods of self-analysis in the pursuit of self-liberation and personal happiness (Brodwin, 2017, p. 78). This self-reflexive self, that “calculates about itself and that acts upon itself to better itself” (Rose, 1996, p. 154) is also reflexive about its body, and about

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<sup>6</sup> For an elaborate critique of “medicalization” and “geneticization”, see Arribas-Ayllon (2016).

its genome, as part of, and contributive in constituting, its identity (Finkler, 2017, pp. 174-175; Rose, 2013, pp. 6-7).

Such self-reflexivity about the role of genes (or DNA) in determining one's identity, was pervasive among my interlocutors in California. In my view, the (imagined) link between the donor conceived person and the unknown genitor is set up by the idea that genes (which are, to different degrees, thought of as determining one's identity) are inherited from one's two genetic parents. As such, and this notion is supported throughout this thesis, the desire for knowledge about one's genitor may be understood as predicated upon a general knowledge of genetic inheritance, and the role of genes in the creation and conception of self. In my estimation, it is this *somatic individual* (Novas & Rose, 2000), this person that reflects about herself in (partly) genetic terms, that is the donor conceived person of California.

This thesis will also explore how anonymity is entangled with activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin. Employing perspectives from Monica Konrad, who did ethnographic research on egg donors and recipient parents, this thesis considers the establishment of "unknown relations", where the donor conceived person creates meaningful relations with anonymous genetic kin. To explore these meaningful anonymous relations, I borrow an analytical term from Konrad, that which she calls *transilience*. Transilience is a state-of-being produced by "setting up" (imagined) relations with anonymous persons (Konrad, 2005, p. 173). These relations are so-called "non-relations" (Konrad, 2005, p. 242), wherefrom one (re)asserts certain aspects of one's reality. Konrad's focus is with egg donors and recipient parents, and she only considers donor conceived persons briefly. However, as Konrad suggests, donor conceived persons may become transilient by "piecing together over time knowledge about [their] genetic origins" (Konrad, 2005, p. 49). Further, I argue that in the case of the donor conceived person, the aspects of reality reconsidered through anonymous relations pertain most notably to one's identity, but also to family relations.

Donor conceived transilient persons have activated knowledge of conception in explicit ways, and with significant emotional intensity at that. And although it was common among my interlocutors, statistics suggest that only a small portion of the total donor conceived

population become what I consider transilient (see figure 1). Yet, transilience is prolific as a case-study because, in answering the question of why transilience occurs, and by studying the effects that transilience engenders, certain conflicts of interests and implicit cultural values are exposed. Moreover, it may reveal ambiguities about what kinship can be. Marshall Sahlins (2013) has stated that kinship is culture – not biology – and that although kinship practice is culture-particular, its characteristic as intersubjective – famously, as a “mutuality of being” – is ubiquitous; it is the defining quality of kinship. Sahlins’ notion of what constitutes kinship (and what does not), namely a “mutuality of being”, has been contested elsewhere (Bloch, 2013), and will be critically explored in this thesis as well, particularly through the establishment of (imagined) relations through anonymity.

Lastly, this thesis also serves as a contribution to the ongoing debates about the ethics and legality of donor anonymity. Many European countries have banned donor anonymity (Graham, Mohr, & Bourne, 2016, p. 208), and recently Norway even ratified a suggestion that obligates parents to inform their donor conceived children of their conception circumstances (Granavolden-plattformen, 2019, p. 55). However, there are still many proponents *for* donor anonymity. Such arguments often focus on the breach of donor’s rights (as argued by Pennings, 2019), resulting donor scarcity, and “fertility tourism”, should anonymous donations become illegal (Pi, 2009). Moreover, Jean-Marie Kunstmann (2011), an M.D. at CECOS<sup>7</sup> in France, has proposed that the suggested ban on donor anonymity is caused by donor conceived persons’ misconceptualization of their origins. Kunstmann suggests that parents should be encouraged to explain to their donor conceived child “both why the donor cannot be in any way involved as a potential paternal image and also how to make sense of the concept of origins not based on any genetic link.” (Kunstmann, 2011, p. 12). In other words, if the child is taught how to conceptualize his origins as non-genetic, problems of donor conception would largely disappear. Many accounts presented in this thesis will work as counterarguments to this suggestion. Moreover, the theoretical contributions (some of them already presented) will

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<sup>7</sup> CECOS (*Centres d'étude et de conservation des œufs et du sperme humains* - Centers for the Study and Preservation of Human Eggs and Sperm) regulate gamete donations in France.

illustrate how genetic meanings pervade many fundamental aspects of (Californian) life already, and the significance of such meanings seem only to increase.

This thesis is, in a sense, an exploration of one small dimension of ART, which again is merely one dimension of biotechnologies. However, because of its emphasis on individuals and what individuals *do* with knowledge of conception and genetic kin, this thesis is also an exploration of the interactive relation between a larger project of “geneticization” and of individual agency. This thesis does not deny that identity and kin are discursively biologized (Melhuus, 2007), but, in line with both Melhuus and Novas and Rose, it maintains that biology and genetics are reflected upon and negotiated, both implicitly and explicitly, by each individual actor. As such, through an exploration of activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin, this thesis considers cultural links between genes, kinship, and identity. Moreover, this thesis illuminates the emotional aspects enmeshed with knowledge of donor conception, and how, especially, knowledge of anonymous kin may produce intense experiences of hopes, joys, fears, and disappointments.

## Methodology

During the fieldwork for this thesis, classical social anthropological participant observation proved challenging for a number of reasons. First of all, how does one *observe empirically* a concept as abstract as activation of knowledge? Presumably, to do so would require an intimate rapport with each interlocutor and a long period of observation where I would be present during everyday family activities and other private goings-on. Even early on in the fieldwork, it seemed implausible I would achieve this. Even though all my interlocutors were happy to meet for an interview, and sometimes even two and three times, my attempts to suggest a “hang-out” usually did not amount to much. My interlocutors often had busy schedules and, I believe, we shared a sense that I was *there for a reason* – that is, as my very presence pronounced my purpose, there was seldom a natural and casual way for us to interact with each other. If we were not to talk about donor conception-related matters, why meet at all? Below, I will elaborate on the methods employed in the face of these obstacles.

*Positioning*

Before continuing, I must take a brief moment to reflect on my position in the field. My warm welcome and my interlocutors' openness and eagerness to share was, I believe, to a significant extent colored by the fact that we were both donor conceived. As Jeanette Edwards has suggested (albeit in observing donor conceived *siblings*), because we "share [...] the fact of donation", we "partake in each other's conception" (2013, p. 291). Knowing and sharing that I am donor conceived has been crucial in establishing a connection with my interlocutors. The sharing of this fact was also a prerequisite for gaining access to certain forums and Facebook groups. The Facebook groups have in turn proved crucial for the continuing recruitment of interlocutors throughout my fieldwork. Furthermore, in sharing the fact of my donor conception and some of my experiences and reflections, I have established a trust and a bond with my interlocutors. My experience of being told of my donor conception at 23 years old has also allowed me to empathize with and relate to my interlocutors who also have found out about their conception post-adolescence.

*Methods of Observation*

I arranged meetings with people whom had responded to my online project presentation posts through Facebook messenger and text messaging. We agreed to meet up for "a conversation or an interview" about their experience of being donor conceived. I conducted several interviews in Los Angeles County and Orange County, and a few in San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, San Diego, and San Francisco. I encouraged those I interviewed to ask their siblings if they would also be willing to meet with me. Sometimes their siblings responded positively, and we conducted an interview, although more often, I did not meet any siblings. The reasons given were often that their sibling(s) were living out-of-state, they were "shy" or "asocial", or they were mostly uninterested in, or "didn't really care" about their donor conception. This last problem, of course, is a major factor playing in on the results of this thesis (more on this below).

The structure of each interview was largely determined by my interlocutor's engagement in the topic, associative digressions, and overall willingness to share. I always encouraged my interlocutors to "think out loud" and I attempted to follow up their answers with a reasonable

degree of inquiry. Although, because of the potential sensitivity of the subject of donor conception, I was often wary not to push too far, even if the interlocutor seemed unaffected by the topic. Each interview usually lasted about one hour, but sometimes two, and a few times three hours. The nature of my questions reflects the open-ended research question I had upon entering my field-work: how and why does it matter that one is donor conceived? As such, the interviews were broad in range and became specific only depending on my interlocutor's answers. In a word, they were structured and semi-structured in-depth interviews, whose quality was largely determined by the dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee. This approach allowed my interlocutor to reflect about various hypothetical situations, about how they think about their genitor, about genetic heredity, about their parents, siblings, donor conceived siblings, about whether or not something changed in their life when or since learning of their conception, about the significance of knowing about their conception, and similar subjects. Moreover, I asked more concrete questions, like: When and how did you learn about your donor conception? When is the best time to tell one's children that they are donor conceived? What do you think about donor anonymity as a practice? Do you want to meet your donor/biological father? Why (not)? Etc.

One great advantage of a prolonged fieldwork compared to single interviews is the possibility of meeting several times. Sometimes I met people once and then, again, a month or two later. In this way, I managed to observe their stance on (hypothetical) events in their lives before the events happened, and after-the-fact (when they had time to reflect on the events). Such events could be identifying, contacting, and meeting one's genitor, or, in other cases, identifying and being rejected by one's genitor, or discovering and contacting one's donor conceived half-siblings. In addition to the advantage of observing-over-time, thus being present during the build-ups to, and in the aftermath of, important life events, I was occasionally able to observe and interact with persons in more informal settings, i.e. when going out for drinks, having dinner, or going for walks (although these situations were also colored by my presence as researcher). Yet, although such observations were valuable to a certain extent, it was still my interviews that yielded the most interesting and prolific data, and what I almost exclusively employ as the ethnographic basis for this thesis. The value of interviews over other methods of



observation is further strengthened by the processual nature of activation of knowledge. Activation of knowledge is a progressive, dynamic, often unpredictable, and sporadic process, and is not something easily observed “in-action”. It is, perhaps, better, or at least more available, observed and explained by the person experiencing – and acting in – this process. This is also true for processes of deanonimization and for persons who become transilient.

All accounts are taken more or less at face value, and I do not attempt to scrutinize psychological or familial circumstances possibly affecting each person’s account. Chapter 3, however, does discuss the question of why, for some people, knowledge of conception (explicitly) becomes a significant aspect of life, whereas for others, it does not. Because I am merely listening to the interlocutor relate her own experience, it is true that I risk missing out on some discrepancies between *what people say* and *what people do*. However, during each conversation and each interview I acquired a sense of my interlocutor’s personality, disposition, and experience. Moreover, I never found any reason to doubt, question, or in any other way disbelieve any of my interlocutor’s accounts. What they shared with me was their personal perception of their circumstances, whether their experience had been emotionally intense or not.

It is also true that there could be some political motivation behind some of my interlocutor’s willingness to participate in this project. The motivation, then, would most notably be to expose their personal account through this thesis with the desire to regulate gamete donations in the US. In other words, the hope was that the account of their suffering would contribute to political change. However, even if, for some interlocutors, this was the case, it does in no way negate or discredit their narratives. Either way, political movements are often engendered by, and otherwise enmeshed with, personal emotional experiences (Collins, 2001). Finally, I stress that I am merely recording accounts of events, and not observing the events actually unfold first-hand, there are some issues of selective memory and of narrative construction. This is true even for the events that took place during my field-work, where I would also only record the narrative of the event post factum.

*Selection Bias*

All interlocutors interviewed for this project are self-recruited. That is, each interlocutor, upon my inquiry, opted to be interviewed about their experience of being donor conceived. Further, all persons whom responded to my online posts were necessarily a member of the forums in which I posted, thus probably having already activated knowledge of donor conception to a considerable degree, and in specific ways. Hence, there is an obvious selection-bias. However, those that I was able to recruit in-field, did not necessarily share a high and explicit degree of activation. At least two, possibly three, of my interlocutors could be considered as only activating knowledge of conception subtly and mildly, both with regards to their identity and their family relationships. It can be argued, however, that the act of meeting with me for an interview is indeed an instance of activating knowledge of conception explicitly – as is my doing this fieldwork and writing this thesis. Still, as will become clear, most of my interlocutors are obviously and explicitly activating knowledge of donor conception and of unknown kin. Thus, this thesis is first and foremost an account of donor conceived persons whom are and have been activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin in explicit and emotional ways. The interlocutors whom only subtly or moderately activate knowledge of donor conception and/or knowledge of unknown kin serve mostly as comparative accounts. However, this is not their only contribution to this thesis. Through their accounts, it is also demonstrated how, even in subtle and non-obvious ways, knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin *is* constitutive knowledge.

Finally, I emphasize that although, because of its selection-bias, this thesis lacks interlocutors whom only very subtly activate knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin, this thesis also misses many accounts of even more intense and radical ways of activating knowledge of conception and unknown kin than those explored here. As such, this thesis should not be regarded as one that only considers the “most severe” outcomes of donor conception, or as one that exclusively explores persons whom activate knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin to the outmost degree.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Through online research and by corresponding with some of my interlocutors before my fieldwork began, I knew that donor conception was a topic that is sometimes controversial and may for some persons be a source of psychological trauma. As such, my approach during my fieldwork has been one of utmost consideration and sensitivity. I found that when discussing donor conception and related topics, my interlocutors' dispositions ranged from largely nonchalant to significantly emotional. Moreover, although I, for other ethical reasons, will not speculate about my interlocutor's explicit dispositions, there is always a chance that even those that seem the most indifferent are merely "covering up", or protecting themselves from vulnerability, or protecting their families. Moreover, I maintain a considerate and sensitive approach in writing the thesis. I do this also when choosing what terms to employ with regards to the donor/biological father and the donor conceived person. For reasons that will be discussed in chapter 2, most of my interlocutors preferred "donor conceived person" as opposed to, for example, "donor child" (although the term "donor conceived" was also, at times, disputed). Moreover, in referencing the genitor, both "donor" and "biological father" are labels that are sometimes contested for their implications. Thus, unless otherwise indicated, I consistently use the term "genitor". This is strictly an analytical term and I have never observed this term employed by my interlocutors, nor on the online forums and groups.

Lastly, all interlocutors have been anonymized in that their names have been changed. Some personal information like occupation and other identifying information like that of a person's genitor's occupation or status has also been altered to a degree that should not pollute the validity of the empirical data presented in this thesis.

### *Structure*

This thesis utilizes three central analytical terms, each the title of a chapter (chapter 2, 3, and 4, respectively). In addition to activation of knowledge (chapter 2), there is *transilience* (chapter 3), and *deanonymization* (chapter 4). Chapter 2 explores in general terms how activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin may be activated. The length of the chapter is a necessary result of exploring the many ways this activation unfolds. Chapter 3 explores anonymous relations through Konrad's term "transilience" and will consider how transilient

persons establish communities through which specific cultural ideas and values are explicated and confronted. Moreover, transilience will be suggested as a kind of liminality – a conceptualization that has implications for how transilience may be cancelled. Moreover, through the analytical lens of transilience, anonymity will be explored as an elicitive force that produces and maintains the hopes and desires of donor conceived persons searching for their genetic kin. This search often leads to what I call “deanonymization”. Deanonymization, which will be discussed in chapter 4, describes, in short, the process of identifying anonymous genetic kin. Through these three chapters this thesis will explore the various ways and degrees to which knowledge of donor conception and unknown genetic kin is activated.

On one level, the chapters may be seen to describe a sequential unfolding of activation of knowledge of conception; from the moment one finds out one is donor conceived, until one meets one’s genitor. Certainly, this is not the most common unfolding of events, not only because, according to some theories (see figure 1), most donor conceived persons do not wish to meet their genitor, but because even among those who do, many obstacles may prevent the desired outcome. In a word, there are many ways of activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin. As such, the quasi-chronological structure of the thesis is an apt approach when exploring some significant ways activation of knowledge of donor conception may play out. Of course, because of this, not all interlocutors’ accounts are relevant for all chapters. For instance, an interlocutor whom does not wish to identify his genitor, will not be relevant for chapter 4 – except, perhaps, as a comparative case. Despite its limits, I believe this thesis covers crucial ground for the donor conceived persons’ possible experiences. However, what is most obviously lacking is, perhaps, an account of the politics produced through, especially, transilience. For instance, through collective imaginaries about the fertility industry as “mass producing” people as “science experiments” that have been “sold and bought” (something sometimes equated to human trafficking, ideas about individual autonomy, the beginning of human life, individual’s inviolability and sovereignty may be employed politically. This is also true for notions about genetic kin and the factuality of genetics in the construction of identity. However, this thesis lays groundwork for further exploration on these topics as well. Lastly, the

appendices include: A) a list of interlocutors mentioned in this thesis along with some personal information, and B) a description of my own experience of processing a commercial DNA test.

## Chapter 2

### Activation of Knowledge

I would be a completely different person, I think, if I wasn't donor conceived – completely! (Laura, 37)

Sometimes, knowledge of donor conception may appear not to have been activated at all. This is especially true when the person in question asserts that being donor conceived is “more of an anecdote, really”. For Paul, a 44-year-old man whom had learned of his donor conception at age 40, this was the case. However, despite his assertion, I learned that Paul had activated knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin in many subtle ways, both in terms of his identity and his family relations – not to mention his 11 donor conceived half-siblings, whom were comprised of “some really nice people”, and some whom Paul “doesn't like”, whom he “can just choose to not have in [his] life”. Obviously, and despite his explicit account, the knowledge that he is donor conceived has affected his life considerably – not only by the inclusion of half-siblings, but also in how he reassesses his relationship with his pater, something I will elaborate on below. Moreover, by his own explicit account, learning he is donor conceived is practically unimportant *and* one of the most significant moments of his life.

This chapter explores some of the more general, varied, and sometimes contradictory ways, of activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin, and how this activation is progressive, sporadic, and sometimes collateral, in its unfolding. Thus, the interlocutors presented here will have activated knowledge of conception to varying degrees, and their emotional disposition towards the topic of donor conception will be diverse. Moreover, this chapter will consider how donor conceived persons, when pondering about their self-identity and family in light of knowledge of donor conception and the existence of unknown kin, make many implicit assumptions (about family, self, and genetic heredity) explicit (Strathern, 1992a, p. 35). This is important, because, in my view, to understand the significance of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin one must understand what it is that is being affected by such knowledge, and the ideas that such knowledge perturbs. Finally, a section of this chapter

is dedicated to exploring the process of online DNA testing. DNA testing was a crucial aspect in the lives of many of my interlocutors, as the results of a DNA test potentially reveals the identity of hitherto unknown genetic kin.

By the end of this chapter I hope to have illustrated how identity and family relations are both affecting and affected by knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin. I also wish to stress that to understand the impact of constitutive knowledge of donor conception and the incentive to search for – and whether to activate and maintain relationships with – genetic kin, it is crucial to understand the cultural link between genetic heredity and identity, and the axiomatic significance of knowledge of genetic kin – without neglecting the importance of interpersonal affinity. Moreover, by exploring more generally the process of activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin, this chapter will lay a theoretical and empirical foundation for chapters 3 and 4. To introduce the process of activation of knowledge, I begin by exploring some of my main interlocutors' first reactions and thoughts in the wake of learning of their donor conception, an instance that is also highly diverse.

### Learning of Donor Conception

Kimberly, a 37-year-old woman whom at 35 years old was informed of the circumstances of her conception by her mother, related that the effects were immediate and validating. “It was like a missing piece... like ten thousand pieces just fitting together and the picture just became clear”. Kimberly had struggled with a lingering sense of her father being “emotionally distant” and was acutely aware of his much closer relationship with his other daughter – Kimberly’s older sister – to whom, Kimberly would learn, he was genitor. The difference and distance between Kimberly and her pater were the reasons Kimberly’s mother chose to tell her; to help Kimberly make sense of the tension between herself and her pater. For many of the same reasons, Naomi was also told of her donor conception by her mother, when she was 23 years old. She was experiencing a “strained relationship” with her “estranged” dad, and in an attempt to ameliorate this feeling, her mother told her about her conception-circumstances. When I asked her how she felt about her parents keeping her donor conception a secret, she replied: “I don’t agree with that. I think they could have told me when I was young; you can explain that [the

fact that one is donor conceived] to a kid. If you do that, then there's no big reveal, like; 'I don't know where I come from, or who I am'."

For Kimberly and Naomi, knowledge of donor conception had immediate effects in several ways. As their mothers had believed, the knowledge allowed them to make sense of feeling "different", or "distant" from their pater. Knowledge of donor conception was immediately activated to re-consider their pater's "emotional distance", while simultaneously sparking an imaginary of unknown biological kin. Kimberly, for instance, upon her mother's revelation, immediately asked: "Okay, then who is my biological father?". Moreover, although these effects were immediate, it is not to say that the ways of activating this knowledge did not evolve and change over the following years. The information-turned-knowledge of conception and unknown kin, and, following Strathern: "knowledge [...] about identity" (Strathern, 1999, p. 75), may lie "unused", unactivated, un-acted upon or with, for any stretches of time, and may thus lessen or increase as a significant component in the individual's life. Moreover, knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin may be activated in many or few aspects of life at any given time.

I introduce Madeleine, a 41-year-old woman, whom was told of her donor conception at age 32 by her embittered stepdad. Her stepdad had recently divorced Madeleine's mother without receiving the financial compensation he had wished for – even when threatening to "spill family secrets", something he proceeded to do. The night following the divorce, Madeleine's now ex-stepdad called her and told her of her donor conception. Her mother had shared this information with him many years ago but sworn him not to tell Madeleine and her siblings. Upon hearing the news, Madeleine immediately called her mother, who at the time, coincidentally, was visiting her other daughter, Madeleine's sister Macy, living just 10 minutes away. "That's perfect! Don't go anywhere, I'll be over in a minute... we need to talk!" Madeleine hung up the phone, jumped in her car, and drove to her sister's apartment.

So, I went over to my sister's apartment, and said: "Mom, we need to talk! ... I just had an interesting conversation with [my stepdad], is there anything you wanna tell me?"

And she got really, really still, and I knew! Like, I knew. And she's like: "What did he tell



you?”, and I said, “Well, he told me this funny story about how dad’s not my dad”, and she looked at me for a second and she said: “Well, that’s true”, and I went (Madeleine gasps theatrically), and then I started – okay, it was totally inappropriate – and then I started laughing hysterically, I couldn’t stop laughing. (Madeleine, 41)

Madeleine’s laughing caught her sister Macy’s attention, prompting her to enter the living room where Madeleine and their mother were having their conversation.

...my sister came in from the other room, and she was like: “What is going on in here?”, and I said: “Oh, this is really funny! Dad is not my dad!”, and she looked at my mom and goes: “MOTHER!” (Madeleine gasps incredulously, imitating her sister’s reaction), and I said: “Well, it gets better! He’s not yours either!” and I couldn’t – that was like the worst thing ever that I... I, I was just in shock, and she didn’t – she was like: “MOTHER!” (imitates sister again). (Madeleine, 41)

Madeleine’s reaction to learning about her donor conception inadvertently caused her sister Macy<sup>8</sup> to learn about her own donor conception as well. Moreover, up until the time Madeleine completed her DNA test (more on this below), Madeleine’s mother believed, on the clinic’s word, that her children had all been conceived using the same donor. However, as it turned out, to their shared surprise, Madeleine, Macy, and their brother, had all been conceived using different donors<sup>9</sup>. Hence, gaining knowledge of donor conception may have collateral effects; that is, it may affect more persons than just the one whose conception is in focus. Indeed, the movements of constitutive knowledge is a significant aspect of activating knowledge of donor conception. If one learns of one’s donor conception through a DNA test, (how) does one tell

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<sup>8</sup> I did not get a chance to meet or speak with Macy. Her reactions are exclusively portrayed through her sister Madeleine. Their brother lives out-of-state.

<sup>9</sup> I often heard accounts of the unethical practices of clinicians. For example, numerous accounts described instances where a recipient parent’s doctor had deceitfully used his own sperm to inseminate his patient. This is an act that is often only revealed upon a completed DNA test and genealogical research.

one's siblings? Does one confront one's parents with the knowledge? Does one contact one's genitor? And, does one contact strangers with whom one shares DNA and in doing so possibly informing them of their own donor conception? I will explore some of these questions throughout this chapter and chapter 4. For now, I wish to continue exploring the process and effects of discovering facts about one's conception.

Madeleine recalls that once she had stopped laughing and had sat down with her mother: "... a lot of questions just kept coming up... pieces of my life started dropping out that I thought I had nailed down... and then they weren't replaced with something new." It is worth appreciating the immediacy with which information of conception transforms into constitutive knowledge. "Pieces" begin "dropping out" or "fitting together", tears may spill, laughter may ring, and questions of identity and belonging ("I don't know where I come from, or who I am") may arise. Another aspect to note here, is the idea that the absence of a genetic link may explain (and assuage the pain of experiencing) a lack of emotional and relational connection between parent and child. These three examples illustrate some ways one might learn of one's conception and show some *immediate activation* of this knowledge.

Activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin is, however, progressive and unpredictable. For Kimberly, upon learning the man she thought was her genitor was not, questions about his identity arose immediately. For Julie, a 33-year-old woman raised by a single mother, this same question ("who is my biological father?") took more than a decade to crystallize. Julie was told of her conception-circumstances at age 17. Until then she had believed, on her mother's word, that her father had died before she was born, and that he had been her mother's husband. During my fieldwork she lived in a small community with her maternal family close-by. She related that she was feeling disconnected and different from all of them, and that she was longing for someone to connect with:

The older I get, the more [the fact that I am donor conceived] matters, [...] I've been [like] a dormant volcano all my life, and now I've erupted. The past years I've been

eruptive [and] I think the fact that I'm proximate to my mother's family pushed me into finding my father's family. (Julie, 33, shortened for clarity)

Having been raised by a single mother and "never fit in" with her maternal family, Julie now finds herself in a situation that makes her "eruptive". This state incentivizes her search for her unknown paternal kin, hoping to find someone more like herself. It is implied that shared genetic material potentially, or probably, constitutes similar personality traits. I also understand the comparison of herself to a dormant volcano eventually erupting suggestive of some repressed or un-activated knowledge. Further, in my estimation, a central dissimilarity between Julie and Kimberly's respective circumstances is that Julie always knew that she did not know her biological father: as she imparts: "[...] my father was always a mystery man... (Comparing herself, then, to other donor conceived persons, she continues) I think it would be worse if I found out that my dad [I grew up with] wasn't my biological father. That would be a greater shock, but then at least I would have had a father figure."

The realization, thus, that her genitor had been a donor, instead of her mother's deceased husband, did not impact his status as "a mystery man". However, what is new is the possibility that her genitor is now alive, identifiable, and contactable. Comparatively, in Kimberly's case, the "mystery man" was *created* upon her mother's revelation. The notion of the "mystery man": the anonymous donor, his effects on the donor conceived person's life and his deanonymization, are topics I will explore further in chapter 3 and 4. What is worth appreciating here, is that although all interlocutors activated knowledge of donor conception to at least some degree, *how* it was activated is a complex question, and one with many answers; the same is true for the temporality of activation. For some persons, the effects of constitutive knowledge are immediate, prompting curiosity and identity perturbation. For others, it is momentarily insignificant but stays lingering, like, as Julie suggested, "a dormant volcano".

Moreover, the process of activation of knowledge is often ambiguous. Despite her immediate activation, Kimberly also reports that the knowledge of her donor conception took "a really long time to sink in". Kimberly had to constantly remind herself for several months that "[her]

dad is not [her] dad". Moreover, after receiving her DNA test results, she had to remind herself that "[she's] Jewish". Similarly, Madeleine recounts:

When I first found out [that I was donor conceived] that was like all I thought about for a while. You know, like, it would just be weird, at random times [I would think]: "Oh yeah! My dad's not my dad, my dad's not my dad, my dad's not my dad", you know? But after a while you don't think about it – until something dogs your memory about it.

(Madeleine, 41)

Finding out what it means to be donor conceived can be a continuous process. And while this process can be postponed, "lay dormant", or never be consciously initiated at all, other persons may explicitly and consciously activate the knowledge in order to determine its significance in their lives:

It's weird to think back on the initial thoughts that I remember, feeling this overwhelming sense of self-acceptance [...] and at the same time thinking: "Oh, wow, maybe I'm overanalyzing this" (Kimberly laughs). But, really, it was... validating. In the sense that I was right, and I was right about being different, and it explained this mathematical equation that mom plus dad equals me that I could never quite square... knowing that there is another variable in that equations is just... yeah. If that makes sense.... (Kimberly, 37)

Through new knowledge of donor conception, Kimberly explains her "feeling different than", and "not quite fitting into", her family. However, her analysis does not go without her questioning her analytical approach. Naomi had similar concerns:

I've never felt connected with my dad. Is that how people who are adopted feel? That they're missing that connection from both parents? Or do they just not know; because, I

had that really strong connection with my mom, but not with my dad. And when I found out, it was like: “Wow, maybe that makes sense now!”, but does it? Because I’m very analytical, so, I overthink everything. (Naomi, 35)

Kimberly and Naomi are both explicitly negotiating the terms of new knowledge of donor conception. The observation that they might be “overanalyzing” or “overthinking” implies that it is possible to *not* overanalyze/think. Thus, I reintroduce the account of Paul, whom out of all my interlocutors was the most (explicitly) indifferent about being donor conceived. When Paul was 40, he found out about his donor conception by processing an online DNA test out of general curiosity about his ancestry, discovering then that he had “matched” with a half-sibling (I will elaborate on the process of “matching” below). Now, at 44, he imparts that once he had confirmed he was donor conceived with his mother the following week, he was “very shocked, but not angry”, and was “more excited”, thinking: “*What does this mean? What are the implications?*”. Paul has since concluded that knowledge of donor conception does not affect his life significantly. He does not give it much thought and he spends no time contemplating what it means to be donor conceived and whether he should attempt to contact his genitor. Although this chapter illustrates how Paul *has* reconsidered his relationship with his pater and some aspects of his identity, I maintain that Paul has acquiesced with new knowledge of conception unperturbedly, and that he is an example of someone only subtly activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin.

Thus far, I hope to have presented some of the more immediate and varied ways constitutive knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin may be activated. I also hope to have demonstrated some of the ambiguities and temporalities entailed in the process of activation. Before moving on to further explore how identity and family relationships are affected by such knowledge, I need to elucidate on the process of DNA testing and “matching”. These were, and are, central aspects in the lives of my interlocutors searching for siblings and their genitor. It is also for some, like Paul, the catalyst for gaining knowledge of donor conception.

## Genetic Testing

For persons aware of their donor conception, DNA testing is often done in the hope of “matching” with genitor or half-siblings, or cousins that might connect one to the genitor. For some, however, the goal itself is the discovery of half-siblings or their ethnic origins. Either way, DNA testing is a significant tool in the process of deanonymizing genitor and/or genetic half-siblings, and for “learning about self”. DNA kits are ordered online ranging between 50 to 100 US dollars, sometimes a little more, depending on the current offer, and type of test. When on offer, it is often considered wise to buy more than one, as having a parent do a test might help determine which are paternal matches, and which are maternal, thus making the search for the genitor easier<sup>10</sup>. On [wearedonorconceived.com](http://wearedonorconceived.com), a popular website for resources and information for donor conceived persons, there is a step-by-step walkthrough of what to do if you “just found out you’re donor conceived”. Step 5, the last step, is “Take a DNA test”:

Right now you might be looking for answers to questions like “who am I?” and “where did I come from?” Fortunately, you can answer some of these questions with a DNA test from 23andMe or AncestryDNA. Both options require a saliva sample to be sent to their lab for processing (by mail). Results can take several weeks, and may surprise you!

Many donor conceived persons also use DNA tests to seek out family members (especially half siblings). Some discover a match right away, others don’t. A good way to approach DNA testing is to focus on getting information about yourself, while being aware that someday, you might have a match.

[...]

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<sup>10</sup> Although both males and females inherit mitochondrial DNA from their genitrix (allowing the tracing of the maternal line through a DNA test), only males inherit the Y-chromosome from their genitor, thus also allowing for a direct tracing of the paternal family line. Females who wish to trace their paternal line may ask a male genetic family member to complete a DNA test for assistance.

Discovering you are donor conceived is a deeply personal, life-changing event. As much as you can, be prepared to experience a spectrum of different emotions— positive, negative, and everything in between, often at the same time. Let the experience unfold, learn as much from it as you can, and know that you are not alone. Not even close.

(06.12.2018)<sup>11</sup>

This excerpt echoes some of the sentiments expressed by my interlocutors, notably “questions like “who am I?” and “where did I come from?”. Additionally, I suggest that the perspective presented in the excerpt above is part of a discursive reproduction of ideas and values (that heredity implies identity), particularly enacted through the participation in online communities (a point elaborated in chapter 3). Further, the excerpt echoes many points made by Kaja Finkler in her elaboration on the implications of personalized DNA testing, again, particularly the observation that DNA tests provide information about self (Finkler, 2017, p. 160). My focus here is on what is (hoped to be) produced by donor conceived persons processing DNA tests with the desire of identifying genetic kin. That is, what is the incentive to deanonymize genetic kin at all? And what could the results of identification entail? Because, if, as Carsten notes, “...kinship knowledge, by itself, does not create kinship” (2007a, p. 422), then what is it that is created when “seeking out [and finding] family members”? In providing an answer to this question, I find it useful to include Konrad’s account on how persons may activate “irrelational kinship-links” (Konrad, 2005, p. 118) or “imagined links” (Konrad, 2005, p. 129) of kinship. Because, as I will show, persons *do* sometimes activate knowledge of these genetic links, and through the knowledge establish (imagined) relationships and reconsider their identity and family relationships, even when the genetic kin is (still) completely anonymous.

I suggest that this “imagined link” may challenge Sahlins’ notion of a “mutuality of being” (2013) as the defining quality of kinship. After all, what is mutual – “intersubjective” (Sahlins, 2013, p. 20) – about this kind of kinship? The “relation” established is, as Konrad notes, an

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from <https://www.wearedonorconceived.com/homepage-featured-article/donor-conceived-what-do-to/>

“imagined or known ‘half-known’” (2005, p. 173); at best a one-sided imaginary of a mutuality of being. For Sahlins then, this “irrelation” would not constitute *kinship* until it has become an intersubjective relationship, where both parts “participate intrinsically in each other’s existence” (Sahlins, 2013, p. xi). Some of my interlocutors would agree with this idea (that persons whom they find online through DNA matches do not “qualify” as kin), however, others would not. Whether or not heredity constitutes “kinship” – and this is one of Finkler’s observations – it nonetheless seems to inform identity (Finkler, 2017, p. 167). The individual – the somatic individual (Novas & Rose, 2000) – is made up of its inherited genes, prompting an interesting observation and a following question: when heredity is personalized, meaning it provides information about self, *must* it also provide information about kinship? Again, the answer is manifold. For some, genetic information speaks as much about self as it does about family, whilst for others, it seems, it is all about self.

Below, I show how “matching” with DNA relatives work, what matching may entail and what hopes and fears it may evoke. Moreover, as I was not there to observe any of my interlocutors actually complete a DNA test, the practical description of ordering a “DNA-kit” is based on my own experience (see appendix B). Websites that are often used for DNA testing are Ancestry.com, FamilytreeDNA.com, Myheritage.com, GEDmatch.com, and 23andMe.com – the latter, in addition to “matching” genetic kin and providing information about ancestral origins, also provides medical information. Importantly, as DNA test results are dependent upon who and how many people have uploaded their DNA to each respective database, each site produces different matches and varying ethnicity estimations. This asynchronicity is overall attributed to the dependence upon different DNA databases (Krimsky & Johnston, 2017, p. 6)<sup>12</sup>.

### “Matching”

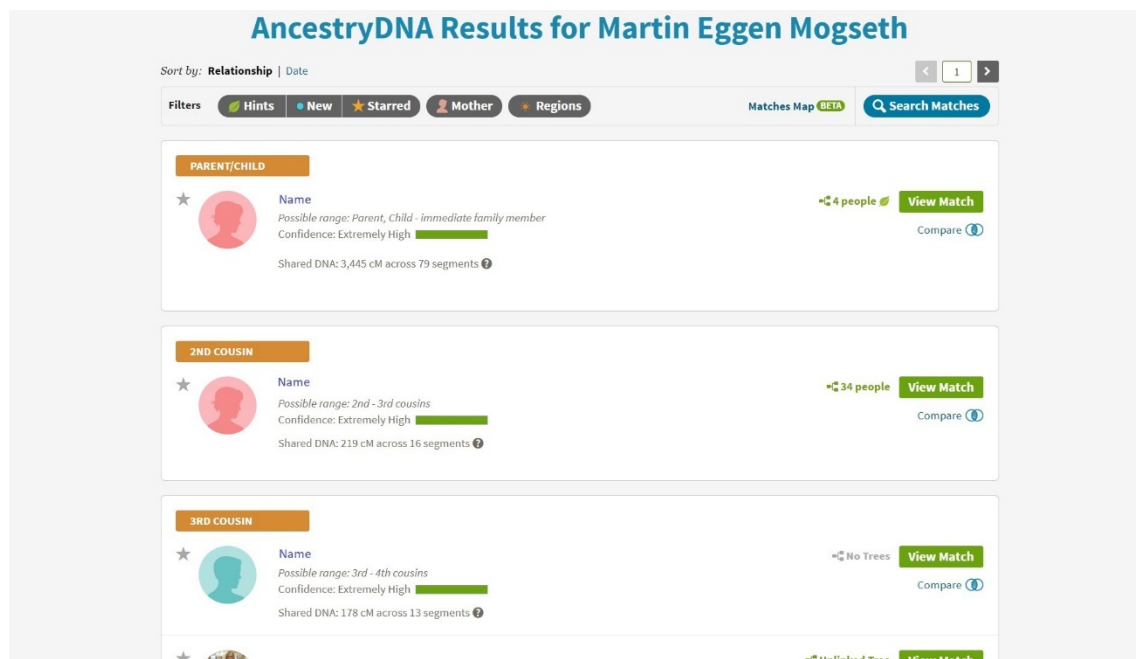
If one has ordered and completed a DNA test with the purpose of inquiring about unknown genetic kin, commonly, the most interesting section is “DNA Matches”. This section is a list of

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<sup>12</sup> The accuracy of an “ethnicity estimate” through a personalized genetic test is overall questionable as “even the best databases reflect a woefully incomplete sampling of human genetic diversity, and this has important consequences for ancestry inference.” (“American Society of Human Genetics. Ancestry Testing Statement, November 13, 2008)



users that have also tested with Ancestry.com, that likely are genetic relatives. The closer the relationship, the higher the guarantee that any two persons are actually genetically related. For example, my mother<sup>13</sup> appeared on my list of matches as a match under the banner: “Parent/Child”; Ancestry.com’s confidence in this being the nature of the relationship is “Extremely High” (see figure 2). The less DNA two persons reportedly share, the more obscure the relationship becomes, until users merely appear under the banner: “Distant Cousin”, with decreasing reported confidence (see figure 3).



2: DNA Matches – Most Proximate Matches, Ancestry.com<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In easing the task of separating paternal from maternal matches I asked my mother to do a DNA test on Ancestry.com.

<sup>14</sup> Screenshot and cropped from my Ancestry.com DNA match results. For privacy reasons, I have replaced the user’s legal name or pseudonym-of-choice with “Name”. This is also true for Figure 3.

The screenshot displays the AncestryDNA interface for Martin Eggen Mogseth. At the top, the title reads "AncestryDNA Results for Martin Eggen Mogseth". Below the title, there are navigation options: "Sort by: Relationship | Date" and a page indicator showing "30" matches. A filter bar includes "Hints", "New", "Starred", "Mother", and "Regions". A "Matches Map (BETA)" and "Search Matches" button are also visible.

The main content area is titled "DISTANT COUSIN" and lists several matches. Each match entry includes a star icon, a profile picture placeholder, the name "Name", a "Possible range: 5th - 8th cousins" label, a "Confidence: Moderate" indicator with a green progress bar, and "Shared DNA" information. The matches are as follows:

- Match 1: 82 people, View Match, Compare
- Match 2: No Trees, View Match, Compare
- Match 3: 3 people, View Match, Compare
- Match 4: 1 people, View Match, Compare
- Match 5: Unlinked Tree, View Match

### 3: DNA Matches – Distant Cousins, Ancestry.com

The disappointment of not discovering immediate genetic kin upon accessing one's DNA results is a recurrent sentiment expressed in the Facebook groups for donor conceived persons. Posts expressing such sentiments are commonly greeted with sympathy, and many members confide having been in a similar situation earlier, until one day – they finally matched with a close genetic relative. For Madeleine, for example, it took nearly a decade from her first accessing her DNA results until a 1<sup>st</sup> cousin match suddenly appeared, allowing her to identify her genitor through this user's family tree. Sometimes the disappointed person may be advised to hire a "DNA detective", a genealogist who has access to and understands historical archives and knows how to compare and extract information from family trees. Commonly though, there is nothing to do but to "wait for a better match".

Some of my interlocutors reported building their own family trees, drawing on their matches' information. This is an arduous and complicated process requiring much resources in terms of time, well-being, and money. Naomi, during our second talk, revealed that she, since our previous meeting a month earlier, had received her results from Ancestry.com. She relates:

Yeah... I don't know. I'll figure it out... like, I've been working... a lot on trying to find – you know, trying to triangulate from one of my matches. She comes up as a fourth cousin but she has a tree, and then she's a match to that guy, who's supposed to be my third cousin; so I was trying to find his surname in her tree, you know, somewhere, and I finally – I had a breakthrough, but then, I'm confused about where I fit into that tree, like... and then I'm stuck, like, I can't go further, there's no more Ancestry results to research, and I'm, I'm just like: "I've spent so many hours in the past two weeks working on that, that I feel like this is just a waste of time"... you know; I don't have a close match, maybe I should just wait. (Naomi, 35)

The piecing together of separate family trees attempting to figure out where one "fits" can be discouraging. Thus, many persons give up on this research and resort to waiting for new matches. Many DNA database sites offer, and set as default, a notification system where, whenever a new match is made, an e-mail is received, reading something like: "Hey, you've got a new match on Ancestry.com!", meaning someone sharing your DNA has uploaded and processed a sample of their genetic material. Often with this notification arises expectations of a close match that either is – or will reveal something about – siblings or the genitor. Thus, some of my interlocutors related turning off this function as this "new match"-notification was almost always merely a disappointing distant cousin.

As observed by Finkler (2017, p. 157), personalized genetic testing is, as also apparent on 23andMe.com<sup>15</sup> and Ancestry.com<sup>16</sup>, supposed to empower individuals by providing them with tools to acquire self-knowledge. However, as Carsten, drawing on Strathern (1999, p. 80), observed, "...when the information that is uncovered has constitutive effects for the individuals concerned, then it is likely that [the information] will constrain choices for those individuals as

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<sup>15</sup> <https://blog.23andme.com/uncategorized/empower-the-people/> (15.12.18)

<sup>16</sup> <https://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2018/07/31/embracing-privacy-best-practices-for-the-industry/> (15.12.18)

much as enlarging them” (Carsten, 2007a, pp. 410-411). In the case of donor conceived persons searching for genetic kin, this means that persons may be launched on trajectories of action periodically “[taking] over their lives”, “each [action] apparently automatically leading to the next” (Carsten, 2007a, pp. 413-414). Naomi relates:

...sometimes I’ll binge, and I’ll be on the website like, every night after work, for like three days straight until 11PM, doing research like: “Where do I fit in!?” Like, “Am I related to that guy!?” or, like, Google it or look at obituaries, and like, being really into it, and then I’m like: “Oh, I’m so over this! I need to do something else”, right? It’s like you get obsessed with it for a little bit. (Naomi, 35)

For Naomi this experience was stressful, keeping her up late at night, distracting her from her career and her duties as wife and mother. Marie, who contacted me during my fieldwork after having read my project presentation online, had a different experience. However, her comparison of genealogical research to a video game is also illuminative of Carsten’s point about “trajectories of action”:

It’s really fun, it’s like... it’s a total nerd’s paradise, because... it’s kind of like a video game: you go up a level and then you find some information and then you unlock something and then you can do all this other stuff! And it’s just; it’s fun! And then you add the genetic component on top of that, and all the math and spreadsheets that are involved and trying to figure out how all the centimorgans<sup>17</sup> map on to the different types of relationships and whatever, it’s kind of... it’s fun! (Marie, 37)

The experience of becoming consumed by or obsessed with genealogical research is varied. For some it is fun, while for others, it is arduous. Many factors weigh in on determining the

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<sup>17</sup> In short, a centimorgan is a unit for measuring the length of DNA segments on chromosomes. The more DNA segments shared, the closer the relation.

experience of the person undertaking such research. Factors such as the ease with which progression is accomplished, the researching person's practical and emotional support, and his or her skill-level and general knowledge about genealogy and logical and digital systems are all involved. Making progress is exciting, while being stuck is not. Marie had a continuous and gradual sense of progress in her research. She also had the support and help of her genealogically interested husband. Other persons, like Naomi shown in the example above, and Rachel, and Laura, have found themselves hitting a wall, and are now waiting for a new lead in their search. I will return to some of these persons' searches for genetic kin in chapters 3 and 4.

Genetic information gained through DNA testing, whether it is explicitly about kin or about self, brings with it an array of related information, some which could also be considered constitutive knowledge. Family histories of cancer or mental illness might surface, having immediate effect on the person concerned. Madeleine has begun wearing sunblock because of the frequent skin cancer occurrence on her newly discovered paternal side, whereas Jessica now does daily mental exercises to prevent Alzheimer's (see Rose, 2013, pp. 6-7) informed by the health section on 23andMe.com. Moreover, in light of her learning of her biological father's mental illness, Rachel is reconsidering her emotional swings related to her menstrual cycle, while joking that she's "waiting for [her mental] breakdown".

In addition to being a means of finding unknown genetic kin and providing more constitutive knowledge, testing one's DNA online can also be a catalyst for gaining constitutive knowledge of donor conception. One of my interlocutors, Molly, a 27-year-old woman whom, because she and her husband were planning on having children soon, reports doing a DNA test with 23andMe because she "wanted to see the health stuff". Instead, she relates, she "found out [she's] Jewish!". Molly continues:

I [then] pulled up the relative-finder to see if I could find a cousin or something, and I found three half-siblings instead. And I'd never heard of them before. And one of them messaged me, and she was like: "You're my half-sister! It's great to meet you." And I was like: "I don't think we're half-sisters." (Molly, 27)

When Molly confronted her mother with her discovery, Molly reports: “[my mother] would just not answer, evade the question, or say something like: ‘Your dad is your father.’ Like, it wasn’t a concrete answer, it was just: ‘He’s definitely your dad.’ But she would not address the biology of it.” This went on for “a really awful month” where Molly reports not knowing whether to “get attached to these new people or not”, and whether or not she should “get to know the donor”<sup>18</sup>. This dilemma occurred because, as I will show, the knowledge of a genetic link between two unfamiliar persons often works as the prerequisite for establishing a relationship. When the genetic link is disproved, the relation is often discontinued.

The completion of a DNA test sometimes initiates the discovery of donor conception, either through unexpected results prompting ego to confront her parents, or by the parents telling ego upon learning that ego is waiting for DNA test results. For others, it is the main tool for deanonymizing unknown genetic kin. Either way, if one discovers unknown genetic kin, one issue arising is one of determining what kind of relationship is to be established, and how to conceptualize the newly discovered person with whom one shares DNA.

### Terminology

He’s not an anonymous donor, he’s my biological father. (Kimberly, 37)

Determining what to call unknown or newly found anonymous genetic kin is often complicated. Ideas about family, about dictionary definitions of family-terms, about normative relationships and their implications, and about intimacy and the significance of genetic heredity, come into conflict. Some will stress the genetic link and insist on applying familiar terms to even anonymous persons, while others will emphasize the experience of being raised by someone, thus considering “kin” something established over time. Meanwhile, some interlocutors found the term “donor” to be a misnomer. This last problem comes in two forms. The first is the idea that the genitor is not *really* a donor “because he is paid”, and donations, per definition, are not (conventionally) reciprocated (see Konrad, 2005, for a discussion on gamete donations and reciprocity). This also relates to the phrasing “my donor”, because, as Kimberly notes, “he was

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<sup>18</sup> After about a month, her mother finally, albeit reluctantly, confirmed that Molly was donor conceived.

my mother's donor", and not hers. The second form is relational, emphasizing the link between ego and genitor, believing then that the term "donor" bagatellizes the genitor's role in the eventual offspring's life. Laura elaborates:

I actually think that it's detrimental to call people who donate their DNA just "donors", because we don't really accept the full impact of what that is. It's not just jacking off into a cup; it's creating a human life. 50% of that life is created from your DNA, and there should be more thought put into that process. (Laura, 37)

This emphasis on genetic links also informs a reconsideration of the term "donor conception". Alternatives are frequently suggested in the Facebook groups as well as by a few of my interlocutors. These alternatives include: "stranger conception", "transactional conception", and "pre-conception adoption". These alternatives are suggested and employed because the term "donor conception" is sometimes understood as an "industry-term" that trivializes the genitor as merely a donor, and hides or neglects the significance of, and otherwise dehumanizes, the (real or imagined) relation between ego and his genetic siblings and genitor. Moreover, "pre-conception adoption" is similar to "antenatal adoption", a term Feuillet-Liger observed being transferred with increased frequency from the realm of adoption to also describe embryo donations (Feuillet-Liger, 2011, p. 46). However, "pre-conception adoption" (along with the other terms mentioned above) is also employed in cases where only the sperm is provided externally.

A related problem, one sometimes the cause of both amusement and uneasiness among my interlocutors, is what to label all the appearing dad-figures. Not only is "the donor" a problematic term for reasons discussed above, but when insisting on naming the genitor "biological father", the pater is sometimes framed as the "social dad", or "legal dad". In a culture where biology is emphasized both in terms of identity *and* what is considered family (Becker, 2000, pp. 33, 64; Konrad, 2005, p. 242; Modell, 1994, p. 2), such terminology risks understating the experienced relationship. Indeed, when "social dad" was employed by my

interlocutors, they all stressed they were only doing so to clearly distinguish who they were referring to. As Lily stated: “I hate that term, by the way... I’m just using it for clarification.”

Some interlocutors, like Madeleine, juggle several dad-terms. She has a “social dad” (now deceased), an “ex-stepdad”, and a “bio-dad”. “Bio-dad”, of course, is short for biological dad- or father, otherwise labeled “the donor”, and less often, “donor dude” and “sperm dude”. For persons opting to search for and contact their genitor, terminology often changes from the quite abstract term “donor”, to the more familiar “biological father” or even “dad”, or, if known, his given name. Julie, who was raised by a single mother, recalls:

I was talking to my mother, I talk to my mom a lot, and... I was talking to her about resemblance; like, you’re supposed to take 50% of your DNA from your mother and 50% from your father... but I think I have 20% from my mother and 80% from my father, both physically and mentally. And I said to my mother: “I’m a lot like my dad”, and we both kind of froze... I’ve never called anyone “dad” before. (Julie, 34)

For Julie, no one has ever had the role of father. In comparison, Madeleine’s father passed away when she was 18, and just after I met her for the first time in January, she contacted her genitor and was warmly welcomed. On our second meeting, in February, she reflects on their novel relationship:

I mean, I don’t need like, a “daddy” kind-of-a-thing, but it’s really cool to just have... a dad! It’s nice. Just in terms of having that relationship as an adult. I mean, I had that as a child with my dad that raised me, so I had it... he didn’t live with us, but... and then I had my step-dad who did live with us, but he wasn’t a very nice person, so that wasn’t necessarily a positive experience. So, this is, so far, much more positive than either of the other experiences I’ve had (Madeleine chuckles). I’ve had way more experiences with having fathers than most people have. (Madeleine, 41)



In my first meeting with Madeleine, before she had been in touch with her genitor, she firmly stated that “...if I talk about my *dad*, I mean my dad that I grew up with. So [in referencing the genitor] I’ll either say *my biological father*, or I’ll say *my donor*... Although, now that I have a name, I can just say ‘Matthew’.” However, by our second meeting, Madeleine had spoken with her genitor “three or four times” by phone, and as a result the firm approach to family-terms had, without explanation on Madeleine’s part, changed. Her genitor was now consistently labeled “dad”. Thus, although the intention of deanonymizing genitor may be to learn about self, and not to “look for a new dad”, the result, depending on the interpersonal affiliation experienced by the two parties, may differ.

One more observation on terminology: “Yeah, well. Because people think of [donor conceived persons] as babies, and just think of babies, you know? They don’t think of adults.” (Kimberly, 37). Here, Kimberly is referencing the fertility industry’s- and recipient parents’ reliable deployment of the term “child”. She, along with others I have observed on the Facebook forums, proposes a change from referring to the potential offspring of a donation as “child” to “person”. Recipient parents were sometimes accused of neglecting the prospect that their donor conceived child would grow up to be “a person” who might someday be curious about his or her genetic background. Adult donor conceived persons advocating for this change maintain that it is detrimental to view donor conception as merely “a means to provide a child”, and what should be emphasized instead is the fact that the potential child will someday grow to be an adult. The choice of terminology plays a central role in promoting this view.

I take this as an argument against a marginalization of the autonomous individual. In the process of “having a child by sperm donation”, the child, I understand, is viewed by advocating donor conceived persons as objectified, and its future as an autonomous person neglected or ignored. Marilyn Strathern states that “[w]hen [...] making the implicit explicit, then what was once taken for granted becomes an object of promotion, and less the cultural certainty it was.” (1992a, p. 35). Through the emphasis on *person* above *child*, and on *biological father* above *donor*, and through the reconsiderations of the term *donor conceived*, there is an explicit effort to autonomize self and to underscore the significance of the genetic link between persons, whether this link is important for self-identity or for potential relations. The role of autonomy,

or *agency*, in the act of deanonymizing genitor and genetic half-siblings will be further discussed in chapter 3.

### Not Just DNA

... it's not "*just DNA*" – it's *DNA!* It's what connects us to each other, it's what makes us who we are, it's like the little Legos that form our reality, our existence. (Kimberly, 37, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

The above subtitle ("Not just DNA") poses an interesting equivocal juxtaposition. DNA, or genes, were among my interlocutors mentioned quite frequently as the explanation for the link between themselves and their unknown genitor. Often, the fertility industry was accused of downplaying the importance of genetic material in the construction of identity. During our interview, Kimberly pleaded: "... it's not *just DNA* – it's *DNA!*". Her frustration with sperm banks and fertility clinics had grown with her increased presence in debates about anonymity and general advocacy for the rights of donor conceived persons. The sentiment in her exclamation is that DNA should not be neglected or ignored as a contributor to one's identity. It's not *just DNA* (merely DNA) – DNA is what makes us who we are.

But, of course, it is not so simple, nor did any of my interlocutors claim it to be. The second meaning of "not just DNA" summons the classic dilemma of *nature versus nurture*. Because even if DNA's role in the construction of identity should not be trivialized, it is not "just DNA" (DNA alone) that determines who we are, and, perhaps even less, who is family. And although knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin informs understandings of identity, it does not necessarily, even commonly, destroy established relationships. It may reconfigure, recontextualize, and allow for re-remembrance of relationships, but unless the relationship is already tenuous, new knowledge of donor conception seems to pose no adverse effects. In fact, even tenuous relations seem most often to survive the revelation of donor conception and the existence of unknown kin. Thus, I must consider Strathern's suggestion that for "the English-speaker",

... knowing the conditions of birth can cut or disturb the continuities of relationship.

More than that, those continuities can be set aside on the basis of such knowledge; and such knowledge is significant for a sense of identity. (Strathern, 1999, p. 67)

Moreover, Strathern suggests that a “choice between facts is also choice *between* relationships” (1999, p. 75, my emphasis). My contribution to this argument is to stress that the incorporation of new facts about conception does not *necessarily* entail a choice *between* relationships. If anything, what is “disturbed” or “obliterated” (Strathern, 1999, p. 75) is the knowledge that pater and genitor are embodied in one person. In other words, what is “taken away” is the understanding of ego’s father as contributor to ego’s genetic composition. This knowledge is replaced, then, by new (or missing) information-turned-knowledge of genetic inheritance. Such new knowledge may launch the donor conceived person on a quest to deanonymize genetic kin, not in the hope of finding one’s “real parents”, but in the hope of learning something about self.

In fact, even in cases where a relationship with genitor was established, and despite the fact that existing relationships were renegotiated, none of my interlocutors discontinued their relationship with their pater solely as a result of learning about their donor conception. I will further discuss this notion in chapter 4, where I will consider what happens when the relationship between united genitor and donor conceived offspring develops into something resembling a father-daughter/son relation. Below, I discuss how self-identity is affected by knowledge of unknown genetic kin, and further, how self-identity may also be understood as a criterion for how this knowledge is activated.

### Identity

It’s weird to think back on the initial thoughts that I remember, feeling this overwhelming sense of self-acceptance. Uhm... because I’ve always felt different than my family and this was kind of an explanation of why and it allowed me to embrace that

rather than define myself as a weirdo. You know, it was kind of like: “Oh, I’ve always been who I was supposed to be” and... I am different. (Kimberly, 37)

Upon learning of her conception, Kimberly immediately felt relief and validation. New knowledge of conception gave her a *reason why* she “always felt different” and allowed her to move on from defining herself as a “weirdo”, providing instead a sense of self-validation. Of course, as shown, Kimberly also promptly asked: “... then who is my biological father?”. Interesting, then, is how new knowledge of donor conception may simultaneously invoke and diffuse confusion. As Kimberly notes, it adds a variable to “the equation that mom and dad equals [her]”, but it does not reveal what, precisely, this variable is.

Chapter 1 presented some theoretical approaches that have sought to understand the contemporary Western individual. I suggested that genetic knowledge plays an increasingly central role in the construction of self-identity. More than that, through the idiom of genetic heredity, knowledge of unknown genetic kin also plays a vital part in this construction, and the process of incorporating such “nonknowledge” (Konrad, 2005) is highly selective. When the genitor is unknown, the donor conceived person who is actively curious about him will attribute, however modestly, some traits and inclinations to his imagined character, based on traits observed in ego. As Julie said: “I always imagine my paternal family to be a bit weird, a bit... you know – really smart and really into culture and all that.” Similarly, in referencing her unknown genitor, Kimberly states: “...there are a lot of things about me that are different from my family, so... any number of personality quirks would be cool to find out that we shared.”

The initial relief and validation accounted for by some interlocutors is thus sometimes accompanied by inquisitiveness about the source (at least partly considered to be the genitor) of these unaccountable attributes. The curiosity in such cases, then, is not informed by the wish for a new parent, but rather by the wish to know more about self, and the prospect of finding someone alike oneself – the latter, especially, if the parent-child relationship is or has been tenuous. However, if the genitor, when eventually deanonymized, is discovered not to embody the assumed attributes, he may be rejected and his genetic impact moderated, suggesting that a psychological, emotional, or otherwise behavioral identification with genetic kin may be just

as important as the genetic link itself. On the other hand, without the genetic link there would be no reason to attempt to establish a relationship at all.

A few years ago, Amanda, a donor conceived woman from Los Angeles, found a doctor through an online database. He had donated at the clinic where she was conceived, and at the time she thought he might have been her genitor. She elaborates:

I met a doctor who I thought could be my donor; and that was a good experience. But we did a DNA test that wasn't a match... he's a really lovely man, and his wife is very nice. I think [it would have been good] if he was my father. [...he's a] very lovely man, yeah... and his wife is lovely; smart and fun, and they have a home in Beverly Hills, and in Nebraska... they're good to their kids... and [his wife] wanted more kids but she couldn't have them, so she was very excited to have this work out.... (Amanda, 49)

Despite the positive experience of meeting, and a mutual fondness established through their interactions, Amanda and the doctor discontinued their relationship. With their potential genetic connection disproven by a DNA test, their reason for interaction vanished.

Nevertheless, a genetic connection alone is not enough to continue a relationship. Below, I demonstrate how a perception of mutual interests and similar traits play a crucial part in activating relationships based on knowledge of a genetic link (for a consideration of "activating" relationships, see Edwards, 2013, p. 291).

Self-identity is an important factor in deanonymizing unknown genetic kin. When a strong wish to meet genetic kin informs a search, it is often with the goal of finding someone with "the same kind of brain", or someone whom "thinks alike". During my second visit to Kimberly's apartment, four months since the first, Kimberly revealed that a month-and-a-half prior she had "matched" with a half-sibling on Ancestry.com – a girl named Chloe. However, because Chloe had not logged in on Ancestry.com for about a month, Kimberly deduced that she had not looked at her "matches", meaning she was not interested in finding unknown genetic kin, meaning she did not know that she was donor conceived. Chloe must have done the test out of

general genealogical interest and missed the revelation that she had matched with genetic half-siblings.

As Chloe's full name was listed on her profile, Kimberly easily found her on Facebook and Instagram. By browsing through her posts and photos Kimberly soon concluded that they had little in common, and that contacting her was a waste of time. Kimberly had previously emphasized her belief that everybody has the right to know the truth about where they come from ("a human right"). However, seeing as she did not wish to stay in touch with Chloe, Kimberly related that she did not "just want to be like: 'Hey, your dad's not your dad, and I don't really want to talk to you, bye'".

Kimberly decided not to contact a discovered genetic half-sibling because of a perceived dissimilarity in personalities. A sibling, and a father, is expected to *be* a certain way (Miller, 2007), and in the case of donor conceived persons, activating knowledge of donor conception to deanonymize unknown genetic kin, is often done with the expectation – or at least the hope – of meeting someone like-minded, someone similar to themselves, to find someone with whom they feel they belong. This idea applies not only to the relationships between half-siblings. Marie, who met her genitor for the first – and only – time eight months prior to our meeting, relates:

I think because I didn't have a close relationship with my social father... maybe I was looking for something, or just that recognition that there is some inherent bond between a parent and their offspring... but there was none of that. (Marie, 37)

Marie explains that after meeting her genitor she was "put off" by him and that she has the "impression that he's not that great of a character". Further, she relates that despite her hopes and expectations beforehand, the meeting was "really awkward" and that "it definitely wasn't warm fuzzy feelings". After the disappointing meeting, Marie reports a "period of mourning", but now, nearly a year since their meeting, she says: "... it doesn't bother me anymore. Whatever... he's a dude." Marie trivializes the genitor as merely "a dude", bearing little significance or impact on her life. However, later in our conversation she ponders what traits

she might have inherited from him – “maybe I do see traits in him that I see in myself, but they’re negative traits!” – and reveals that just two months ago, after her father (pater) died, she sent the genitor an e-mail:

... because when we had met, he had mentioned that he didn’t really feel comfortable getting to know me while my dad was alive. So, I was kind of opening the door back up... So, I think maybe in the back of my mind there’s still some sort of hope that he might want to... know who I am and know who my kids are, but no... there’s not... he’s just a silent... a silent type, I guess. (Marie, 37)

Marie’s situation illuminates two juxtaposing points. One is that, for her, the discovery of her genitor’s flawed character disincentivized continuous relations. In other words, the perceived content of his character outweighed the significance of their genetic relation, meaning that although a genetic connection may incentivize a relationship, if there is no mutual affinity, the relation is not necessarily continued. This leads directly to the other point, which is that the disincentivization for continuous relations is not final. The significance of these juxtaposing points is easily illustrated: was Marie to meet a complete stranger whom she thought was “not that great of a character”, the decision to discontinue a relationship with him would be uncomplicated and absolute. However, the knowledge of a genetic link imbues the relation with potentiality (K. S. Taussig, Hoeyer, & Helmreich, 2013, pp. 6, 10), placing Marie in direct confrontation with the implication of familial relations produced by her knowledge of a proximate genetic connection (Strathern, 1992b, p. 3).

Because of this, Marie’s relation to the genitor has not been destroyed but has become latent. It has become fixed with potentiality produced by its genetic component, and it continues to elicit social activation. What exactly this relation promises to become is unclear, even for Marie and other interlocutors still deanonimizing their genitor. They all maintain that they are not looking for a father, and that their father is the man they grew up with. They usually assert that the reason they seek contact is to learn something about themselves, or to find someone like them. However, once a relationship is initiated, terms change and evolve depending on the

quality of the relation – and, crucially, on the status of pre-existing family-relations – and exactly what the relationship may evolve into, i.e. how it is conceptualized, labeled, and what it entails, becomes increasingly ambiguous.

I will return to the managing of new parent-child relationships in chapter 4. What I wish to highlight here is the motivation for establishing – and the conditions for maintaining and continuing – relations based on a genetic connection. The genitor and unknown donor conceived half-siblings are often believed to provide information about self and is also often imagined to induce a sense of belonging upon interaction. As Lily says:

I would wanna sit down and ask him, you know, finally get to the bottom of, you know: “Why did you give sperm?”. And just ask him about his life, like: “Are you a creep?” (Lily chuckles), “What do you think about this? Are you good at this? Do you like this?” But those are more about learning about me than about him. (Lily, 25)

I suggest that these expectations are constructed from perceptions of aspects of self being different from one’s respective family. For example, a donor conceived person whom enjoys traveling but finds that no member in his family appreciates the same, might hope or expect to find genetic relatives who enjoy traveling. If one is athletic but raised in a non-athletic family, one expects to find genetic relatives who are athletically inclined. The same goes for someone who’s scholarly or intelligent but recognizes few such traits in their respective family. When these expectations fail upon meeting deanonimized kin, the potential relationship may recede to a state of inactivity.

### Relationships

In this last section I will expand on reconsiderations of existing familial relationships. Like identity, existing familial relations are not only affected by new knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin but may themselves affect how such knowledge is activated. Again, I include the account of Paul. When I ask Paul about his relationship with his parents growing up, he relates that he and his dad “didn’t have the best relationship”, and that they “didn’t get along”



much. I then ask if this disconnectedness made sense when he was told of his donor conception. Paul answers: “It did. It did. It actually made me feel closer to him, in a way, like, the fact that he didn’t care, or didn’t act any differently, made me feel good about it.” New knowledge of conception helps mend Paul’s relationship with his father; explaining their disconnectedness and making him empathize and appreciate the time and effort his father put into raising him.

I will include two similar examples. The first is from the account of Lily, a 25-year-old girl whose mother told her of her conception-circumstances at 19:

When you see your parents as people; you can kind of get that healthy separation and understand them as people, rather than just your flawed parents. And now, even taking a further step back and knowing: “Okay, I’m also not related to you [her pater]; but you’ve loved me this much”, that actually made me feel stronger for him because that’s a big deal. (Lily, 25)

Then, of Rachel, whose pater died when she was 17, and whom was told of her donor conception by her mother at 32: “I never had a clue that he wasn’t biologically my father, so, I wish I could have thanked him that he raised me as if I was his own.” Lily and Paul “feel stronger for” or “closer to” their dads, and Rachel wishes she could have thanked hers. Because she did not know of her donor conception while her father was still alive, Rachel feels robbed of her opportunity to thank him. Moreover, despite their genetic non-relatedness, Lily, Paul, and Rachel’s respective fathers still gave their dedication and love in raising them “as their own”. To illustrate another side of this point, I include, finally, the account of Laura, a 37-year-old woman whom was told of her donor conception by her parents at age 15. Retrospectively, Laura explains her “legal father’s” continuous distance throughout her life:

I’m estranged from my legal father. And the trigger for that for me was his decision not to come to my wedding. Which, I think I have more compassion – it’s not a lot of compassion – but I have more compassion for him when I think the lack of biology, or

shared DNA, has consistently played a role in the decisions that he's made; regarding where he lives and works. It's like when you hear people say: "I can never imagine leaving my three-year-old child", like: "I couldn't imagine living in a different state, no less a different country [than my child]". And I think that too, but when I filter it through the idea that there isn't a shared biology – that I'm not his – I'm not his genetic offspring, it makes it a little more understandable as to how he could leave – it doesn't excuse it; he still made the decision, along with my mother, to create me, and in theory he should have taken responsibility in that decision, but... I understand how much easier it would be to leave a child that at least a piece of you didn't entirely feel like was your child. (Laura, 37)

Based on these accounts, it seems the implication is that it is more commendable for a (non-genetic) pater to be nurturing and dedicated in his child's upbringing, than of a genitor raising his child in the same manner. The obverse perception then, as illustrated through the account of Laura, may also be true: that if a father is not his child's genitor, it is (however slightly) more permissible for him to be neglectful. In some ways, these observations are reminiscent of Gay Becker's observations on "the power of the cultural ideology of biological parenthood that so permeates people's approach to parenthood" (2000, p. 65), or of the idiom that "blood is thicker than water" (Modell, 1994, p. 4). What is important here, however, is that it is the *knowledge* that one genetically originates elsewhere, that allows, through the idiom of genetic heredity, for a reassessment of family relationships. Moreover, it is the quality of these very relationships that to a large extent determines the potency of these reassessments. Thus, what I hope to have demonstrated here is that knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin is both activated to recontextualize families, *and* that the family dynamic is a criterion for degree and manner of activation. Further, as not knowing where half of one's DNA comes from was

(for my interlocutors) always significant, and sometimes tantamount to not knowing (half of) who one is<sup>19</sup>, this dialectic dynamic is also true for identity reconsiderations.

In this chapter I have presented some of the many ways activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin may unfold. Further, I hope through the accounts presented here to have demonstrated some of the pervasive meanings of DNA and genetic heredity in the construction of identity, and how they imply relationships and bear implications for existing relations. In the two remaining chapters I will explore some more specific ways of activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin.

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion on how such an understanding of identity and genetic origins fueled the Norwegian legislation of banning anonymous sperm donation in 2003, see Melhuus (2012, p. 11; 2017, p. 203).

## Chapter 3

### Transilience

Activating knowledge of donor conception sometimes leads to *transilience*. Transilience is an analytic term I borrow from Monica Konrad, introduced in her book *Nameless Relations: Anonymity, Melanesia and Reproductive Gift Exchange Between British Ova Donors and Recipients* (2005). Konrad describes a transilient person as someone whose occupancy “inside of the twilight zone of the *imagined or known ‘half-known’* [...] sets up ‘unfinished’ relations” (2005, p. 173, my emphasis). It is the “active not knowing” of these unfinished relations – or “irrelational kinship-links” (2005, p. 118) – that “makes persons ‘transilient’” (2005, p. 173). Below, I elucidate on how I employ transilience in this thesis, and I must also admit that I do take some liberties with Konrad’s term in describing the experience of donor conceived persons. Konrad only briefly mentions transilience with regards to donor conceived persons. However, I find that transilience is a germane analytical tool for analyzing the realities of certain donor conceived persons as well.

As shown, certain fundamental questions are sometimes prompted upon learning of one’s donor conception. Most vitally, these are questions like: “Who am I?”, “Where do I come from?”, and “Who is my (biological) father?”. Sometimes, the only (imagined) way of answering these questions is by identifying and (physically) encountering the genitor (and/or donor conceived half-siblings). In other words, to pursue “a task of unmasking” (M. T. Taussig, 1999, p. 105) of anonymous kin, or, initiate a “process of piecing together over time knowledge about one’s genetic origins” (Konrad, 2005, p. 49).

Moreover, before one has met or otherwise identified one’s genitor (or half-siblings), one may still draw upon the *knowledge of* (the existence of) anonymous kin to explain certain aspects of reality – in fact, this is done even if nothing is presently known or can be known about anonymous kin whatsoever. This, I understand, as the “active not knowing”: the drawing upon unknown – imagined – kinship links – the “non-relations” (Konrad, 2005, p. 242) that inform aspects of reality. As I have shown, these aspects of reality usually pertain to identity and familial relationships, but may also extend to careers, education, politics, community, etc. It is

this “active not knowing” of “non-relations” and the gradual unconcealing – that is, deanonymization – of anonymous kin, that constitutes a transilient person. Konrad suggests that a “relation remains transilient up until the time it is no longer purely imaginary. Physical encounters enacted through re-union cancel out or ‘kill off’ transilience...” (2005, p. 214). Although I will challenge this notion later, for the time being, I accept it.

Through this chapter I wish to examine various ways transilience is (re)produced and to illustrate how transilient donor conceived persons both are affected by and produce transilience. The role of anonymity in this (re)production should not be underestimated. After all, donor anonymity is the main element that stops a non-relation from becoming a relation – that is, what, despite the donor conceived person’s efforts, allows for the continuity of transilience. Specifically, I argue that along with certain “built-in effects” (Strathern, 1999, p. 69) that come with knowing about anonymous immediate genetic kin, it is the *potentiality* embedded in anonymity that creates and maintains transilience. Potentiality, it has been argued, “provides the grounds upon which renewed promises may be made and new expectations produced” (K. S. Taussig et al., 2013, p. 10). It is precisely the promises and expectations – the imaginaries – evoked by knowledge of unknown genetic kin, that elicits the donor conceived person to “unconceal” (Konrad, 2005, p. 173) anonymous persons, all the while maintaining that the questions prompted upon gaining knowledge of donor conception, can, and will, be answered upon complete deanonymization. Specifically, and most potently, this potentiality relates to the potential for the establishment of relationships and for gaining knowledge of self. Thus, the potentiality embedded in anonymity crucially contributes to suspending the donor conceived person as transilient, occupying, then, what Michael Taussig (whom inspired Konrad’s development of “transilience”) has called “the twilight zone of the ‘half known’” (1999, p. 204).

Lastly, I wish to contribute to a discussion recently considered by Maren Klotz. In her article (2016), Klotz responds to a suggested trend of “genetization” of identity and family. She proposes that instead of understanding the donor conceived person as merely subjected to such trends, the role of agency is crucial in making sense of why some donor conceived persons search for, and establish relations with, anonymous genetic kin. As I will illustrate, I agree with

Klotz's notion that a reassertion of agency is an important factor, in certain respects, however, I argue that in order to understand the complexities of activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin – not to mention transilience and its effects – further analysis is needed.

### Agency and Community

Thoughts and actions as affected by knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin may sometimes develop into activism against anonymity in gamete donations, or into criticism against “the (in)fertility industry” and “selfish parents”. In such cases, the language employed is one about rights and injustices, fueled by pain and indignancy, that considers plainly (yet ambivalently) the state of not knowing the identity of, or not knowing intimately, one's genitor. Some such perspectives are presented through the accounts of my interlocutors. However, I also draw on statements posted on a closed Facebook group for donor conceived persons, where, I suggest, most (active) members can be considered transilient. I pseudonymously call this group Donor Conceived Community (DCC). DCC is a self-described “community”: “...a place for donor conceived people around the world to share their perspectives on topics relevant to *our community*, connect with each other, and find support.” (DCC group description, February 2019, my emphasis). Such online communities, I suggest, are created- and frequented by transilient donor conceived persons and would not exist without a considerable degree of activation of knowledge. The group has nearly 1000 members and is exclusively for “donor conceived individuals”. I stress the phrase “community”, because I wish to briefly discuss the similarities and differences between transilience/DCC and Victor Turner's liminality/*communitas*, and, despite their similarities, why transilience is the better term in the context of this thesis, when compared to liminality.

Firstly, transilience may correctly be understood as a liminal phase – in that it is an unsettled state of being “between” two settled states of being: from the moment of learning one is donor conceived to the moment of encountering one's genitor, at least in its simplest variation. Secondly, there is, arguably, for many transilient donor conceived persons established a kind of *communitas* through various online communities. Again, I take some liberties with the term: transilience is not an institutionalized *rite de passage* where “neophytes” are initiated into an

hierarchically structural rank (V. W. Turner, 1969, pp. 359-360), but is rather an individual state of transition – whose development and outcome is highly unpredictable – shared with other persons in similar situations. The sharing of personal stories in a community may, as Modell has observed with regards to adoptees, offer a “stockpile” of “performative and narrative resources for the inchoate experiences<sup>20</sup> of participants” thus creating a shared rhetoric (Modell, 1994, pp. 8-9). Through online communities, then, some donor conceived persons establish a *communitas*.

I pause here to expand on Edward’s suggestion that: “[n]ot only do donor siblings know themselves to share genes, they also share a donor and the fact of donation. We might say they partake in each other’s conception.” (2013, p. 291) The Sahlins-inspired suggestion that donor conceived siblings “partake in each other’s conception” is, I argue, not only true for donor conceived *siblings*, but for many donor conceived persons in general. I discussed this briefly in the introduction with regards to my interlocutors’ acceptance and inclusion of me in their lives. I also find it a salient point here. The fact of donor conception seems to automatically incentivize community among donor conceived persons. Moreover, the more one’s political and emotional dispositions (with regards to one’s conception) align with a broader community, the stronger the affiliation becomes. For example, the more upset one is about one’s donor conception, the more one will be welcomed by other donor conceived persons who are equally or similarly upset. This was echoed in a speculation expressed by some of my interlocutors: that those donor conceived persons who do not care about deanonymizing their genitor or maintain that they have no issues with donor anonymity, were merely pretending so as to protect their family, or were “in denial”. Some persons would support this notion and affiliate through their mutual disposition. Others would affiliate through the converse disposition etc. In this way, facts of conception incentivize community, whereas emotional and political dispositions reinforce it.

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<sup>20</sup> “Some experiences are inchoate, in that we simply do not understand what we are experiencing, either because the experiences are not storyable, or because we lack the performative and narrative resources, or because the vocabulary is lacking” (Bruner, 1986, pp. 6-7).

In DCC, discussions flourish: about anonymity, about parents and human rights, and about the significance of DNA and genes in terms of one's identity. In a sense, DCC is a site where "what was once taken for granted becomes an object of promotion, and less the cultural certainty it was" (Strathern, 1992a, p. 35). That is, the implicit is made explicit: identity and its cultural coupling with heredity – and, more specifically, heredity of genes – is employed as an argument against anonymity, for the right "to know where one comes from". Again, with some liberties on my part, Turner's notion of liminality/communitas is prolific. It can be argued that through DCC – as a communitas – persons reclassify "reality and [their] relationship to society, nature, and culture" (V. W. Turner, 1969, p. 373). In other words, transilient donor conceived persons partaking in communitas explicate, consider, and employ culturally fundamental and coupled ideas. In addition to ideas about family, belonging, and identity, this especially relates to ideas about genes and genetic heredity.

Moreover, significances of genetic heredity and personal belonging are emphasized by employing values and ideas that underpin understandings of identity (Finkler, 2017, p. 174; Novas & Rose, 2000, p. 485; Rose, 2013, p. 6) and family (Becker, 2000; Modell, 1994, p. 231), and vice versa. For example, in opting for sperm donation to conceive a child, parents of donor conceived children may through various tactics (Becker, 2000, pp. 219-224; Konrad, 2005, p. 164) trivialize the genitor as merely "the donor"<sup>21</sup>, and as functionally insignificant in the donor conceived person's life. Contrarily, donor conceived persons attempting to deanonymize their genitor may justify their actions by emphasizing genetics – and, crucially, the passing on of genes – as constitutive of identity. Thus, by employing the idea that genes influence/create identity, the genitor's role as "trivial" is confronted, and, because of a cultural coupling of biology and family (Strathern, 1992b, p. 3), ideas about family, belonging, and origin also come into conflict. This may include, for instance, conflicts concerning the integrity of the family and the genitor's responsibilities toward the donor conceived person, in addition to intrapsychic conflicts like "who am I?" and "why am I who I am?".

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<sup>21</sup> Such trivialization of genitor is also recommended by some medical professionals advocating for donor anonymity, i.e. Kunstmann (2011).



The point is, transilience can be understood as a kind of personal and non-institutionalized liminality; a liminality that is temporally indefinite, and with sporadic experiential intensity. Moreover, during transilience, many culturally implicit ideas are made explicit, challenged, and/or politically employed, particularly through online communities like DCC. Such a community is not what Turner had in mind when coining “*communitas*”, but, as discussed above, some of the qualities that make up a *communitas* (V. W. Turner, 1969, p. 366) are also present in communities such as DCC.

I suggest that the explication of implicit ideas – engendered through transilience – is often both stimulated by- and part of stimulating the desire for knowledge about one’s unknown genetic kin. That is, through collective participation (on DCC and other similar communities), donor conceived persons are reproducing and intensifying desires and imperatives of deanonymizing unknown genetic kin. That is *not* to say that the desire to deanonymize cannot be prompted immediately upon learning of one’s donor conception (as shown, this was the case for several of my interlocutors), nor that the desire to deanonymize cannot be intense even if one is not part of a community like DCC. However, it is to say that such desires may be intensified and may influence others through a sharing of personal stories, sentiments, and arguments in (online) communities. Furthermore, the sharing of such personal stories, sentiments, and arguments may contribute to providing “people [with] a sense of power and of leverage over decisions they [feel that] others [have] made for them in the past.” (Modell, 1994, p. 9). The notion that knowledge of self is tied up with genetic origins, and the fact that individuals undertake tasks of acquiring such knowledge, brings me to a discussion of two separate but linked phenomena.

On the one hand is the purported “medicalization” (Finkler, 2001) or, as it has been labeled in broader terms, “geneticization” (Klotz, 2016) of EuroAmerican personhood and family. The concern is that when donor conceived persons search for their anonymous genetic kin, they are contributing to a “colonization of nongenetic kinship” (Klotz, 2016, p. 53), meaning that in their search, donor conceived persons favor, and ultimately “replace”, social forms of relatedness. In response to this notion, it has been suggested that what is really the driving force of donor conceived persons searching for genetic kin, is not just an axiomatic emphasis on genetics, but

it is rather an attempt to reassert lost agency “brought about by [...] an absence of kinship knowledge” (Klotz, 2016, p. 51; also see Carsten, 2007a, p. 416). What this means, is that the search for genitor is a response to the fact that information of donor conception (and hence the existence of unknown genetic kin) has been kept and controlled by external agents – information that is believed to rightfully belong to the donor conceived person himself. Thus, by taking control over this information-turned-knowledge, Klotz argues that the donor conceived person “reasserts agency” over “regimes of managing kinship knowledge, such as exercised through doctors, clinics, and regulators, and, in a way, also parents” (Klotz, 2016, p. 48). Moreover, Klotz argues that when donor conceived persons establish new relations based on genetics (i.e. with a donor conceived half-sibling or with deanonymized genitor), it is *not* done at the expense of “social relationships”; in short, such “relations are *complementary* instead of *colonizing* [social] relations” (Klotz, 2016, p. 53, emphasis in original).

I certainly agree that a relationship established between donor conceived half-siblings, and even between genitor and offspring, does not automatically or even usually “replace” existing familial relationships (I will explore this further in chapter 4). However, based on empirical findings I present below, I find Klotz’s analysis insufficient in making sense of the *why* one searches for genetic kin at all. For example, I would argue that even if we submit that a main drive for deanonymizing unknown genetic kin can be attributed to a reassertion of lost agency, the question still remains: why, after all, does the inaccessibility of information of genetic kin result in an experience of “lost agency”? That is, why does information of genetic kin (sometimes) matter so intensely? If one asserts that deanonymization and the establishment of relations with deanonymized kin is all – or mostly – about reasserting agency, then I fear a crucial point is lost. First, consider the following quote by one of my interlocutors:

The fertility industry exists solely so that people can have the maximum genetic continuity in their children, right? People only use it because they want to have kid of their own. They want a kid that’s genetically – that’s biologically related to them. But then that same industry, and those customers, turn around and tell the *product* of that

industry – who is a human being – that it shouldn't matter to them, and that they have no right to know where they come from. I mean is there any greater hypocrisy? It's unbelievably hypocritical. I'm dumbfounded by how they don't see that. That they're so desperate to have their own biological child, and then they tell that child that they don't get to know, biologically, where they come from. I can't understand how they don't see... how that's so hypocritical. It's unbelievable. (Rachel, 42)

Near the end of her utterance, Rachel's voice began shaking and her eyes filled with tears. Rachel deplores the injustices imposed upon her, and, in her view, upon other donor conceived persons born as a result of an anonymous donation. Although she has identified her genitor, it is unlikely that Rachel will ever meet him. Rachel's genitor's ex-wife has informed Rachel that, about a decade ago, he developed a significant mental illness. Subsequently, he left his job and family, and that his whereabouts have been unknown since. Most probably, according to his ex-wife, he is now either homeless or deceased. Considering the extraordinary circumstances of Rachel's genitor, and seeing as the circumstances of Rachel's conception was kept hidden from her for most of her life, and that she has had to deanonymize her genitor without the help of the clinic where she was conceived, one might rightly consider Rachel's account of the hypocrisy of the fertility industry as supporting Klotz's argument about loss of agency. Moreover, sentiments of "not wanting to keep [one's donor conception] a secret" and, even more telling, "not wanting to *be* a secret", were prevalent among my interlocutors.

Such sentiments may indeed be interpreted as a (wish for) "reassertion of agency" in response to previous secrecy around one's conception, and to the inaccessibility of genetic information and kin, orchestrated by external agents. However, what I wish to add here, is an emphasis on the (imagined) significance of genetic information, and the lived experience of the donor conceived person. Moreover, I wish to stress the cultural values underpinning such sentiments that Rachel expressed – which without, naturally, there would not be experienced a "loss of agency" at all. Crucially, transience, and the emotionality enmeshed with this experience – including a sense of lost agency – is produced by a cultural connection between identity and

genetic heredity. I submit that a reassertion of agency is part of the equation, but I urge to emphasize the impact that constitutive knowledge of donor conception has on one's identity, on one's family relations, and I stress that identity, and sometimes family, is axiomatically informed by knowledge of the existence of unknown genetic kin and donor conception. In turn, the activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin – that may be intensified through transilience and community – may manifest as a reassertion of lost agency.

### (Re)Production and Effects

I was shocked. I was completely shocked. I had a moment where I just had to sit down because my legs gave out from under me. And... I felt like – just, immediately my very first feeling was like I was being abandoned. I felt like he was... telling me that he wasn't my father. (Karen, 43)

Karen's recount of what she experienced upon being told of her conception, as with all of my interlocutors, was related to me in hindsight. However, the emotionality described is significant for understanding transilience. In addition to highlighting the cultural link between kinship and biology, it prompts the question: What characterizes a transilient person? And, what are some specific effects of transilience? To begin answering these questions, I consider some interlocutors whom I do *not* consider transilient. Remember Paul, and how he noted that, for him, being donor conceived is "more of an anecdote, really". Similarly, Robert, Rachel's brother, attests that he has "never been that upset about it". This is clearly a low intensity of activation. Paul and Robert do not actively search for genetic kin. Moreover, their identity is not perturbed, and they do not feel marginalized. Paul, as shown, *does* recontextualize his relationship with his father, but this is done undramatically – it never appears to lastingly disturb his reality. I say *lastingly* because, after all, following Strathern, constitutive knowledge is characterized by it being choicelessly embedded in the way one perceives the world, meaning there are inevitable alterations of reality upon acquiring such knowledge (Strathern, 1999, p. 78). In other words, there appears to always be *some degree* of activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin.

Similarly, for Robert, knowledge of donor conception provides answers instead of pressing questions. Constitutive knowledge was (promptly) incorporated into his understanding of self and family, and there was – and is – no *active not knowing* launching him on a trajectory of unconcealing (Konrad, 2005, p. 173). For those that do not become transilient, new knowledge is acquiescently incorporated, and reality remains unperturbed, or, if it is perturbed, “a new reality” (M. T. Taussig, 1999, p. 135) is easily and swiftly established. There are no lingering questions eliciting the donor conceived person to search and discover. Thus, following Konrad, because Paul and Robert have not “set up” any “unfinished relations”, there are no relations to “complete”. There is no wish to “begin”, “constitute”, or “finish” a relationship as a result of gaining knowledge of donor conception. Conclusively then, Paul and Robert are persons I do not consider transilient.

Feuillet-Liger proposes that “in practice, the child born from ART can be the object of a *double secret*: one concerning his or her mode of conception and the other with regards to the donor’s identity.” (Feuillet-Liger, 2011, p. 39, my emphasis). The concept of a “double secret” might help in beginning to understand why some donor conceived persons become transilient. When Kimberly learned of her donor conception, she was indeed informed about “her mode of conception”, but with this revelation came a mystery. Kimberly now knows there is something she does not know (about her genetic heritage and hence, as we have seen, about herself). Because although, for Kimberly, “a thousand pieces” suddenly “fit into place”, at the same time a myriad of questions and unknowns appeared: a *new* missing piece, a *mystery man*, by which many aspects of life could be explained, distorted, complexified and reassessed. Exemplifying a similar reaction, Madeleine, who was informed of her conception by her very recently divorced and embittered step-dad, recalls the conversation she had with her mother later that same day:

As my mom and I were chatting [that evening] I went: “Mom! I’m not half Italian!”, and she goes: “Well, you don’t know that you’re not”. And then later, in that same conversation, I went: “Oh, my gosh” – because my dad was an alcoholic – I went: “I’m not the child of an alcoholic!” – And that’s huge! That is a big, big thing to find out,

because there is potentially a genetic component to that in there, you know, so I went: “Oh my God, that’s not a thing! That is a thing that I can take out ...”, and she was like: “Well, you don’t know that you’re not!” (Madeleine laughs). So, that was her response to everything: “Well, you don’t know that you’re not.” ... So, I had this idea that I was 50% Italian, but that was pulled out and wasn’t immediately replaced with the idea that I was this or that instead. It was just a big question mark. So, on St. Patrick’s Day I sent my sister a text message that said: “It’s St. Patrick’s Day, party like you’re Irish! Because after all, you don’t know that you’re not (Madeleine laughs)!” (Madeleine, 41)

As Madeleine previously summarized: pieces are falling out, and they are not immediately and obviously replaced with something else. Madeleine no longer knows whether she is Italian, or Irish (hence, the joke), or the (genetic) daughter of an alcoholic. This new non-knowledge has implications for her ethnic ancestry, identity, and health. She cannot “be Italian” unless one of her genetic parents are Italian. Her cultural heritage and belonging are informed by the heritage of her genetic parents. It is implied that had Madeleine’s donor not been anonymous – that is, had his identity been immediately available – the “pieces falling out” would have been “replaced”, and the “question mark” would have dissolved:

I was asking her questions – I started asking about my donor, like: “I wanna know about him!”, and [my mom] said: “I don’t know anything!”, I said: “How is that possible? Didn’t you pick him out of a binder?”, and she said: “No, it wasn’t like that.” So, all I had was the donor number to start with. I had nothing but that information to go by.

(Madeleine, 41)

This question mark, because it could not dissolve without Madeleine’s efforts, sparked in her “a little side quest” of finding her genitor.

I would love a complete medical history, obviously. I'd love to see pictures of him from when he was a kid, so I can compare them to mine and compare them to my kids, and... I'm just curious about who he is. Because I kind of wonder, like, sometimes you get mannerisms from your parents even when you're not raised with them. There are things that, later, when you meet up, you're like: "Oh, that thing! That weird thing that I do that no one else does, that's where I got that!". I feel like it would answer some questions – maybe even questions I didn't know I had... you know? (Madeleine, 41)

A curiosity about "who he is", and "what he's like" was common among my interlocutors. Madeleine, among others, would like to know if she resembles her genitor, both physically and behaviorally. Similarly, when I ask Laura why she would want to meet her genitor, she replies:

I think... it's like, a missing piece of me – that information, yeah. I think also what some [donor conceived] people say about their experience of meeting someone who's brain works similarly to theirs. I would really love to have that experience, because uhm, my mother and I do not think in a similar way at all – which can be very frustrating for me. So, I would love to know like, is my biological father more like me? And I'm assuming he is, you know? [...] And also, I know that I'm intelligent, but I'm intelligent in a way that is completely different from my [pater] and his brother. (Laura, 37)

The accounts of Laura and Madeleine illustrate how transilient persons "[elicit] a meaningful non-relation that makes an imagined 'link'" (Konrad, 2005, p. 129) – in this case, between themselves and their genitor. Thus, through the "imagined link", certain information is (actively) employed in making sense of aspects of reality – their identity and their family relations. The issue, and what further constitutes their transilience, is that this information can only be confirmed or invalidated upon the enactment of a physical encounter, where the relation is no longer "purely imaginary" (Konrad, 2005, p. 214). Thus, Carsten's (2007a)

*trajectories of action*, again, comes to mind. In my estimation, Madeleine became transilient when her step-father revealed to her the facts of her conception. Upon inquiring with her mother for answers, more questions arose, provoking Madeleine to purchase a DNA test where her results showed only “distant matches” (see chapter 2). This prompted Madeline to search Facebook and family history archives for more information – an intermittent process lasting a full decade. Such stories were plentiful among transilient donor conceived persons, some even relating that they had travelled to other states in order to look at graduation photos of different classes they suspected their genitor had enrolled in.

One might say that for transilient donor conceived persons, “new opportunities or new information rapidly impose their own trajectory of actions, each apparently automatically leading to the next” (Carsten, 2007a, p. 413). A significant cause of why such transpiring trajectorial action is engendered, I suggest, is the inherent potentiality of anonymity.

“[Potentiality] provides an epistemic space filled with unknowns” (K. S. Taussig et al., 2013, p. 4). The effects of knowing about the existence of anonymous genetic kin may be explained in a similar fashion. However, the potentiality embedded in an unknown genetic relation, is not one of infinite possibilities. Rather, as discussed in chapter 2, it is constrained by the self-perceived individual. To recapitulate: the imaginary of the genitor is framed by the self-perceived identity of the donor conceived person in relation to her family-members. Such conceptual constraint, or framing, I suggest, is set up by a cultural link between identity and genetic heredity.

Furthermore, when clues emerge – that is, when a transilient donor conceived person learns that the information desired might be traceable<sup>22</sup>, or might be further unconcealed (through a new DNA match, by the building of family trees, or by searching Facebook and Google) – it is this very “traceability [that] becomes the [...] form of elicitation: [traceability becomes] the medium by which [donor conceived] people [...] hope to know that they can come to be known as ‘relations’.” (Konrad, 2005, p. 90). Thus, potentiality (a concept wherein “hope” is subsumed (K. S. Taussig et al., 2013)) and traceability impose their own “trajectory of actions” (Carsten,

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<sup>22</sup> Idioms like “anonymity is dead”, produced by commercialized DNA testing technology, and “success stories” of donor conceived persons meeting and connecting with their deanonymized genitor may enforce the assumption that anonymous genetic kin is traceable.



2007a, p. 413), launching the transilient person on what M. T. Taussig might call a “task of unmasking” – or, what I call, a process of deanonymization – where the very task itself “augments the mystery” it endeavors to reveal (M. T. Taussig, 1999, p. 105). The “mystery” that is “augmented”, is here the very identity of the genitor, whose elicitive power grows with every clue discovered, with every further step towards that goal. Lastly, what should not go unmentioned, are the emotions enmeshed in the experience of transilience. Even those that did not become transilient often described the instance of learning about their donor conception as “shocking” and “confusing”. However, whereas for those that remained non-transilient the emotional intensity was confined to just that instant, allowing related topics to be discussed casually, for those that did become transilient, the topic of genitor, of donor anonymity, and of (non)access to genetic information, were all often emotionally loaded, and sometimes intensely so.

Laura, 37, for example, has uploaded her DNA data to “all of the three major registries”. Additionally, she has traveled to the school her genitor probably attended (a trip costing her “over a thousand dollars” to complete) in order to search graduation photographs in the hope of finding a familiar face. Furthermore, she has contacted the clinic where she was conceived in an attempt to acquire information about her genitor. I pause to include Laura’s account of what transpired when she contacted the clinic:

They said that they could not release any records, because I wasn’t a patient there – which, I think, is one of the most offensive things you can possibly say to somebody who’s... a *human being* created there. Like: “You are not a patient, you have no say! These aren’t your records even though it was your *life* that was created!”, as if you were a *thing*, you know? So, I had to get my mother to agree to call them, which was a several-year process, and when she finally did call, they said: “Oh, those are gone”, you know, “those records don’t exist” – same old story we all hear. (Laura, 37, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

When I asked her, Laura emphatically professed that what she would want, could she decide the nature of her relationship with her genitor, were they ever to meet, was “the most loving relationship possible.” In saying this, Laura cried, and it became apparent that despite her honest efforts to manage her expectations and projections, to keep a practical and open-ended outlook on this potential relationship, the stakes were high, and a rejection hypothetically devastating. Though Laura’s was one of the most emotional accounts among my interlocutors, on DCC, similar stories are not uncommon. The efforts made by some transilient donor conceived persons to deanonymize their genitor are both exhaustive and exhausting, and the emotional toll may become greater with every obstacle encountered. Moreover, I find Laura’s proclamation that she’s being viewed as if she was “a thing”, as adding to Klotz’s observation of “lost agency”.

Thus far, I hope to have demonstrated how transilient persons differ from non-transilient persons, and some ways transilience is produced and reproduced. I suggest that the (re)production is caused by activating knowledge of a genetic link between self and unknown kin – to reassess identity and family – and that this activation is a “built-in effect” (Strathern, 1999, p. 69) of constitutive knowledge that in turn might be reproduced and intensified through transilience and community. Further, such effects – and the (re)considerations engendered by knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin – are often enmeshed with emotion, and sometimes intensely so. I have also attempted to illustrate that a significant aspect of transilience is the explication of implicit cultural ideas, particularly ideas concerning identity, family, and genetic heredity. In turn, especially through participation in communities, these ideas are sometimes deployed to challenge political praxis. Still, admittedly, the question remains: *why* do some persons become transilient, whilst others do not?

### To Be, or Not to Be, Transilient

I think it’s very circumstantial, [I think it depends on] what your life is like, what your family was like growing up. I think if you were more stable and more secure [the fact that you are donor conceived would] be less impactful and less important. (Paul, 44)

The implication of Paul's hypothesis is significant: the more adverse a person's childhood-conditions are, the greater the impact of new knowledge of conception will be. Logically then, the opposite may also hold true: if recipient parents provide their child with a good upbringing, and do so with the child "as their own" (Becker, 2000, p. 224), the child will not grow up to have issues with his or her conception<sup>23</sup>. This section explores Paul's hypothesis and its implications. Moreover, it explores the mirror arguments employed by donor conceived persons whom have activated knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin to high degrees, and how they may view persons whom do not become transilient. Paul's hypothesis is both contentious and, in some respects, politicized. The implication is that if one is provided a "good upbringing", then the method of conception, and any related concern – e.g. the choice of using an anonymous donor – will not develop into an issue for the donor conceived person. I have often observed this, and similar arguments, employed by recipient parents on Facebook groups where donors, recipient parents, and donor conceived persons interact with each other<sup>24</sup>.

The argument that it is your upbringing and how "stable" you are that determines whether you find issues with donor conception as a praxis, has two major effects. One, it validates the decision to use a gamete donation to conceive a child – after all, if parents only provide "a good upbringing", the child will not grow up to find issue with donor conception – and two, it reduces the opinion of donor conceived persons who oppose gamete donations to a consequence of (poor) upbringing. These effects are precisely why the argument is considered contentious by some donor conceived persons. That is, in response to a resistance against (especially anonymous) gamete donations, to-be parents assert that they will raise their child "lovingly" and "rightly", thus *not* fostering issues with donor conception and their own choice to utilize it. Accordingly, any donor conceived person whom has a problem with (anonymous) donor conception was raised by "bad parents" or had a "bad upbringing" or is in other ways "unfortunate". Moreover, such sentiments are believed to be implicitly condoned and

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<sup>23</sup> The idea of raising children with love and care also fuels the argument of non-disclosure by parents to child about conception. However, this has been covered extensively elsewhere (Eric Blyth & Frith, 2009; Hewitt, 2002; A. J. Turner & Coyle, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Such groups often have more members than, for example, DCC, and heated discussions between recipient parents and donor conceived persons are frequent.

incentivized by major sperm banks and clinics, i.e. “the fertility industry”. Hence, the argument is politicized because it reduces the opposing opinions (i.e. those that argue against anonymous gamete donations) to a consequence of poor upbringing, thus allowing the arguing party (i.e. “recipient parents” and “the industry”) to justify the continuity of gamete donation praxis as is. The continuity is justified, then, by invoking an imaginary of “good upbringing” of the (to-be-donor-conceived) child.

Kimberly, whom has been a prominent advocate against donor anonymity for years, was, during my fieldwork, rejected by her genitor. She now fears that should the information that she has been rejected by her genitor become public, her arguments against anonymity might be reduced to a mere consequence of her rejection (I will elaborate on Kimberly’s efforts to contact her genitor in chapter 4). The pressing question appears to be: is knowledge of donor conception only “impactful” and “important” because of personal circumstances? And, if yes, then what?

In many ways, the answer to the first question – is donor conception “impactful” and “important” because of personal circumstances? – is clearly yes. As argued in chapter 2, I propose that self-identity is both a criterion for the degree to which (knowledge of) genetic nonrelations are activated, *and* that identity itself is affected by such knowledge. Moreover, I argue (again, in chapter 2), that the same is true for family-relations. Thus, the notion that why and how one activates knowledge of donor conception is “circumstantial”, is true. However, the circumstances that allow for high activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin is difficult to discern, and even more difficult – perhaps impossible – to predict, even if one could guarantee that a given parent would provide a “good upbringing”. Moreover, a “good upbringing” (if there is, objectively, such a thing) does not necessarily lead to a “good relationship”. In fact, even if one, hypothetically, *could* guarantee a “good relationship” between parents and child it does not automatically follow that the genitor will remain conceptually trivial and that problems related to donor conception will not arise. Some of my interlocutors, and several accounts I have observed online – despite having had a “good upbringing” and (still) a “good relationship” with both parents – expressed both a reconsideration of their self-identity and some family-relations, and some, even a curiosity

about the identity of their genitor. What is more, is that many whom attested to having a “good relationship” with their parents, also disagreed with the praxis of donor anonymity and affirmed a need for “more regulation” of the fertility industry.

Thus, a “good upbringing” and a “good relationship”, even if one could predict and guarantee such dynamics, do not necessarily prevent the emergence of issues of donor conception nor do they necessarily disincentivize interest in, and deanonymization of, genitor. To highlight another aspect that complicates the idea of circumstantiality, I include a quote from Laura. When I asked her if she thought that sperm donation as a whole should be made illegal, she replied:

I think that it should still be an option, but I think it should be done with *way* more regulation, and with the understanding that while some scenarios might turn out angelic and lovely, you can't know that it's gonna turn out well based on any... – it's not like a paint-by-numbers, you know, like, if you say: “If I do A, B, and C, then it's gonna be great!”. And that's the kind of wishful thinking that a lot of parents take going into it. You know, in the same household you can have one [donor conceived] person who's pissed and one person that's sad, and somebody else who's completely fine. And so, when we say it's different case by case, it's literally person by person – it's not household by household, you know what I'm saying? And the fact that you can't predict [the outcome of donor conception], is one of the things where I'm like: there should be an awareness that it's not always gonna turn out like... you know... rainbows and butterflies and whatever the fuck people think when they have children, you know?

(Laura, 37, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

In addition to pointing out the implausibility of predicting a “good” parent-child relationship, Laura conveys that the ways and degrees of activating knowledge of donor conception differ

greatly, even among siblings. Having been raised in the same household, and been conceived using the same donor, Rachel and Robert are “full siblings”. However, their experience of being – and their perception of – donor conception, differ greatly. When I asked Rachel whether finding out she was donor conceived has altered her life, she immediately exclaimed: “Irrevocably! Profoundly! I would say it is the defining issue of my life.” Moreover, Rachel was the only one of my interlocutors who confessed that, sometimes, she “wished she didn’t know” she was donor conceived:

I do sometimes wish I had never been told. Because I feel like my life kind of fell apart. I’ve had a hard time kind of surviving it. It’s been that kind of hard for me. I mean, ideally, I would have been told when I was like two [years old]. But if I hadn’t been told by 32 then, maybe, I would have been better off not knowing. Because, I remember waking up the next morning [after being told] and like, kind of, being hit with, like, the giant mindfuck that it was. Like, looking in the mirror and being like: “Okay, who’s eyes are these?” And, like: “Who am I?”, Like where... who is half of this person now, that I thought I knew? It’s just been taken away from me. Like, my... my father’s been taken away now... and there’s nothing to fill that back in with. [...] Because, my dad died when I was 17, but... I felt like I was mourning him again... because, I felt like I was mourning no longer being related to him, you know? Because, I adored my father – I mean, I *adored* my father! So, finding out I wasn’t related to him was devastating – it still is! Like, I still tear up 11 years later... I wish that he was my father, desperately. (Rachel, 42, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

In talking about her deceased father, Rachel’s eyes, again, filled with tears. The revelation of a genetic nonconnection, she relates, has caused her to “re-mourn” her father. Rachel’s emphasis on this genetic (non)connection is not only telling of its effects in terms of her identity, but also

of (the knowledge of) genetic links as facilitating connectedness between family members. Meanwhile, her older brother, Robert, whom I interviewed about three months after I interviewed Rachel, maintains that he has “never been that upset about it.” He elaborates:

I feel like it came from a loving decision from my parents, right? That they wanted us and... they've dealt with a lot of other things in their life, so I think being equipped with telling that to a young person... it just was a different era, right? I don't think they did it intentionally to hurt anyone or to protect anything. I think it's just the way it was. [...]

And, I think because I found out at an age where I already was... I had my career, and I already define myself in other ways, and I've seen enough of the world – I don't know, it just never really struck me as a terribly wrong – it might be wrong in certain ways, but personally, for me, I never felt it was done in a wrong or harmful way. (Robert, 44)

Robert focuses on his parent's intentions and on “the way it was” during the time period when his parents made the decision to use an anonymous sperm donor. Moreover, like Paul, in explaining why he is “not that upset about it”, Robert points to the fact that he found out about his conception circumstances at a time in his life where he could “define [himself] in other ways”. I ask Robert if he ascribes any emotional or personal issues in his life to the manner by which he was conceived. He replies:

No, I don't think so... I actually went to therapy last year thinking maybe there was something there, right? And I was dealing with other relationship-things, and mom, and... I felt like it was good to talk to a therapist for a few months, but it didn't seem like it was much that... – it's more of a matter-of-fact, like: “Yeah, this happened to you”, but it's not causing me any serious distress about who I am as a human. And, I think... I already knew I was gonna be an engineer, and, I wanted to be an engineer since I was six, I am pretty self-aware of who I am and what I wanna do and... yeah, I would love to

meet the father, but if I never meet him then at least I know I got some of my background from him. (Robert, 44)

Robert has incorporated new knowledge of conception into his identity and he has reassessed aspects of his relationships with his parents (“I think I really did get a deeper appreciation for them doing this”). Robert also “always knew” what he wanted to do for a living, and his learning of his conception did not change that. Despite the fact that he would love to meet “the father”, the knowledge of his genitor’s existence and what little information Robert has learned about him, is enough. Rachel, who has done all the work in deanonymizing their genitor, has shared some of the information she has discovered with Robert:

Rachel did tell me little things that she found out from his ex-wife. And there’s a little bit of a rebellious spirit, and maybe he was a little uneven in terms of emotions. And... it’s good to be aware of that, I think. I think Rachel thinks we gotta guard ourselves from going crazy, but... who knows? You don’t know the circumstances, you know, it could be the environment as much as anything else. (Robert, 44)

Robert places a higher value on “the environment” and on other aspects of his life than his genetic composition, heritage, and its influence on his life. Moreover, despite their genitor’s ex-wife’s assertion that he developed a severe mental illness and consequently lost his career and family, Robert describes his genitor as “a little uneven in terms of emotions”, and “rebellious”. This conceptualization, perhaps, is more easily incorporated into Robert’s reality.

Although the exact dynamics that influence activation of knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin (and that determine who becomes transilient and not) are difficult to discern, and are, perhaps, better assessed by a different approach, I suggest that identity and family-circumstance *do* determine the ways and the degrees to which knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin is activated. I also suggest that these circumstances determine whether activation of knowledge of donor conception develops into what is here labeled transilience. However, and importantly, the “personal circumstances” that allow for, and cultivate,



transilience, are extremely difficult to discern exactly, and, again, likely impossible to predict and, should one wish to do so, prevent. Thus, the suggestion that it is “circumstantial”, even though it is correct, says nothing of what kind of circumstances produce transilience. Further, the implication that only “bad circumstances” produce transilience is misleading and is ultimately detrimental to the political efforts of donor conceived persons advocating to ban donor anonymity and to more generally regulate the fertility industry.

### Cancellation

Konrad proposes that transilience is “cancelled out” by “physical encounters enacted through re-union” (Konrad, 2005, p. 214). For the most part, I agree with this proposal. After all, transilience is defined as the activation of “known ‘half-knowns’ or by what is simply imagined and not yet known.” (Konrad, 2005, p. 181). However, I wish to introduce a case from which I draw the suggestion that transilience *may* survive the physical encounter enacted through re-union. Moreover, I wish to discuss the notion of “purely imaginary”, as the process of deanonymization (elaborated in chapter 4) is a *gradual* unconcealing of genitor’s (or genetic half-siblings’) identity. Through this process, the donor conceived person that is deanonymizing her genitor may acquire information of many aspects of the genitor’s personal life before (if ever) a physical encounter is enacted. For example, information may be acquired by gaining access to his Facebook profile through internet research. His occupation, his interests, his appearance, and his family situation may be revealed, thus obscuring the line between what is “purely imagined”, and what is “known to be true”. Moreover, although I did not observe this in any of my interlocutors, I wish to suggest that, at least hypothetically, transilience can be cancelled even without the enactment of a physical encounter. I will return to this idea by the end of this chapter.

In chapter 2 I showed how Marie’s relationship with her genitor, after she had been “put off” by him during their first and only meeting, had regressed to dormancy (instead of being terminated). I proposed that it was the potentiality embedded in the knowledge of the genetic link between them that prevented the relation from being terminated, instead suspending it for potential re-activation. During our interview, Marie reflected on her situation:

You know, I had my moments where it was really... devastating... and all-encompassing, where I was just trying to figure out what it all meant. And, over the summer, after I had met him, and was just put off by him, I started reading some of the posts by other donor conceived people on the Facebook groups and things like that. And... at first, I became a bit obsessed with them, like, reading everybody's stories, and, it was the first time I had access to other people who were going through a similar thing... and it helped me realize how widespread it is. And... uhm... I don't know, I guess I was just kind of grappling with that. I think the hardest part was really just me trying to understand what it was that I was going through, and why I was having a hard time with it. And once I rationalized that, like, once I took a step back and analyzed myself... once I was able to do that, I just kind of...moved on. I mean, maybe I'm repressing something and it's gonna come out later but... Yeah, I'd rather just concentrate on my own family, and the people that are important in my life, and not focus on this douchebag [her genitor] out in Texas somewhere. (Marie, 37)

Marie's account is yet a testament to the emotions and the ambiguities entangled in transilience. Moreover, Marie's suggestion that she has not completely moved on is further supported by her confiding that she sent her genitor an e-mail, "opening the door back up", after her father's (pater) recent death (discussed in chapter 2). To Marie's disappointment, her genitor did not respond to her e-mail. With the relationship with her genitor indeterminately inactive, Marie, then, still imagines a reactivation. She wishes that she could learn to know him better, while hoping that he would want to know her and her children as well. In my view, in Marie's case, a relation has not been established (as opposed to a non-relation). In fact, the non-relation is still very much active, at least as a "known 'half-known'" (Konrad, 2005, p. 181). I grant that the relation is no longer "purely imaginary", however, I also find this to be the case

for many of my other interlocutors, including some of those who has not met their genitor (i.e. by acquiring information through Facebook profiles). Thus, I propose that gradual deanonymization of genitor may constitute a “half-known”, or *partly imaginary*, non-relation, and, although she has met her genitor once, this is also the case for Marie. Effectively, then, the active non-relation makes Marie transilient.

Moreover – and this is in line with Konrad’s notions of cancelling and maintaining transilience – Marie has learned of the possible existence of genetic half-siblings:

I asked him [her genitor] how often [he had donated] and he said: “Probably every other week” ... And this is over a period of... you know, multiple years. So, that was kind of mind blowing to me. Maybe I have hundreds of siblings out there! (Marie, 37)

Additionally, Marie has learned of the existence of his children that he raised:

I am still curious about his kids. I kind of... I think that’s the thing that still bugs me. Because I kind of want to get to know them. I think I have just this curiosity, like: (Marie makes a high-pitched, naïve-sounding voice) “Are we alike? Do we have things in common? Because we’re brother and sister?” ... uhm, so he has two – he has two kids that I know about. (Marie, 37)

Thus, Marie remains transilient not only because of her hopes and imaginaries of her genitor, but also because of her knowledge of the existence and plausible existence of her genetic half siblings (Konrad, 2005, p. 214). The prospect of acquiring new knowledge of unknown genetic kin was present in the lives of all my interlocutors. New half-siblings and cousins may appear any day, particularly as a match on a DNA database website. Thus, even when cancelled, transilience may be reactivated should new knowledge of genetic kin present itself. Of course, one may opt not to include newly discovered genetic kin in one’s life. However, even then, as Strathern proposes:

... the information is already, so to speak, knowledge, that is, already embedded in the way one acts towards others and perceives the world. In short, in Euro-American thinking, knowledge creates relationships: the relationships come into being when the knowledge does. (Strathern, 1999, pp. 77-78)

In other words, the knowledge of a genetic link between self and other choicelessly implies the nature, so to speak, of the relation. And, as has been illustrated several times in this thesis, an immediate genetic connection is automatically significant in some way or another. “Knowledge creates relationships” says Strathern, however, in applying Konrad’s terminology, knowledge may also create non-relations. That is, “half-known” or “imagined” relations that despite their imaginariness influence and constitute identities and relationships. Whether or not such non-relations qualify as “real kinship” – Sahlins would, perhaps, say that they do not – is a question with many answers. Again, even among my interlocutors there was disagreement about the implications of knowledge of genetic links between otherwise unfamiliar persons. Moreover, although new knowledge of unknown genetic kin does not necessarily reactivate transilience (for example, if one does not act on genetic information or should choose not to include the discovered person in one’s life – though, even then, the non-relation may elicit inquiry and inform identity), there is always a chance that it might. Furthermore, the mere knowledge that there *might* exist more immediate genetic kin “out there”, is for some persons enough to maintain transilience indefinitely.

Now, then, the final question of this chapter: if not a physical encounter, what is it that cancels transilience? This question is, perhaps, best answered by examining the desired effects of meeting one’s genitor. In short, the desired effect is to have the questions prompted by gaining knowledge of donor conception, answered. Except for Marie, every one of my interlocutors who met their genitor (on which I will elaborate in chapter 4) had in common the experience of having questions answered, and their curiosity satisfied. The answers to their questions could manifest as “pieces fitting into place” or as “making sense” in terms of identity as constituted (at least partly) by genetic inheritance. However, answers could, in other cases, manifest as

affirming a belief in a non-significance of genetic heredity. That is, if one found little or no similarities between self and genitor, the donor conceived person could view the genetic relation as trivial, emphasizing, instead, other aspects of life as constitutive of identity. The point is, transilience is not cancelled by meeting one's genitor *per se*, but rather by the establishment of "a new reality" (M. T. Taussig, 1999, p. 135). This new reality is characterized partly by the perception that answers demanded by the questions raised upon gaining knowledge of donor conception, have been provided.

In Turnerian terms, the new reality equates the end of liminality. The donor conceived person's world, again (as it did before she knew she was donor conceived), "makes sense", and there are no (more) elicitive mysteries and "known half-knowns". The knowledge acquired through deanonymization provides acceptance for reality as is. For example, upon meeting one's genitor, the genitor's appearance and personality may resonate with the donor conceived person, allowing for reaffirmation of self and an amiable relationship to develop (as it turned out for Madeleine and Karen, explored in chapter 4). In other cases, the genitor may be recognized merely as a friend, emanating no familiar or recognizable attributes as perceived by the donor conceived person, reinforcing then, perhaps, an understanding of self as "self-made" (as in the case of Phoebe and Jessica, explored in chapter 4). In this way, one may conceptualize how transilience can survive an encounter with genitor, as in the case of Marie. This is because it is the very character of the encounter that determines its outcome. Likewise, one may also imagine how transilience may be cancelled *before* encountering one's genitor. Although I am not sure it is practically possible, there are, in my view, theoretically, a number of ways such a cancellation could happen. In the case of Rachel, for whom it is highly unlikely will ever meet her genitor (and will thus remain transilient for the rest of her life), she would have to acquiesce with the knowledge available to her. She would have to find a way to "kill off" the elicitations produced by her learning of her donor conception and the existence of unknown genetic kin. In effect, the desire for answers must cease, and along with it, in M. T. Taussig's words, the "act of unmasking" that "augment[s] the mystery" it hopes to unmask (1999, p. 105) must end.

To summarize, I propose that transilience occurs when reality is significantly disturbed – when the information gained upon learning of one’s donor conception is not incorporated into one’s perceived reality, but instead prompts questions that remain unanswered, and creates non-relations that hopes to become relations. What is needed, then, for transilience to be cancelled, is either for those questions to be answered and the non-relations to become relations (which is precisely the desire that maintains transilience), or for the cessation of inquiry and imaginaries of unknown genetic kin altogether. This would mean the acceptance and acquiescent incorporation of the information available into one’s life. In a word, for transilience to cancel out, “a new reality” must be established (M. T. Taussig, 1999, p. 135).

## Chapter 4

### Deanonymization

I have been dreaming about my father recently, now that I know what he looks like. And he's always rejecting me in my dreams. I never dreamt of him before I knew what he looked like. (Julie, 34)

Upon meeting one's genitor, it is likely – however, as shown, not guaranteed – that transilience is cancelled. However, a myriad of steps is taken to reach that point, and outcomes of this process vary significantly. This chapter examines some of the methods employed and some of the considerations made by donor conceived persons looking for unknown genetic kin. It also highlights some of the internal and external obstacles and difficulties one might encounter in this process. Furthermore, I will explore how (non)relations are established and activated even when one does not manage to completely deanonymize one's genitor. I call the process of obtaining information about anonymous kin, *deanonymization*.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of deanonymizing genitor, this is a process which includes obtaining photographs of genitor, his Facebook profile, e-mail address, marital status and number of children, home and office address, his donor profile<sup>26</sup>, information about his attributes and interests, and anything else pertaining to his identity and personality. This process also includes the processing of DNA tests and the browsing of family trees and archives, text messaging, phone calls, and, finally, if allowed, a physical encounter. This process may span, with irregular intensity, for years and even decades. When deanonymization is completed, different types of relationships may be established, and different things might be learned about self. Hence, by observing

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<sup>25</sup> This term was originally and is most commonly used in the IT world and describes a “data mining strategy in which anonymous data is cross-referenced with other data sources to re-identify the anonymous data source.” (Rouse, 2015). Although “deanonymization” recently has been employed to describe judicial prohibitions of gamete donor anonymity (Tamir, 2013; Chambers & Hillsburg, 2013), I use it here to describe the process of deanonymization instigated and undertaken by individual donor conceived persons.

<sup>26</sup> The voluntary biographical information provided by the genitor upon donation. This includes basic measurements and appearance information like height, weight, and eye-color, but can additionally include education- and work history and a short list of personality attributes and recreational preferences.

deanonymization, certain deductions may be made about the role of genetics in conceptualizations of identity and family.

Transilience and deanonymization are fundamentally interlinked. I suggest that for transilient persons, there is necessarily a desire for at least some deanonymization. Yet, one may be transilient without having initiated a process of deanonymization, and without having made any progress in this process. Further, it is conceivable that one may partake in deanonymization without being transilient, especially if information about genitor is discovered by another party, and subsequently conveyed to the non-transilient, non-searching donor conceived person. This chapter also hopes to illustrate that for persons who become transilient, deanonymization is both an integral part to the cancellation *and* to the reproduction of transilience. Additionally, it may be a source of considerable emotional stress.

My interlocutors reported having deanonymized their respective genitor to different degrees and had many considerations about how and whether to proceed with making contact. This chapter presents some of these considerations, along with different outcomes of those that finally reached out to their genitor – outcomes ranging from being accepted, ignored, and outright rejected. Through these examples a few points will be made. It will be shown how knowledge of unknown genetic kin is coupled with identity and how it often bears implications of and for relationships. By examining the process of deanonymization it will also become clear how this process affects transilience: how transilience is maintained, intensified, and, finally, cancelled. Further, the unpredictability of the outcome of deanonymization will be explored. The risk of rejection and hope for acceptance often subjects the donor conceived person to considerable suffering and distress, as there is no way of knowing how the genitor will respond to one's reaching out. Chapter 3 examined how imaginaries contribute to the reproduction of transilience; imagination also plays a crucial role in deanonymization. Moreover, the process of deanonymization is interesting in yet another way. As mentioned previously, constitutive knowledge does not cease its movements when the donor conceived person learns of her conception. The donor conceived person who deanonymizes her genitor is usually doing so without her genitor's consent and awareness. As Lily relates:



...sometimes, you know, when I'm telling this story to strangers I'll pull up a picture of my donor and it's just really weird to be that casual about it, like: "Oh yeah, here's my biological father; he has no idea I exist, but I could tell you his ex-wife's name, his kid's name, where they live..." (Lily laughs). (Lily, 24)<sup>27</sup>

Lily now "holds" information about anonymous kin (herself in relation to genitor) and the decision of whether or not to share it. I have earlier presented this same phenomenon with Kimberly and her donor conceived genetic half-sister Chloe. Though the relations in these examples are different, the situation is similar enough to illustrate a point: with regards to donor conception, constitutive knowledge does not only concern the person conceived. Information of donor conception may yet be shared with more persons on whom it will have constitutive effects. This is also interesting in situations where one learns of one's donor conception by completing a DNA test. Years ago, Kimberly matched with Logan, a genetic half-brother whom at the time, like Chloe, did not know he was donor conceived. This was the first and only sibling Kimberly had matched with until Chloe, and it was Kimberly's reaching out to Logan that informed him of his donor conception. Interestingly, as Kimberly stated, Logan has decided not to tell his parents that he knows about his donor conception. Thus, expanding on Feuillet-Liger's notion of the double secret (2011, p. 39), the situation now entails a *triple secret*: 1) Logan's parents are keeping information of his conception from him, while 2) Logan is keeping his knowledge of said information from them, meanwhile 3) the genitor's identity is unknown to both parties (although, at the time of my field-work, Kimberly and Logan had deanonymized their genitor to a certain degree). Again, what is interesting is how information of conception is exchanged between – and kept from – different parties, and how the decision of whether to share it also entails the decision whether to release constitutive effects.

I suggest that deanonymization is always completed upon a physical encounter (where Konrad, but not I, would claim transience is cancelled), but that the process may be terminated even

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<sup>27</sup> Lily later expressed her ambivalence about this uneven knowledge relation: "I feel a little uneasy that I know him, and he doesn't know that. But, you know, I made that choice to creep into his life".

before such an encounter. As some of my interlocutors were content with just knowing the identity of their genitor, but wishing no further contact, I argue that termination is relative to the desired outcome of each individual process of deanonymization. Thus, although I argue that a physical encounter necessarily completes deanonymization, I maintain that there is no definite point where deanonymization is terminated *before* such an encounter is enacted. Moreover, I will problematize the satisfaction of premature termination of deanonymization. Deanonymization also includes the obtainment of information about unknown genetic half-siblings, however, space does not allow for the elaboration on all these various progressions and outcomes. Thus, I reserve my focus for the deanonymization of genitor.

### Contacting Unknown Genetic Kin

When I first met Kimberly in January 2018, she had already attempted to establish contact with her genitor four times. She had first sent a letter, then six months later she had sent a card, and she had tried to call him on the phone twice:

...it went to voicemail both times, and I decided I don't have to put myself through this, and... you know, it was too hard, it was too hard to try... I literally stared at the Skype icon for three hours before I even started dialing the number... I have never been so afraid in my life... I don't know, it was so... I couldn't even understand, I could not get my head in the right place to just be calm and call him. Like, I would sit there and I'd be crying and I'd be shaking, and I... yeah. Your brain's going: "It's a total stranger, who cares if he judges you?" But it just felt like it was so much on the line, and I couldn't risk messing it up. I just feel this responsibility to be perfect and understanding and welcoming, so that he will respond to me, and I don't feel that way about anyone else in my life, but I can't, I can't help it, like... it's irrational. At one point I was really upset and [my boyfriend] was trying to give me some perspective, to make me calm down, and he would say: "He's just a guy, he's just a person", and I'm like: "NO! That is the point! He is

not.” And I know that he’s a stranger but there’s *one* guy out there who’s my biological father! So *of course* I’m gonna be upset if I find out that he’s dead or that I’ll never have the chance to talk to him. (Kimberly, 37, emphasis added for vocal emphasis)

I quote Kimberly at length to illustrate the emotional intensity enmeshed in the acts of contacting one’s genitor. Most notably, this pertains to the fear of rejection in reaching out<sup>28</sup>. Even though Kimberly often stresses the importance of placing responsibility on donors and sperm banks and clinics, here it is Kimberly who feels a responsibility to not provoke a negative response in her genitor. In my view, this attests to the emotional weight of this action, and, again, the high risk involved. Later in my fieldwork, Kimberly received a response from her genitor. I visited her to talk about it about a month after she had received his letter. She told me she had a “literal panic attack” when she first saw it in the mailbox. And, to say the least, his response was not what she had hoped for, and Kimberly relates that the fact that it was handwritten was the only positive thing about it. Kimberly summed up the content of the letter as “very impersonal”. For example, it was addressed to “Ms. Johnson” – her last name, instead of her first – and that it was basically him telling her to respect his privacy. Kimberly was visibly upset about it. She struggled to understand how he could be “so selfish”, and how he could “not even acknowledge [her] as a person”. She confides that she is “back on antidepressants” because of it.

I pause briefly to present another example that illustrates the emotional aspects of deanonymization; namely, obtaining a photograph of the genitor. As Lily stated during our first interview: “That’s the moment it became real, when I saw the picture.” The importance of physical resemblance in determining kinship in Western societies has been noted by several scholars (Becker, 2000, p. 228; Konrad, 2005, p. 142; Marre & Bestard, 2008, p. 78), and the revelation of the face of the genitor often bears a profound impact on the deanonymizing

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<sup>28</sup> Some interlocutors consistently used the term “to make contact”, rather than “to reach out”, while for others the opposite was true. Others, again, used the two more or less interchangeably. I reserve the possibility that the appliance of these nuanced terms reveals something about the emotionality and hopes/fears entailed in establishing a relation with genitor. Unfortunately, I do not have space to consider this matter in this thesis.

donor conceived person. The genitor's face is what causes Julie's dreams, as cited at the beginning of this chapter. Further, one of the things Molly – whose relationship with her genitor I will expand on below – found most impactful about meeting her genitor was the sensation of looking into his eyes:

Looking into his eyes it was just very weird seeing it was actually my eyes I was looking at. Like, I didn't realize neither of my parents had my eyes exactly. So, when I looked at his it was almost an out-of-this-world experience. (Molly, 27)

Having had a month to reflect on her situation, Kimberly finds some solace in knowing her genitor's identity, having seen pictures of him, and having acquired a sense of who he is. In this way, she considers herself lucky when compared to other donor conceived persons whose genitor is completely unknown. For Amanda, for example, this was the case for a long time. Amanda, now 49 years old, was informed of her donor conception by her mother when she was 23. Her genitor had remained completely anonymous through most of her life, until June 2018 – late in my fieldwork – when she finally had a breakthrough.

Amanda discovered that her genitor was a doctor, that he was a pilot, and that he had died two decades ago, 70 years old. Along with this discovery came the revelation of his children (that he had raised with his wife), now in their 50s, whom Amanda subsequently attempted to reach out to, with the hope, as she stated, of learning more about their father (Amanda's genitor). Not knowing their father had been a sperm donor until Amanda reached out, his children responded to her with caution. When I left California, Amanda had yet to establish contact with her newly discovered paternal genetic relatives<sup>29</sup>. Some of my other interlocutors also reported encountering cautiousness when reaching out to unfamiliar genetic kin. Those who encountered this cautious response usually attributed it to a suspicion of “scamming” – that the people whom they reached out to suspected that the story of a genetic link and donor conception was only a pretense to acquire some financial gain. In fact, even with a genetic link

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<sup>29</sup> Amanda, after my field-work had ended, related briefly in a text message that she has since met with a paternal first cousin, which was “a really cool experience”.

confirmed, the suspicion of scamming was not always abandoned. Thus, suspicion, death, and rejection are some of many external obstacles donor conceived persons might encounter in their attempt to reach out to genitor or other unfamiliar genetic relatives.

Still, whatever information is available about genitor can be of some, however slight, comfort to the searching person, even when the process of deanonymization is terminated before the desired outcome is realized. I have already mentioned Kimberly's reflections around knowing her genitor's identity. As she says: "There are certain things that I've found out about him where I can see similarities between us". Likewise, Amanda, who had a tenuous relationship with her now-deceased pater, was noticeably content with the knowledge that her genitor had been a doctor and a pilot – and in her estimation an all-round more reputable character than her pater – thus confirming and validating their disconnection. Deanonymization then, even upon premature termination caused by external factors, and although ultimately dissatisfactory, can provide some valuable activation of knowledge for donor conceived persons.

Further, it could be argued that like adult adoptees searching for birth kin, donor conceived individuals deanonymizing genitor "create continuities of kinship out of disparate elements" (Carsten, 2007b, p. 85); elements like photographs, attributes, careers and education, thus establishing meaningful partly imagined relations or non-relations (Konrad, 2005, pp. 129, 242) with (partly) anonymous kin. On this note I return to Lily. In many regards Lily stands as a juxtaposing point to the accounts of Kimberly and Amanda, and, also, to several other interlocutors. Lily's process of deanonymization had not been cancelled by external factors but had been stopped on her own initiative. She explains:

I think the unspoken thing between me and my sister<sup>30</sup> is that... both of our social fathers<sup>31</sup> would need to not... be living anymore, before we [would contact our genitor].

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<sup>30</sup> Lily is referencing her donor conceived genetic half-sister whom she discovered through Ancestry.com three years before my field-work, when she was 22 years old. Lily consistently labeled her "my sister".

<sup>31</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, Lily is using the term "social father" in our conversation only to clearly distinguish who she is referencing.

And both our social fathers are very old and not in very good health, so... My sister definitely feels like: "I'm not doing it until my dad's died". And once she said that, I was like: "Oh yeah, I don't think I feel comfortable doing it either until then" ... So, who knows when that happens? But then we're mourning the loss of our fathers so, I think it will be just way too much. (Lily, 25)

Lily knows the identity of her genitor, along with "his ex-wife's name, his kid's name, where they live" and more. She has found this information by connecting family trees and searching Google and Facebook. However, one of the reasons she does not want to attempt to establish contact with her genitor is her belief that it would be disrespectful to her pater. My point is that obstacles to deanonymization do not only manifest as external catalysts but are also generated in the intersocial dynamic of the family. Moreover, Lily is afraid of being rejected and of what she might discover in terms of her genitor's personality. "It would be unfortunate to meet your biological father and he's a total weirdo. I think it would reflect poorly on me, you know, that technically this person had a part in making me and he's a weirdo (Lily laughs)".

Lily stated, half-jokingly, that she would have liked to observe her genitor without him knowing, just to, in her words, "kind of do the weirdo-check" to see if "he's a nice guy, if he's liked, and if he's respected." Thus, self-centered factors like imaginaries of the future and of the imagined inheritance of negative personality traits may also halt the process of deanonymization. Further, I understand her proposal of an incognito "weirdo-check" as also attesting to her fear of rejection and to the relative stability and safety of keeping (not sharing) information containing (possible) constitutive effects contra the possible precarious position of sharing such information. Likewise, the "safe position of keeping information" is what Kimberly necessarily sacrificed when she reached out to her genitor, hence her "three hours of staring at the Skype logo" and the ensuing emotional intensity. Similarly, Julie states:

I want to meet him, but I'm scared – you can say I'm a chicken. Sometimes the stories of people contacting their fathers are beautiful. But sometimes they're horrible. Some

people even get a restraining order. I am really scared, because I know that if he does reject me I have no cushion. Some people can say “I have my family that loves me if he rejects me”, but I don’t have that... but maybe one day I will do it. (Julie, 35)

For many of my interlocutors a fear of rejection played a critical part in halting deanonymization<sup>32</sup>. Some stated that were they ever to contact their genitor, they would have to be in “an emotionally stable place” to do so, to be sure they could “handle the [potential] rejection”. Fear, then, crucially affects the temporality of deanonymization. Fear may be greatly intensified when one attempts to contact genitor, as the object of fear, namely rejection, may consequently become real. Where the decision of whether to initiate (the proposition of) a relationship (by reaching out) previously was the donor conceived person’s alone, the act of reaching out passes this decision entirely to the genitor.

Thus, a power dynamic is established between the two parties. However, because the act of reaching out is itself an act of much potency, this power dynamic is interesting for yet another reason. The effects of making contact may ripple through the social world of the genitor and influence more persons than was intended or imagined by the donor conceived person. The genitor’s decision, then, of whether to reject, accept, or ignore, may be colored by his own – and his family’s – reality being disrupted by the constitutive knowledge of an unfamiliar genetic offspring’s existence (and more, his or her wish to establish contact). Thus, although, through making contact, all power is surrendered to the responding genitor, the act itself is also powerful in that it may inadvertently disrupt and alter many aspects of the genitor’s life.

There are a few additional points to extract from Lily’s considerations about reaching out to her genitor. One of those points also reinforces my point about safety contra precarity in keeping/sharing information. When we first met in early March, Lily was ambivalent about contacting her genitor and had more or less decided to postpone contact indefinitely. Furthermore, she stated clearly that she did not care much about him – that knowing his

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<sup>32</sup> As shown in Julie’s quote above, different stories shared in the Facebook groups, of rejection and of acceptance in contacting genitor, adds to the emotional stakes of reaching out.

identity was enough. However, when we met about a month later, the situation had changed. Lily had now discovered two new donor conceived half-siblings: two “full” sisters, raised by the same single mother, one with whom Lily had matched on Ancestry.com. What is more, Lily had, to her surprise, and along with her half-siblings, also matched with her genitor (keep in mind that Lily already knew who the genitor was through online research), meaning that the genitor himself had completed a personalized DNA test.

Within the first week of these matches, the two newfound sisters informed Lily that they were about to reach out to the genitor<sup>33</sup>. Lily had quite dispassionately approved of their reaching out, explaining to me that if she “took the backseat” in making contact, the prospect of being rejected would not hurt as much, seeing as it would be them (the sisters), and not her, being rejected. However, because of how it all turned out, this is a decision she now regrets. The two sisters screenshotted both their initial message to the genitor and the genitor’s response and shared the images of the messages with Lily through Facebook messenger. Lily reiterated portions of the genitor’s response to me, in which he said he was willing to share medical information and to maintain contact with the sisters, concluding his message with: “I’ll be happy to hear from you”. However, once the sisters replied to the genitor and the genitor again wrote back, the sisters refused to share the exact content of those messages with Lily. The sisters told Lily that “he doesn’t want to talk to us anymore” and seeing as they refused to share the exact content of the latter part of their dialogue with the genitor (i.e. by screenshooting the message like they did with the first messages), Lily could only speculate on why the genitor had decided to withdraw.

According to Lily, the two sisters likely disincentivized the genitor’s wish to maintain contact, possibly because, having been raised by a single mother, they “wanted a father”, a role the genitor was not comfortable embodying. Again, this is all speculation on Lily’s part. Still, consequently, Lily now feels like a “door is shut” – that the sisters not only spoiled their own

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<sup>33</sup> Considering the genitor’s knowledge of his previous sperm contributions, one could argue that having now completely processed a DNA test he had done this with the intent of interacting with potential genetic offspring.



chance of establishing contact with the genitor, but Lily's chances as well. Moreover, Lily suggests that in contacting the genitor, the two sisters "represented" not only themselves, but also Lily – as one of his donor conceived offspring. Thus, although Lily "took the backseat" so as to not personally feel rejected, ultimately, she could not adequately separate herself from her donor conceived sisters, and Lily now believes that the sisters have tarnished the genitor's impression of her.

This example highlights some unpredictable complications to (the management of) deanonymization. Further, the example illustrates how the safety of holding information converts into precarity as the information is shared, even when, as in Lily's instance, someone else shares the information. It also exemplifies how the interests of different parties involved can come into conflict, i.e. how activation of constitutive knowledge of one's donor conception and unknown kin may interfere with other donor conceived persons' activation (for example, one's own management of deanonymization may be ruined by other parties' deanonymization). Events such as these may intensify and prolong transience and may pause and possibly even terminate deanonymization (thus, in turn, unless cancelled by other means, extend transience ad infinitum).

Lily's example illustrates yet another point: because, by her own account, Lily was "most surprised by how much [she] cared":

I told my mom, like, "I'm upset that I care so much, because I never cared before". And it's funny, because the more I learn about him, over the past year, I have cared more every single step of the way. Like; I saw a picture of him, and I got really upset. And... when I heard they were gonna send him an e-mail I was kind of okay because I already knew who he was, and then as soon as I found out that [they] had gone and messed up that, I cared all the way (Lily laughs), and I was *so upset!* (Lily, 24, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

Despite previously claiming her indifference and emotional disconnectedness to the matter, Lily, addressing the two sisters' failed attempt at contacting the genitor, attests to her increased emotional investment:

I very quickly realized that I do care what was said [in the e-mail], because obviously it can go terribly wrong. But still, even as I sit here now, and I've had time to think on it – I don't know why I give a shit what he thinks or what he said or... I don't know why. But in a way I do care what he thinks of us and me... which is awful. (Lily, 24)

Lily, like Kimberly and Julie and several of my other interlocutors, experience an almost inexplicable emotional investment in their genitor, one that even they – with noticeable exasperation – pronounce “irrational”. In my estimation such examples testify to the axiomatic significance of genetic heredity in the West (for other examples of social significances of genetic heredity, see Becker, 2000; Finkler, 2017; Novas & Rose, 2000). Importantly, this is not to say that genetically based relationships automatically and absolutely “override” socially founded relationships, but it is to say that where a genetic link is known, there is always (at least in my interlocutor's cases) an *implication* of filiality, and a cause for (re)considering relationships. The implicit value of genetics and the axiomatic significance of genetic heredity, and the following implications, are often difficult to negotiate. Thus, there is considerable ambiguity tied to the meanings of genetics, particularly with regards to identity and relationships.

Lily's situation also serves as an example of someone “act[ing] on [an] irrelational kinship-link” (Konrad, 2005, p. 118). This is a kind of one-sided relation that, as previously stated, may challenge Sahlins' “mutuality of being” (2013). However, in defending Sahlins' idea, one might argue that as deanonymization indeed progresses – that is, as anonymity diminishes – the potential for an actual intersubjective participation (Sahlins, 2013, p. 20) increases. In other words, with decreased anonymity increases the prospect of Sahlinsian kinship – hence the amplified emotional intensity of the (non)relation. However, even in cases where, upon completed deanonymization, a relationship is established and allowed to prosper, we should not hastily label it “kinship”. It is true that some of my interlocutors do label their

deanonymized genitor “dad”, but it is also true that some reserve the term “dad” for the man who raised them, and instead employ “donor” or the genitor’s name in referencing their genitor; stating, as previously considered, that “parent is a title earned over time”. Of course, despite having a clear notion of “who’s family and who’s not”, navigating the significance of a genetic link may still prove difficult.

### Complete Deanonymization

I will now consider some of the outcomes of complete deanonymization, that is, where the donor conceived person physically encounters her genitor. I have already discussed one such outcome, where Marie met her genitor and left feeling “more confused” than before the meeting. I argued that in Marie’s case, transilience survived the physical encounter. However, I believe this is seldom the outcome. When deanonymization is completed, transilience is likely cancelled, and is necessarily cancelled if a relationship is established and allowed to prosper – thus transforming the non-relation (Konrad, 2005, p. 242) into a relation. I introduce Karen, a 43-year-old author living in Los Angeles with her husband and three children. Karen’s mother passed away when she was 10, and she was told of her donor conception by her pater when she was 29 years old. At 41 she met her genitor for the first time. In addition to talking on the phone once a month or so, Karen says:

... we’ve seen each other maybe four times in the last two years. It’s very fun – we’re lucky we get along and it’s great to go out to dinner and have a good time and talk about books and talk about poetry and... it’s great! Both our temperaments are very compatible with that kind of a relationship, I think. Uhm... and I would just wish for anybody that their donor was capable of the same. (Karen, 43)

Karen has given much thought to the experience of being donor conceived. She has even written and published a novel about her own experience of finding and meeting her genitor. Moreover, Karen is gathering data for future projects about donor conceived persons. When we conducted our interview, she had her own questions for me, and she too recorded our

conversation – as she has recorded conversations with other donor conceived persons before me – for her own future projects. Karen’s situation is one example where transilience has been cancelled and an amiable relationship has evolved upon completed deanonymization. Karen related that the decade after learning of her conception circumstances was filled with “bits and bops of looking – periods of intense activity”, and that it was not until she received help from a friend adept at genealogical research that she finally had a breakthrough and discovered her genitor. She sent him a letter and he replied that he would be happy to meet her. I ask Karen what she calls him, and she says that when she’s speaking with him, she uses his name, and when referring to him she either says “donor” or “biological father”:

...it’s kind of like a new category person: “My donor!” (Karen chuckles), it’s like... closer than an uncle, you know? That’s how I think of the word. I would never say, “This is my dad”, but he says, “This is my daughter”, which I really like. And somebody pointed that out to me and said: “Well, typically, we can have more than one daughter, but we’re not used to having more than one father”. And yeah, I didn’t grow up with the idea that I had two fathers, so, somehow calling him my father seems a little off. ... But I’m sort of delighted that he calls me his daughter. It feels like a warm thing for him to do. (Karen, 43)

The implication of filiality is, in this case, overt. “Uncle” and “daughter” are terms employed because of the two parties’ shared knowledge of the immediate genetic link between them, and by their interpersonal affinity. Writing her novel and interviewing other donor conceived persons, Karen has had much time to reflect on what it means to be donor conceived, and she mentions that meeting her donor felt like discovering a missing piece. I ask her what that piece was, “what did that piece contain?”.

Before, it contained just a desire to know “who” ... and then when I met “who”, it was filled in with all of these qualities that I recognize in myself. It was like looking in the

mirror and not seeing those qualities reflected back, and then, all of a sudden, the mirror changed, and I could see them more clearly. And so... my donor – he’s very funny (Karen chuckles), he’s a poet, and he’s very – he’s a little bit eccentric in a very great way that I find engaging, and he likes to laugh and he sends these very engaging texts that I enjoy that are sort of half literary, half rambling, with an eye towards the detail of his life that are really fun for me to read. And... I think in my best moments I would aspire to engage with someone else in that way. [...] I think he really enjoys language – he’s a writer and has written fiction and poetry his whole life, and, I’m not a fiction writer but I do tend towards the verbal in that kind of way and I recognize that in him as well. (Karen, 43)

Karen’s genitor welcoming her into his life has had a profound effect on her sense of self and well-being. Not only does his “qualities” facilitate self-validation for her, she has also established a meaningful, intimate relation with a person she admires and enjoys the company of. In addition to what is cited above, Karen relates that meeting her genitor “took away the anger” that she was directing towards “the medical system”. I noticed such anger – or frustration or indignancy – in all interlocutors whom I consider transilient. Karen still considers herself a “huge advocate for openness” (as opposed to donor anonymity and secrecy around donor conception), but the time- and energy consuming sense of personal anger, along with a “sense of wondering” and “desire to know”, has dissolved. Dissolvement of such personal sentiments, I suggest, are further indicators that transilience is cancelled.

It is worth noting the uncertainty of such a positive outcome. Upon contacting her genitor, Karen had to subject herself to the precarity of reaching out and had no guarantee that she would not be rejected, something she affirms would have been “really awful”. In referencing her and her genitor’s monthly phone-call and occasional meet-up, Karen proposes that, for a former donor, to accept a relationship with his donor conceived offspring is “not that big of a

deal". Karen, as mentioned, is a self-described advocate against donor anonymity and thus encourages donors to welcome their offspring. "What does it really involve? A talk on the phone every month?" she asks. However, the nature of the relationship potentially established upon deanonymization is highly contingent, and may, as shown, not be established at all. It is also plausible that some donor conceived offspring reaching out to their genitor expect or desire more than just a monthly phone call. However, for now, I will not explore this issue further. Instead, recall Julie and how, ever since seeing a photograph of her genitor, she has been dreaming about him, and how he "is always rejecting [her in her] dreams". This is an illuminating example of the high stakes involved in reaching out, and often the outcome is painful rather than delightful. Thus, Karen's outcome of deanonymization was coveted by many of my interlocutors. Before I leave her house, Karen shows me a photograph of herself with her biological father. She looks at it, smiles, and says: "How satisfying is that? How do you put that into words? That's two people smiling at each other, with the same smile."

Karen has not found any donor conceived half-siblings. She is (thus far) her genitor's only donor conceived offspring. For Molly, Phoebe, Douglas, and their genitor, Gary, this is far from the case. Molly, as discussed, inadvertently discovered she was donor conceived when she matched with a half-sibling after completing a DNA test out of general genealogical curiosity. At this point there were already "about a dozen" (Molly, 27) donor conceived half-siblings who had connected with each other, and one of them had six months prior (to when I first spoke with Molly) discovered their common genitor, Gary. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to speak with the girl who gradually deanonymized Gary, however I was told of her method by Douglas – one of her donor conceived half-brothers:

She was able to connect the disparate sets of data [about the genitor] that our mothers had from our conceptions – like, some had his height and eye color, some had his profession, and through research she was able to track him down. She then went on [an online registry of teachers in Los Angeles] and found him. (Douglas, 24)

Gary has since his initial shock completely accepted every one of his donor conceived offspring, whom have now become a group of 21 half-siblings. He attends barbeques, graduations, birthday parties etc., if and when he is invited. He is also a keen initiator of their “family gatherings”. Gary has not raised any children of his own, and was, upon his donor conceived offspring contacting him, a single man in his 50s. According to him, the timing could not have been better, “it’s been a blessing!” he affirmed, adding that connecting with “the children” had resulted in much personal growth for him, and that it had changed his life for the better.

I met Gary with three of his donor conceived offspring<sup>34</sup> for lunch one day in Los Angeles. Through the course of our meal all four were laughing and joking with each other, often remarking they all had inherited – thus shared – the same sense of humor: a quick witted, ironic, and pun-based style where “taking it too far” preceded an initial tension that was immediately broken by much laughter; the more “inappropriate” the joke, the better. Along with a shared sense of humor, creativity – or an “inclination towards the arts” – was also cited as a common denominator in the group of siblings. “We’re all creative!” Molly exclaimed at one point during lunch. Moreover, both Douglas and Molly affirms that meeting Gary has allowed them to understand themselves better. During our private interview a month prior to our lunch, Molly said that her “little puzzle piece had finally fit into place”. Similarly, Douglas, during our interview, stated: “I definitely feel like I know myself better, which is interesting. I didn’t expect to get that.”

As already illustrated, deanonymizing genitor may prompt a sense of self-validation; pieces may fit into place and one may better understand certain aspects of one’s personality. I have also shown how meeting one’s genitor may evoke no such sensation, especially if the outcome of the encounter is unpleasant. However, through the account of Phoebe, another person conceived as the result of Gary’s donations, I will illustrate how even positive outcomes of deanonymizing genitor may not yield explicitly self-validating effects. Phoebe relates:

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<sup>34</sup> I had lunch with Gary, Molly, and two of his other donor conceived offspring whom I did not have the chance to interview. Phoebe and Douglas could not make it.

My sister<sup>35</sup> thinks that I'm gonna have this whole new identity because I found out who this guy [Gary] is, and that I can see all these attributes that I share with him... but I don't think that's important at all, you know? I think you have to decide what's important to you. You have to be okay with yourself, no matter what. So, I think they [donor conceived people looking for their genitor] are searching for something in another person, which I feel like is just a let-down anyway. I don't know if I explained that right. Do you get what I'm saying? (Phoebe, 21)

I ask Phoebe if she means that it's important not to rely on other people to make up who you are as a person. She answers: "Yeah, you find your own sense of identity." In this way, Phoebe asserts that meeting Gary did not affect her identity. Phoebe believes that she creates her identity individualistically and autonomously, and that relying on external factors for self-validation is a bad idea. However, despite this assertion, Phoebe confirms she has learned some things from her time spent with Gary:

I think meeting him has taught me where I want to go. I'm pretty anti-social, but Gary is so outgoing, and I want to be more like that. It seems like he has a lot of friends and he has a full life, and that's what I hope for in the end. And I also think that you have to have a strong sense of self when there's no one there for you, when everything you love falls away... that's what I want to be like, and I think Gary has that. (Phoebe, 21)

Ultimately, then, though there was no immediate sense of belonging or self-validation, meeting Gary has inspired in Phoebe a sense of direction and in him she recognizes several virtuous attributes. Further, through her encounters with Gary, Phoebe has reevaluated another aspect of her life. Remember Paul and how he ameliorated the memory of his father by a re-remembrance allowed for by new knowledge of donor conception ("it made me feel closer to

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<sup>35</sup> Phoebe's older sister that she grew up with, who was donor conceived using a different donor.



him, in a way”). Conversely, Phoebe states that after interacting with Gary, she is now “more angry” with the father she grew up with, with whom she has a tenuous relationship:

I’ve let a lot of things slide with my dad, but as I’ve hung out with Gary and started recognizing like, “Wow, *this* is what you do when you wanna be in someone’s life and you wanna be a dad to them!” ... Gary texts me every week if I don’t write him; he asks me how I am or says he misses me, and, after I visit him, he’ll text me the next day and say: “I’m so glad you came to see me”, and stuff. And that’s way more than my dad does. Gary is just way more interested in my life. (Phoebe, 21, cursive added for vocal emphasis)

I suggest that Gary’s level of commitment is uncommon, even among deanonimized genitors opting to maintain a relationship with their donor conceived offspring, and I speculate that his commitment can be attributed to his marital status and childlessness. However, his overall dedication has incited affection and positive dispositions from Phoebe and his other donor conceived offspring. Gary’s dedication has also illustrated for Phoebe what a father can be and/or should be. However, Phoebe maintains that she has no definite opinion on what to label him, and states that she usually just calls him “Gary”, and “if [she has] to clarify, [she will say] ‘donor dad’”. Yet, during our interview, Phoebe often interrupted and corrected herself when referencing her pater. For example, she would say: “My dad –”, then immediately follow with “– or, the man I thought was my dad...” before continuing. Moreover, Phoebe still preserves the possibility of her eventually calling Gary “dad”, once the relationship has had time to mature. Similarly, Molly is negotiating what to label Gary, and usually settles on his name. However, she explains that when introducing him to someone, she will say: “This is my dad”, and only when she has to “get specific” she will say, “donor dad”. On the other hand, Douglas, who was raised by a single mother with whom he had a tenuous relationship, now considers Gary his dad, and is gradually adjusting to labeling him thus. Gary allows each of his offspring to label him as they wish and at their own pace, and he welcomes both “dad” and “donor dad”, and, really, any

variation, in reference to himself. He also readily calls any of his donor conceived offspring “daughter” or “son”<sup>36</sup>. I will elaborate on this progressive fluidity of familiar terminology later.

One might rush to conclude that Douglas’ quick acceptance of Gary as his dad – when compared to Phoebe and Molly – is due to him being raised by a single mother, thus not having a(nother) father. However, I must problematize this with the account of Jessica. Jessica is also an only child raised by a single mother, who, when I met her, had met her genitor for the first time just four months prior. Jessica relates:

There were parts of me that was dying to know who this person [genitor] was. But I think more so, it was also... I wanted a father. I wanted a father-figure. But now that I’ve met the guy, I realize he's not gonna ever be my father, and I’m never gonna have that bond with him. I realize it was a weird quest to like, try and fill that hole. When I didn’t know who he was, I just thought he was this amazing person. I guess when you’re searching you think it’s the missing puzzle piece, like, “I’ll know who I am”, and you’re wondering, thinking like: “Oh, it’s gonna fill this hole,” and all these things... When, like, afterwards, I’ve realized it didn’t. I guess after meeting him I have realized that it doesn’t have anything to do with my identity. There’s nothing that needed to be filled, you know? But I guess it took meeting him to know that. I guess now I know that it didn’t fill in anything. And then I guess the main question would be... why do you think you have this hole that needs to be filled in the first place? (Jessica, 26)

For Jessica, although she had her hopes and expectations, meeting her genitor did not incite self-validation or a sensation of discovering “the missing puzzle piece”. Jessica notes that she does not see many similarities between herself and her genitor, neither physical nor

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<sup>36</sup> At several points during lunch, Gary had his arm around Molly as she rested her head on his shoulder. At one point, Gary had one arm around Molly and one around one of his other donor conceived daughters; both leaning their head on each of his shoulders.

personality-wise – except perhaps that they are both shy about becoming acquainted with each other, “which is interesting”. Further, Jessica, similar to Phoebe, believes that it is “unhealthy” to look for self-validation in other persons, and that a sense of self should be produced “by yourself” or “come from the inside” – that you “have to decide what’s important to you”. Jessica and Phoebe’s accounts may be seen as examples of “contemporary norms of selfhood that stress autonomy, self-actualization, prudence, responsibility and choice” (Novas & Rose, 2000, p. 502). Moreover, and importantly, their emphasis on individualic autonomy may disallow knowledge of self to be derived from other persons. Again, I propose that how one conceptualizes one’s (deanonymized) genitor has much to do with one’s sense of self, interpersonal affinity, and one’s explicit emphasis on genetics and identity. Moreover, this emphasis may be altered depending on perceived (dis)similarities between self and genitor. For the donor conceived person, perceived (or imagined) favorable qualities in genitor and perceived (or imagined) similarities between self and genitor plays a crucial role in determining the personal impact of – and intensity of desire to establish and maintain – a relationship with genitor. For those of my interlocutors who experienced the most positive and fulfilling outcomes of deanonymizing their genitor, all reported having discerned several similarities and admirable traits in their genitor. Such perceptions often effected a sense of pride and satisfaction in the donor conceived person, drawing then on the genitor’s qualities to inform notions about self (also see Finkler, 2017, p. 173). I have presented such examples both through the accounts of donor conceived persons meeting their genitor (like Karen, Molly, Douglas etc.), and by the accounts of those pausing or terminating deanonymization prematurely (like Amanda and Kimberly).

Finally, and despite Phoebe’s explicit account, I wish to argue for the implicit role of genetics and the passing on of genes in the construction of identity and in determining meaningful relationships. During our interview, Phoebe inadvertently challenged her own assertion that, when it comes to her identity, meeting Gary does not “matter at all”. She did this when she stated that: “I’m glad that I have Gary’s genetics because he just seems like such a great guy”. Thus, despite her emphasis on personal autonomy, she implicitly suggests that her genitor’s personality informs something about herself. Further still, the prospect of Phoebe calling Gary

“dad” sometime in the future, is solely an effect of their genetic link. Finally, Phoebe and Jessica both continually meet and interact with their respective genitor, something, if taking their perspectives on identity and lack of perceived interpersonal similarities seriously, one can only attribute to their knowledge of a genetic link.

### A Reconsideration

Chapter 2 claimed that none of my interlocutors discontinued their relationship with their pater solely on the basis of establishing a relationship with genitor, thus, in effect, “replacing” the nurturing father with the biological father (for a similar conclusion, see Klotz, 2016, p. 49). I did this to convey my point that searching for one’s genitor (in the case of my interlocutors) always concerned knowledge about self rather than the desire for another father<sup>37</sup>. Although I must reassess this in light of what has been discussed thus far in chapter 4, I maintain this position. Douglas and Madeleine now both call their deanonymized genitor “dad”, while Molly and Phoebe entertain the possibility of this happening in the future<sup>38</sup>. Thus, although, more often than not, the search for genitor is done in the name of knowledge of self, the establishment of a relationship is always a possibility, and sometimes also desired. However, what is less common is the genitor eventually embodying the role of “dad” or “father”. And although, as shown, it does happen, this was (at least in the case of my interlocutors) never the intention or the initial purpose of reaching out. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, is that the relationship only evolved or began to evolve into something like a “father-child” relation if the pater was already deceased, non-existent, or the paternal relationship was tenuous (see Carsten, 2007b, p. 98 for a similar tendency in adoptees with “difficult” relations to their adoptive kin). This observation also testifies to the progressive temporality of activation of knowledge of donor conception, as the relationships (potentially) established change and evolve over time.

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<sup>37</sup> This argument does not include donor conceived persons raised by single mothers.

<sup>38</sup> The “desire for another father” can only concern those interlocutors whom at some point in their life have had a father. Therefore, this issue does not relate to the accounts of Douglas and Jessica, whom out of all my interlocutors, were the only two raised by a single mother.

Allow a final note on Jessica and Douglas, as the outcomes of their completed deanonymizations were highly different – in fact, almost contrasting. Jessica relates that she, before meeting her genitor, in addition to learning about herself, desired a father-figure. However, upon meeting him she realized he would “never be her father”. On the other hand, Douglas was more inquisitive about his genitor in terms of his own identity than he was interested in a father. However, upon meeting Gary and allowing their relationship to evolve, he considers Gary his dad. I hope by these accounts, and by the others presented in this chapter, to have illustrated some of the many and unpredictable ways deanonymization progresses, pauses, terminates, and completes. Further, I hope that I have clearly presented the often highly emotional and meaningful effects – both in terms of identity and relationships – the various progressions, setbacks, and outcomes of such a process may yield.

I also wish to have exemplified how the cancellation of transilience is tied up with complete deanonymization. In short, that is: when the non-relation (the “eliciting unknown”) is transformed into a relation, thus “answering questions”, transilience is cancelled. This is so, because, despite the fact that learning of one’s donor conception may affect a sense of self-validation and may recontextualize some relationships, when one has not been able to completely deanonymize one’s genitor, there may still remain many questions unanswered. Thus, learning of one’s donor conception may prompt a sense of affirmation, while concurrently or subsequently engender curiosity about unknown kin and self. For some persons, this “unknown” remains elicitive – thus (re)producing transilience – until either a physical encounter is enacted, or until one by other (hypothetical) means terminates one’s curiosity by settling for “a new reality” based on what information is available. Of course, in both cases there is always a chance that transilience may be reactivated. In cases where deanonymization is terminated before a physical encounter, new leading information of genitor may prompt inquiry and (re-)spark transilience (if previously cancelled). Moreover, in cases where a physical encounter with genitor *is* enacted, one might remain transilient if the encounter is unsatisfactory, or one might rebecome transilient “should more information come to light about other presently unknown, genetically related kin” (Konrad, 2005, p. 214). The process of deanonymization may also intermittently intensify transilience.

My last point for this chapter concerns the keeping and sharing of information of donor conception and unknown kin. As shown, in reaching out to one's genitor or genetic half-siblings, the donor conceived person shares information of her conception and possibly imposes constitutive effects on these persons. These effects may in turn ripple out and effect even more persons; like the wife of a former donor receiving a letter from a stranger claiming to be her husband's donor conceived offspring. Or, as in the case of Logan (Kimberly's half-brother), who knows about his donor conception but has not revealed his knowledge to his parents, where, one could say, perhaps, the knowledge is suspended within the family as a secret that both parties know but concomitantly keep from each other, plausibly imbuing their relations with some tension. Moreover, in reaching out to an unsuspecting genitor one imposes unpredictable effects on the genitor himself. In Gary's case, and in Karen's genitor's case, it enriched the genitor's life, but many former donors reject the inquiring offspring, often then alluding to a breach of privacy and the deemed inviolability of the contractual agreement of anonymity. It is activation of knowledge, then, and the desire for more knowledge, about self – about one's genetic origins, about one's conception – that produces the effects discussed in this thesis, whether subtly or explicitly. It is also knowledge, and the desire for more knowledge, that fuels deanonymization, and what produces and reproduces transilience.

## Conclusion

Because of space and, in some cases, methodology, this thesis omits a few important issues in the realm of the donor conceived person's experiences. For instance, although this thesis does lay some groundwork for understanding certain affects that may incentivize political action, and some of the accounts presented do illuminate central arguments in the political discussion surrounding ART, a larger picture of political activism is sorely missed. Another missing aspect is an exploration of the relations between donor conceived half-siblings – relations that come with their own sets of griefs and joys (for a discussion on such relationships, see Edwards, 2013). Further, there is plausibly something to be explored in terms of gender differences in manner of activating knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin.

Despite these shortcomings, by observing the effects of constitutive knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin through the concept *activation of knowledge*, I have discerned certain thoughts and actions that follow gaining knowledge of one's donor conception. By this approach, this thesis has also allowed for an appreciation of the ambiguities, temporalities, and emotionalities enmeshed with knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin. Moreover, this approach has begged the question: why is knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin activated the way it is? Thus, prompting an inquiry about certain ideas permeating my interlocutors' procreative universe.

As shown, the ways such constitutive knowledge is activated varies significantly and is often filled with ambiguity. Chapter 3 attempted to illustrate the role of anonymity – and the potentiality embedded in anonymity – in (re)producing transilience and the desire to deanonymize genetic kin. Moreover, the chapter attempted to explore how ideas and discourses are reproduced through transilience – especially through communities. Chapter 4 explored the process of deanonymization, the emotions and risks involved in this process, and the unpredictability of its completion or termination. It also explored how activating knowledge of unknown genetic kin sometimes results in relationships whose nature, again, are highly unpredictable and contingent.

I have suggested that the significance of knowledge of the existence of unknown genetic kin is symptomatic of larger tendencies in Western society – tendencies that have been labeled, in broad terms, “the new genetics” (Finkler, 2017, p. 149). Because of the significant permeation of these tendencies, continuing the practice of donor anonymity is bound to cause issues for some persons. Needless to say, perhaps, is that the prospect of conditioning donor conceived children from childhood on, e.g., into thinking differently about “origins”, as suggested by Kunstmann (2011), seems at odds with the developments of society at large. Even if parents condition their children into de-geneticizing the concept of origins, it is likely that through exposure to the social world beyond the family, acquiring knowledge of genetic origins may become significant, in which case the inaccessibility of such knowledge may become problematic. The search for genitor, however, is yet often a contentious act, not only because of idioms of “blood” and “biology” as prominent aspects of kinship (Becker, 2000) (thus potentially evoking a sense of “threat” in the pater) but also because of the genitor’s rights to privacy and intentions when donating. The implications of family along with the rights of the genitor are aspects that evoke uneasiness in the process of deanonymization. The donor conceived person is often wary of potentially hurting his pater, and trespassing on the interests of the genitor, adding to the emotional tumultuousness of transilience.

I have found that, for my interlocutors, the concept of DNA is fundamentally tied up with identity. One might say that identity is both (1) the criterion for the (dis)continuation of relations based in genetics, *and* (2) what is variably affected by establishing these very relations, and by the mere knowledge of the existence of these unknown genetically related persons. This dialectic, I argue, is also true with regards to family relations. Thus, the interplay between family and identity is the matrix that constitutive knowledge of donor conception and unknown kin effects, but this interplay is also the dynamic that determines the potency of such knowledge. Importantly, this thesis suggests that because knowledge of the existence of unknown kin is, primarily, through the idiom of genetic heredity, tied up with identity, it does not follow that the search for one’s unknown genitor should jeopardize one’s place in one’s family, or risk replacing family members. Similarly, Novas and Rose (2000, p. 491) argue that although “...ideas about [...] genetic identity will certainly infuse, interact, combine and contest



with other identity claims; we doubt that they will supplant them". In other words, knowledge of the self as informed by (the passing on of) genes does not necessarily, even probably, exclude, "colonize" (Lippman, 1993), or "supplant" one's identity as, for example, son or daughter of one's pater (for a similar take, see Arribas-Ayllon, 2016, p. 136).

The fact that knowledge of unknown genetic kin has implications for identity supports Strathern's observations about the cultural coupling of (genetic) kin and identity, hence the constitutive force of kinship knowledge, and the controversy around deanonimizing one's genitor. However, this thesis also supports, and expands on, Carsten's notion that despite this cultural coupling there are different ways of dealing with such knowledge, and that the effects may both be subtle and obvious, acknowledged and unacknowledged, dramatic and quiet. Thus, this thesis, and this should come as no surprise to anthropologists, has also portrayed how family is more than biology, and that even where discourses are biologized and geneticized, families are as much, if not more, about time and effort – in a word, nurture – than about genetic information. However, and this is another major point of this thesis, knowledge of genetic links between people often implies a relationship in some form or other. What this relationship will, or should, entail, is subject to many hardly discernable factors. Importantly, familial relations seemed to be most affected in cases where the pater had in some ways failed in his normative role (Miller, 2007). The implication of a relationship, then, provoked by knowledge of a genetic link (Strathern, 1992b, p. 3), becomes a larger "threat" to the family unit if a relation is already tenuous. Donor conceived persons may then (seek to) establish familial relations based on knowledge of genetic links, the quality of which, again, depends on interpersonal affinity.

In this view, a "geneticization of society" is not a process that objectifies persons and reduces families to biological information, thus "colonizing" social relations and concepts of self. Instead, as Rose has suggested, "[t]oday, to deem something biological is not to assert destiny or fatalism, but opportunity." (Rose, 2013, p. 5). The American "epistemological 'self' that is rooted in physicality and microbiology" (Finkler, 2017: 174-75), is, thus, not a self without agency, or without social networks and meanings of family, but is rather a self partly informed by genetic information that bears its own implications for identity and, often, relationships.

These implications are influenced by the social reality of the individual and are negotiated and employed by the individual according to her social reality (including her self-identity, emphasis on genetics, and family relationships). The idea that genetics matter in terms of conceptualizing, understanding, and constructing one's identity, is not the same as reducing identity to a readable DNA code, much less submitting that families are genetically colonized as a result.

In closing, I present, perhaps an overly ambitious, suggestion. I believe that the contentiousness around a deanonymization of genitor pervades because of the implication of family embedded in the knowledge of a genetic link. Without the implication, presumably, a donor conceived person could interact with his genitor in the name of knowledge of self, without threatening the established family unit, and without invoking any anticipation of responsibility on behalf of the genitor, or fear in the pater. Thus, instead of attempting to de-geneticize the concept of origins, as suggested by Lippman, I draw inspiration from the account of Karen. Karen knows who her genitor is, *and* she knows who her father is – for her, the two ideas do not indicate the same person. Moreover, although it is not always easy, ultimately, Karen's pater is accepting of the genitor's involvement in Karen's life, and he is understanding of Karen's desire to maintain this relationship. Following this example, I propose that the concept of genetic heredity as informative of identity, could, and perhaps should, be untangled from its implication of family – at least in the case of transilient donor conceived persons.

This proposal builds on Strathern's observation on "[t]he idea of a genetic parent", and that "for Euro-Americans it is virtually impossible to talk of a parent in a human context without evoking the idea of potential social relations." (Strathern, 1992b, p. 3). In my view, it is the conflation of (the idea of) *the contributor of genes* and (the idea of) *the parent*, that causes the controversies around donor anonymity. This conflation is also what fuels the contentiousness surrounding deanonymization, and what maintains the reproduction of transilience. The knowledge of the existence of the genitor might evoke an idea of social relations, however it need not evoke the idea that this person is a parent.

### On a Personal Note

Writing this thesis and conducting the preceding fieldwork has, for me, been a process of considerable personal change. Scrolling through various Facebook groups, reading accounts of despair, of joy, observing instances of heated arguments and of genuine solidarity, and, more than anything, meeting and acquainting with some of the donor conceived persons of California, has provided me with a repertoire of perspectives to reflect upon. Exactly what knowledge of donor conception means to me, or does for me, is yet an ambiguous thing to discern. However, when looking back on the time when I was preparing for my fieldwork, I cannot help but appreciate the personal impact of my many conversations in California. My interlocutors were all persons whom had, albeit to varying degrees, discarded the secrecy revolving their donor conception. They spoke about the meanings and implications of their donor conception and their knowledge of the existence of unknown kin unabashedly, patently, and often eloquently. Contrasting me, in a sense, many of my interlocutor had developed or accessed a *language* about their experience, a discourse with which to transform the inchoateness of their experience into one of explicit expression, despite the accompanying and often frustrating ambiguity. For me, the process of transforming inchoateness into explicitness also transformed a sense of secrecy revolving my donor conception. Of course, no one had told me, or even insinuated, that I keep my conception a secret, but, then again, no one had told me not to. During my fieldwork, by sharing my experience, and by listening to my interlocutors, the topic of my donor conception lost its inexplicit taboo, and with this loss: a veil of displaced shame dissipated.

# Figures

<i>1: Illustrative Estimate of the Proportions of the Population of Donor Conceived Persons .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>2: DNA Matches – Most Proximate Matches, Ancestry.com.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>3: DNA Matches – Distant Cousins, Ancestry.com.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>4: Ethnicity Estimate, Ancestry.com .....</i>	<i>123</i>
<i>5: Progress of DNA Sequencing, Ancestry.com.....</i>	<i>124</i>

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## Appendix A

### List of Interlocutors

The following list contains condensed bullet-point information about my main interlocutors. The list is based on the information related to me during the interviews conducted throughout my fieldwork. Interlocutors are ordered alphabetically and the list functions as a rough overview of some of the persons on whose accounts this thesis is based. All interlocutors could be described as middle-class, educated persons.

#### Amanda

- Age: 49.
- Marital status: Single, no children.
- Occupation: Sales representative for a larger company.
- Raised by heterosexual parents with one older sister conceived by a different donor.
- Told of her donor conception by her mother in her early 20s.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Delighted, happy.
- Parents divorced when she was a teenager.
- Had a tenuous relationship with her pater, and a good relationship with her mother.
- Pater died when Amanda was 46.
- Discovered the identity of her genitor late in my fieldwork. Also deceased.
- Has found and connected with one donor conceived half-sister with whom she has an ongoing relationship.

#### Douglas

- Age: 24.
- Marital status: Single, no children.
- Occupation: Student.
- Raised by a single mother as an only child.
- Told of his conception by his mother sometime during early childhood.
- Does not remember being told.

- Has a tenuous relationship with his mother.
- Discovered and met his genitor (Gary) about two months before my fieldwork began, with whom he has an ongoing relationship.
- Has discovered 20 donor conceived half-siblings and has ongoing relationships with many of them (including Molly and Phoebe).

### Jessica

- Age: 26.
- Marital status: Domestic partnership, no children.
- Occupation: Designer, Singer.
- Raised by a single mother as an only child.
- Told of her conception by her mother sometime during early childhood.
- Does not remember being told.
- Has a good relationship with her mother.
- Met her genitor for the first time four months prior to our interview. They now meet on occasion.
- Has found no donor conceived half-siblings.

### Julie

- Age: 33.
- Marital status: Single, no children.
- Occupation: Unemployed due to health reasons.
- Raised by a single mother as an only child.
- Told of her donor conception by her mother when she was 17. Her mother had until then told Julie that her father had died before Julie was born.
- Has a tenuous relationship with her mother.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Disbelief, unsure whether this was yet another lie. When the fact of donor conception eventually had been confirmed, Julie reports being frustrated with the prospect of not accessing the donor's identity because of his status as anonymous.

- Has discovered the identity of her genitor but has not attempted to make contact.
- Discovered and contacted her only donor conceived half-sibling during my fieldwork.

### Karen

- Age: 43.
- Marital status: Married, two children.
- Occupation: Novelist.
- Raised by heterosexual parents as an only child.
- Told of her donor conception by her pater when she was 29.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Shock, sense of abandonment.
- Parents divorced when Karen was 7.
- Mother passed away when Karen was 10.
- Has a good relationship with her mother and has a good relationship with her pater.
- Discovered and contacted her genitor when she was 41. They have an ongoing relationship.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

### Kimberly

- Age: 37.
- Marital status: Domestic relationship, no children.
- Occupation: Journalist.
- Raised by heterosexual parents with one older sister who was conceived by Kimberly's pater and genitrix/mater.
- Told of her donor conception by her mother when she was 35.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Shock, sense of self-affirmation, confusion.
- Parents separated when she was 33.
- Has a good relationship with her mother, but a slightly tenuous relationship with her pater.

- Has discovered the identity of her genitor and has attempted to make contact several times without a response. When she finally received a response, it was him asking her to respect his privacy.
- Has discovered two donor conceived half-siblings and has contacted and established a relationship with one.

### Laura

- Age: 37.
- Marital status: Married, no children.
- Occupation: Writer.
- Raised by heterosexual parents as an only child.
- Told of her conception by both parents when she was 15.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Self-affirmation.
- Parents divorced when she was 3 years old.
- Has a highly tenuous relationship with both parents.
- Has not discovered the identity of her genitor, despite her efforts.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

### Lily

- Age: 25.
- Marital status: Domestic partnership, no children.
- Occupation: Student.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with one older brother from pater's previous marriage, who is Lily's pater's genetic offspring.
- Told of her donor conception by her mother and her husband (Lily's step-father) when she was 19.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Shocked, confused.
- Parents divorced when she was 14 years old.
- Has a good relationship with both parents.
- Has discovered the identity of her genitor but has not attempted to make contact.

- Has discovered four donor conceived half-siblings and established a relationship with two of them.

### Madeleine

- Age: 41.
- Marital status: Domestic partnership, three children.
- Occupation: Guidance counselor.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with two siblings, each conceived by different donor. Although, up until Madeleine did her DNA test, her parents thought they had been conceived using the same donor.
- Told of her donor conception by her embittered ex step-father when she was 32.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Shock, sense of surrealism, laughing in disbelief, confusion.
- Parents divorced when Madeleine was 6. Pater died when she was 18.
- Has a good relationship with her mother, and had a good relationship with her pater.
- Discovered the identity of and contacted her genitor early in my fieldwork.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

### Marie

- Age: 37.
- Marital status: Married, two children.
- Occupation: Medical doctor.
- Raised by heterosexual parents with one genetic half-sister from mother's previous marriage.
- Told of her donor conception by both parents when she was 31. Her parents told her because she was waiting for her results from a completed DNA test.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Relief, laughter, affirmation, confusion.
- Pater died when Marie was 36.
- Has a good relationship with her mother, and had a good relationship with her pater.



- Discovered the identity of her genitor about 10 months before my fieldwork, and subsequently met with him once.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

## Molly

- Age: 27.
- Marital status: Married, no children.
- Occupation: Preschool teacher.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with two younger brothers conceived by different donors.
- Found out about her donor conception by completing a commercial DNA test out of general genealogical curiosity three months before my fieldwork began. When Molly confronted her mother with the results her mother eventually and reluctantly confirmed that she was donor conceived.
- Immediate reaction to finding out: Confused (until her mother confirmed it, which allowed Molly to connect with her donor conceived half-siblings she had found by completing the DNA test).
- Parents divorced during Molly's early teenage years.
- Has a tenuous relationship with her pater, and a good relationship with her mother.
- Discovered and met her genitor (Gary) about two months before my field-work began, with whom she has an ongoing relationship.
- Has discovered 20 donor conceived half-siblings, and has a relationship with many of them (including Douglas and Phoebe).

## Naomi

- Age: 35.
- Marital status: Married, two children.
- Occupation: High school teacher.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with one brother conceived by different donor.
- Was told of her donor conception by her mother when she was 23.

- Immediate reaction to being told: Upset, shocked.
- Parents divorced when Naomi was 16.
- Has a tenuous relationship with her pater, but a good relationship with her mother.
- Has not discovered the identity of her genitor.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

## Paul

- Age: 44.
- Marital status: Married, two children.
- Occupation: Sound Engineer.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with one younger sister who was conceived by Paul's pater and genitrix/mater.
- Found out about his donor conception by completing a DNA test out of general genealogical curiosity at age 40.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Shocked, confused.
- Pater died when Paul was 37.
- Had a good relationship with both parents.
- Has discovered the identity of his genitor but has not attempted to make contact.
- Has discovered 11 donor conceived half-siblings. Paul is in contact with some of them.

## Phoebe

- Age: 21.
- Marital status: Single, no children.
- Occupation: Student.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with three other siblings. Phoebe is part of a triplet and has one older sister conceived by different donor. Her twins live out-of-state.
- Was told of her donor conception by her mother when she was 17. Phoebe had brought a blood-type testing kit home from school and tested herself and her siblings, revealing their blood types did not match their pater, prompting them to question their mother about their genetic origins.

- Immediate reaction to being told: Largely indifferent.
- Parents divorced sometime during Phoebe's childhood.
- Has a tenuous relationship with her pater but a good relationship with her mother.
- Discovered and met her genitor (Gary) about two months before my field-work began, with whom she has an ongoing relationship.
- Has discovered 20 donor conceived half-siblings, and has a relationship with many of them (including Douglas and Molly).

### Rachel

- Age: 42.
- Marital status: Domestic partnership, no children.
- Occupation: Unemployed due to health reasons.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with one older brother conceived by the same donor (Robert).
- Was told of her donor conception by her mother when she was 32.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Confused.
- Pater died when Rachel was 17.
- Had a good relationship with her pater, but had a slightly tenuous relationship with her mother.
- Has discovered the identity of her genitor but has been unable to contact him.
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

### Robert

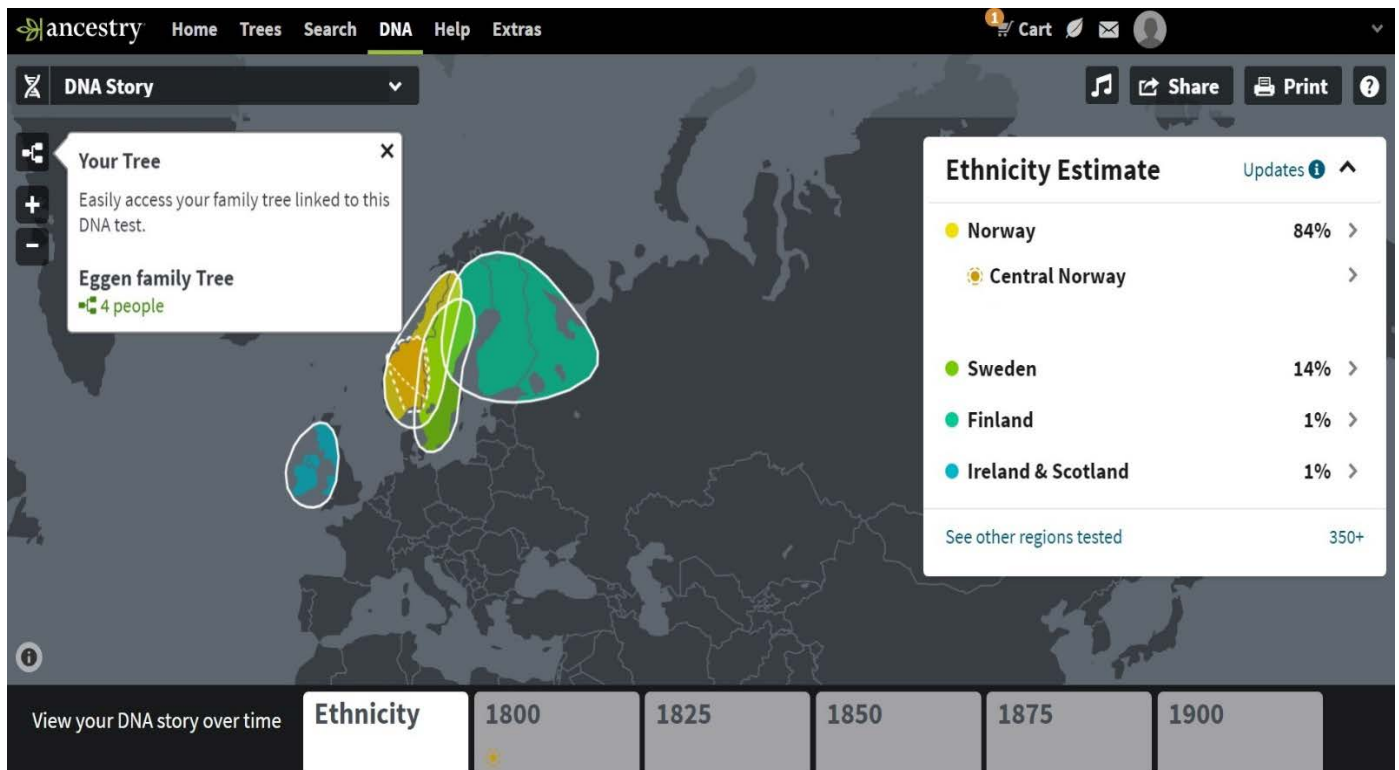
- Age: 44.
- Marital status: Domestic partnership, no children.
- Occupation: Engineer.
- Raised by heterosexual parents along with one younger sister conceived by the same donor (Rachel).
- Was told of his donor conception by his mother when he was 34.
- Immediate reaction to being told: Surprised, shocked.

- Pater died when Robert was 19.
- Had a good relationship with his pater, and had a good, although perhaps a bit tenuous, relationship with his mother.
- Has discovered the identity of his genitor but has not attempted to make contact (although his sister has).
- Has not discovered any donor conceived half-siblings.

## Appendix B

### My DNA Test

What follows is a description of the ordering and processing of a personalized DNA test. I have chosen Ancestry.com as an example because of its popularity with my interlocutors. Upon visiting Ancestry.com, one is greeted with a large “order now” proposal, often with a limited discount offer. The primary concern is selling DNA kits and acquiring subscriptions to their respective website through a “free trial”. Subscriptions allow users to build family trees, to access other user’s family trees and, depending on which kind of membership one opts for, to access international birth, marriage, military, and death records. All for fees ranging from 19.99USD to 44.99USD a month. Without a subscription, users may, for free, access their “DNA matches” and view an interactive map of their ancestral origins and a percentile ethnicity estimate.



4: Ethnicity Estimate, Ancestry.com

For me, delivery of the DNA kit, from England to Norway, lasted about two weeks. Once the parcel finally arrived, I unpacked from it a neat white box, reminiscent of something an Apple

product might occupy. The box was adorned with green squares interlinked with lines, resembling a family tree, where below there was printed nothing but “Ancestry DNA” with their logo – a green silhouette of a leaf. Inside it was the saliva sample tube with a unique Activation code. This code, the instructions read, was to be typed in on Ancestry.com where it would be used to identify the spit sample I would ship back in the included return-envelope.

Once this was done, then began the next wait. After about another two weeks I received an e-mail from Ancestry.com saying they had received my shipment. I could now track their progress of processing my DNA sample online. Again, a wait – this one up to two months – while my DNA was “processed”, “extracted”, and “analyzed”, until finally, the results were ready. Once completed one may access estimates and analyses done on one’s DNA, along with profiles of persons with whom one has “matched”.



5: Progress of DNA Sequencing, Ancestry.com<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, one may now download a “Raw DNA data”-file, which is “the lab-generated information of a DNA sample that can be downloaded in a .txt (text file) format.”<sup>40</sup> This text file may be uploaded to other DNA Database websites (like Myheritage.com or FamilytreeDNA.com) that also analyze DNA, providing then a slightly different ethnicity estimate and other DNA relative-matches.

<sup>39</sup> Image screenshot and cropped from <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/US-DNA-Status> (11.12.18)

<sup>40</sup> <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Downloading-Raw-DNA-Data-1460089696533> (11.12.18)