2. Research and analysis

Studying anonymity ethnographically can be challenging. The difficulties that may arise during research and/or writing are related to how anonymity is evaluated in a particular field. This becomes clear in Frois's work on self-help groups in Portugal (2009). Frois found that anonymity was "the *sine qua non* condition demanded by members before deciding if they are going to be part of one of these groups" (2009: 149, emphasis in original). It is therefore not surprising that anonymity was the only condition that members imposed on her research. They wanted to remain unrecognised by her general readership and prevent others within the group from recognising their personal stories. Frois therefore gave participants pseudonyms and changed or omitted other details, while "still trying as far as possible not to compromise the content of the information provided" (2009: 15).

While these are not in themselves unusual demands or measures, it was also Frois's methodological approach that was shaped by the purpose anonymity has in the groups she studied. For example, Frois was not allowed to record conversations during group meetings, but only formal interviews and could not take notes while interviewing (ibid.). The challenges Frois faced had to do with the fact that anonymity was perceived as a necessary protection by members of self-help groups (section 1.3). By contrast, in my own research difficulties as well as opportunities arose from the fact that donor anonymity was viewed extremely critically by most of my interviewees. Many of them seemed to see my work as an opportunity to share their opinions with a wider audience. Finding research contacts was therefore easier than I had expected. While their critique also created challenges for my research, which I will discuss in more detail in this chapter, ethnography nevertheless is a suitable means of exploring anonymity. Certain aspects of what the donor-conceived think about anonymous donors could have been investigated by means of a questionnaire. However, questionnaires only "work well to elicit responses about which respondents are confident and, above all, certain" (Franklin and Roberts 2006: 82), since they "rely on people *knowing what they think*" (Franklin and Roberts 2006: 81, emphasis in original). For a question such as "Should donors be anonymous?", a questionnaire would probably have worked better than it would have for a more complex question, such as what kind of donor information people want to receive.

In this chapter I will first give an overview of the people I have interviewed in the UK and Germany. In addition, I will go into more detail about how the media strategies of the donor-conceived have affected the taken-for-granted practice of anonymisation in my work. Afterwards I will describe how I found my interviewees, introducing some of the online infrastructures and groups that are important in my field. I will also briefly address a specific problem I encountered while doing research in the UK as an employee at a German university. I will then give an overview of the process of data collection before elaborating on how I analysed my data, how I put results into written form, and how I represent my findings and the people I either interviewed or that somehow figured into my research.

2.1 Sample composition and (re)negotiating anonymity

From September 2016 to December 2017, I interviewed 24 donor-conceived persons (UK n=13; Germany n=11) whose parents had undergone treatment with anonymously donated gametes in a clinically controlled setting in either the UK or Germany. All but one egg-donor-conceived person from the UK had been conceived with anonymously donated sperm. My interviewees ranged in age from 18 to early 60s, with the majority of them being in their mid-30s to early 40s. About one third of them had been conceived in the 1990s. Apart from one person who had been born in the 1950s, the rest of my interviewees had been born as a result of a treatment that took place from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Due to the "culture of secrecy" (Klotz 2016: 46) that has historically dominated gamete donation, it is not unreasonable to assume that it is probably "rare that they [the donor-conceived] would know of their donor conception in the first place" (ibid.). Therefore, I was rather surprised when I started to get contacted mainly by people who told me in their first email that they had been conceived in the 1980s or 1970s. I had assumed that more younger people would reach out to me, simply because it seemed more likely that they knew about the circumstances of their conception. I cannot answer with certainty why only a few people who were conceived in the 1990s did contact me, although a theory voiced by those of my interviewees involved in advocacy work might shed some light on this: they were of the opinion that many of the donor-conceived did not become interested in their donor until their mid-20s, as this was usually the age when people joined their groups. Many believed that this had to do with people starting to have children at this age and, as a result, developing a stronger interest in their genetic origins. Some of the people I interviewed also reported how their own interest in their donor had only emerged over time. They usually mentioned that they had become more interested when something important in their own family life changed (section 6.4). This might indicate that an interview about donor conception becomes interesting for many only at a certain point in their lives. I would also suggest that it may not have been an appealing idea for younger people to talk to someone older than them, especially because they knew that the interview would address issues that are often coded as private and that are perhaps more likely to be discussed with friends of the same age.

For both countries, there are reports from doctors who performed inseminations with donor sperm decades ago (for example Barton et al. 1945; Schaad 1972; Rose and Schaad 1974), which indicates that there might be significantly more donor-conceived persons aged 60 and older than my sample of donor-conceived persons might suggest. However, probably only a small percentage knows about the circumstances of their conception. Since there was still variation in terms of when people had been conceived, and because I had interviewed people from the UK and Germany, I was still able to examine a particularly wide range of experiences in relation to the infrastructures they used in their search for information. The people I interviewed differed especially with regards to the officially endorsed means and registers available to them.

The people I met also differed in how long they had known they were donor-conceived and regarding the age at which they had been told. Most of them did not grow up knowing they were donor-conceived. One person had known for about ten months at the time of the interview, others for several years or even decades, and two of my British interviewees told me they had always known. Those who could remember a specific moment in which they were told had either found out in unplanned situations, or because their parents had planned and decided, for various reasons, to tell them. A few of my interviewees also mentioned that they had provoked the disclosure talk, for example by confronting their parents with the results of a secret paternity test (section 5.2), although no one claimed to have suspected that they were donor-conceived. All of them had been born to heterosexual parents who were married at the time of the treatment. A different sample composition in terms of family background might have resulted in me meeting more people who had learnt about the circumstances of their conception in early childhood. High levels of disclosure have been found among families of single women, lesbian couples (Frith et al. 2018: 191), and gay fathers who had children via egg donation and surrogacy (Dempsey and Kelly 2017: 208). Due to the absence of someone who could easily be identified as a "father" or "mother", these parents cannot easily "display their family as a biogenetic family" (Frith et al. 2018: 198).

Moreover, the findings of previous studies (for example Klotz 2014) indicate that those who do not conform to the ideal of the heterosexual family are at the forefront of promoting openness and the child's right to know. As lesbian/gay couples and single women are generally perceived as being beyond the boundaries of what a "real" family is, their families are being looked at more critically. They may therefore be more concerned than heterosexual couples to practice "see-through kinship" (Edwards 2018) and to ensure that their children have access to information about the donor (Sullivan 2004). For them, openness might also constitute a way to break up heterosexual and bi-parental family norms rather than it being solely a practical matter (Klotz 2014: 320). Since lesbian couples and single women have in the past mostly been excluded from access to reproductive technologies and notably clinical DI, I was arguably less likely to meet someone who had been clinically conceived within a two-mother or single-mother family.[1] I chose not to specifically recruit additional interviewees who grew up in families led by lesbian and gay couples or single women, as I conducted more interviews than I had anticipated. While my sample lacks diversity in terms of family background, the people I interviewed differed significantly in how they positioned themselves in relation to heteronormative family norms, with some of them having very conservative views (section 4.1). However, I found that there was much more talk of "good" and "open" families, and people did not necessarily believe that "good families" had to be genetically related to each other (section 4.2).

Exactly one quarter (six out of 24) of the donor-conceived persons I interviewed were men. This sample composition almost mirrors the response rate of a study conducted with registrants of UK Donor Link (UKDL), the former voluntary register in the UK (Frith et al. 2018). 77 percent of those who participated in the questionnaire-based study were women, which reflects the overall composition of the register's membership in terms of gender (Frith et al. 2018: 191). In their overview of studies conducted with donor-conceived persons, Blyth et al. (2012: 773) point out that the majority of them had more female than male participants. The predominance of female individuals in my sample also seems to reflect what I was told by

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[1] In the UK, single women and lesbian couples mostly did not have access to NHS-funded treatment until 2008 when the HFE Act was amended and no longer included the "need for a father" clause. A few private clinics did specifically target at least the lesbian community already prior to that (Klotz 2014: 111). Access to reproductive technologies for those who are not in heterosexual relationships was still highly uneven in Germany at the time of my empirical research. Since physicians considered it more likely that children of single women and lesbian couples would sue donors and/or physicians for maintenance, the German Medical Association had in the past advised doctors to treat only heterosexual married couples (Bundesärztekammer 2006). This passage is not part of their 2018 guidelines (Bundesärztekammer 2018). After the Sperm Donor Register Act came into force in July 2018, the number of clinics that treat lesbian couples has increased: whereas in the past lesbian couples often had to resort to clinics abroad because German clinics did not treat them, today they are offered treatment with donor sperm in most parts of the country (Hammel 2020: 35). For single women, on the other hand, it is still not easy to receive treatment with donor sperm at a German clinic. Despite the legal changes in Germany, only a few German fertility clinics treat single women. Doctors still seem to be afraid of maintenance claims and/or worried about the welfare of a child growing up with only one parent (ibid.).

one of my interviewees about Facebook groups created for and by donor-conceived persons (section 4.3): according to Elizabeth Chapman, whom I interviewed in the UK, they had far more female than male members.[2] The role and importance of gender in the creation of and participation in similar networks has been explored by Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson (2019). They analysed different types of donor sibling networks in the US, the members of which often maintained online contact for example via Facebook groups. Hertz and Nelson found that girls were "more likely to play an active part in maintaining a large network itself" (2019: 200). They suggest that the higher involvement of girls in these networks has to do with gendered expectations: "Gender role expectations are notable for emphasizing that women are more inclined to acquire social skills that facilitate interaction." (2019: 270) Since relations and feelings are coded as female concerns and competencies, it seems likely that women are more inclined to engage in donor sibling networks and online groups, and also more inclined to participate in research that explores issues pertaining to social relations. Moreover, reproduction is also widely seen as something that is a female responsibility (Baumeister-Frenzel et al. 2010: 84). This might be another reason why more women than men did contact me.

My sample of donor-conceived persons was very homogenous in terms of education, with most people having earned a university degree. Those who were under 30 were mostly either still studying or had completed their studies just before I met them. Moreover, all of my interviewees were white, and based on what I learnt about their lives, I would describe all of them as belonging to the middle class. It should be noted that I did not systematically collect data on the persons I interviewed in terms of education and other socioeconomic characteristics, as this was not a quantitative study where such information would have been considered relevant. However, many mentioned their academic degrees and successes especially when talking about the talents and characteristics they thought might have been passed on to them from their donor (section 5.3). When particular characteristics of my interviewees are relevant to my analysis, for example with regard to their profession, education or family life, I mention them when introducing individual persons in more detail. Again, I want to emphasise that my interlocutors are a very specific group among all donor-conceived persons. Most of them had only learnt about the circumstances of their conception as grown-ups, wanted to find their donor, and were actively searching for information about their genetic origins. Many of them publicly advocated for the rights of the donor-conceived, and it was obvious that "being donor-conceived" had become a central part of their life. Especially those who spoke frequently with journalists tended to be highly eloquent

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[2] In a later email, Elizabeth Chapman told me that she had posted information about my project in a closed Facebook group in order to specifically motivate more men to participate. As far as I know, none of the men I interviewed had found out about my project via this post.

and had the means to make themselves heard. It is in this light that the following chapters (3–8), in which I present and discuss my own empirical material, have to be understood.

In addition to donor-conceived persons, I also interviewed an HFEA officer who was working with the central UK donor register to better understand the Authority's way of handling data, processing requests of donor-conceived applicants and releasing information. The officer was also in charge of the voluntary donor sibling register. Moreover, I collected a large amount HFEA documents, which she either sent me or which I found on the Authority's website. These included application forms and numerous meeting papers. Besides, I interviewed a former donor who volunteered for the voluntary UK register DCR, a German physician who had been working with donor sperm since the late 1970s, and the head of a German sperm bank. Through these interviews I was able to gain valuable insights into how donations had been organised in the past, how they had changed over the past three decades, and how donor anonymity had been (re)negotiated at different points in time. I also interviewed Marilyn Crawshaw, an internationally renowned expert on donor registers from the UK, and Claudia Brügge, one of the founders of the German advocacy group DI-Netz ("donor insemination network").[3] Through the interview with Marilyn Crawshaw I got much background information on the UK's voluntary register and on the lobbying for the right to know of a group of social workers within the BASW. I drew a lot of data on interest groups and their activism in Germany from the interview with Claudia Brügge, who also provided important insights into the way clinical management of donor information has changed in recent years and the challenges parents are faced with, for example when trying to secure access to information for their children. I was also invited to attend parts of a meeting that brought together several DI-Netz families, and where I had informal conversations with couples who had all decided to tell their donor-conceived children at an early age. Given their highly unique expert status, both Marilyn Crawshaw and Claudia Brügge have given consent not to be anonymised. Any direct quotes have been authorised by them. The same applies to Joanna Rose, a donor-conceived person from the UK. She was involved in the court case that helped change the law in the UK (section 3.2). It is almost impossible to write about the 2002 verdict without mentioning her, especially since her surname is mentioned in the court ruling (EWHC 2002).

Joanna Rose was not the only one of my donor-conceived interviewees who had already told her story in a public arena. In fact, half of them had already spoken to a journalist at least once, were preparing to do so when I met them, or chose to contact one after I had already interviewed them. Some had also taken part in government consultations. I had not specifically looked for people who had experience

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[3] www.di-netz.de (last accessed March 28, 2020).

with the media or politics, nor had I tried to contact donor-conceived persons after I had seen them on television (TV) or read about them in a newspaper article. From the beginning, I had planned to do research on anonymity in gamete donation and especially on how the donor-conceived are involved in its transformation. However, I had not anticipated that the phenomena and practices I would investigate would ultimately present me with challenges in terms of anonymisation. I suggest that given my research interests, this chapter would be missing the point if I were to simply note that I anonymised my interlocutors for reasons of confidentiality, although this was indeed part of what I decided to do.

It is important to note that not all of the people I interviewed chose to appear in the media with their real names. Some of those who had decided to conceal their identity told me that they would actually prefer to use their real names and were hoping or planning to do so in the future (see for example David Weber in section 4.2). In addition, some were using different strategies simultaneously: they appeared under their full name at a public event and were announced in the program, again by their name, as representatives of a specific organisation, but used a pseudonym, an apparent nickname or their real first name in online forums or blogs. For someone who knew them, it was arguably not particularly difficult to link the various pseudonyms and stories to one particular person. I certainly managed to do so after I had interviewed them. I discovered several articles and blog entries of or about people who had been pseudonymised, but which I could still assign to a person I had interviewed. I therefore do not consider it impossible that readers of this book, who are familiar with some of the articles and TV documentaries that feature my interviewees, might recognise some of the stories that I tell in the following chapters. At the same time, someone who is not familiar with donor conception and the stories circulating in the media and on the Internet will not recognise the people I interviewed. Nevertheless, the challenge remains the same: even if people remain nameless in public, their stories can oftentimes be connected.

Given the extent to which reproductive technologies and donor-conceived persons are mediatised, using pseudonyms and changing or omitting personal details seems necessary to me, although I am aware that I cannot control anonymity. Moreover, the consequences of mentioning people by their real names can hardly be estimated, neither by me nor by my interviewees themselves. In addition, from an analytical point of view, it is arguably problematic to name some persons by their real names, while continuing to anonymise others. Due to their different visibility in the text, non-anonymised persons might be perceived as more meaningful and more 'authentic', which I wanted to avoid as much as possible. Besides, I did not want to be perceived as a Public Relations (PR) officer for the people I interviewed by the readers of this book, which I assume might have happened if I had chosen to only interview those who would agree to have their real names revealed.[4] The question of anonymisation seemed particularly tricky to me in the case of those who had decided to make themselves identifiable after the interview I had conducted with them, but before the completion and publication of my PhD thesis. I suspected that they may have told me things that they might have been more reticent about if they had already known then that they would make their stories public.[5] I decided to contact those I knew had gone public, and from whose interview I quote, to address the situation and to point out that it was more difficult for me to ensure confidentiality under these changed conditions. I also sent them those excerpts from my PhD thesis in which I explicitly referred to the interview I conducted with them. Nobody insisted that I should not use their interview, or that I should change more details about them.

Overall, my work illustrates that there are ethical and epistemological questions regarding anonymity that need to be renegotiated, rather than offering concrete solutions. The fact that anonymity and ethnography are not always compatible has also been discussed by other researchers, even though the subject still seems to receive relatively little attention.[6] Based on what I was told by other anthropologists, I would nevertheless argue that those who do research on other, less mediatised topics might experience similar difficulties, especially since the assurance of anonymity is often a condition for obtaining both funding and access in the field. I suggest that given the transformation of anonymity and the blurring of the boundary between identifying and non-identifying information, ethnographers will need to renegotiate the practice of anonymisation which has long been taken for granted.[7]

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[4] As I discuss in section 2.3, some of my donor-conceived interlocutors did in fact seem to see me as someone who would advocate for their needs and rights at an academic level.

[5] Besides, some of those I pseudonymised might decide to make themselves identifiable much later.

[6] Notable exceptions are Stein (2010) and Duclos (2017).

[7] My thoughts on this topic are based on numerous discussions I had with the other members of the *Reconfiguring Anonymity* project, some of whom encountered similar challenges during their work. Based on our discussions within the project group, Michi Knecht and I organised a roundtable entitled "*(Re-)negotiating anonymity in ethnographic*" research at the 2019 conference of the German Anthropological Association. Through the participants' short statements and numerous comments of the audience, it became clear that many had encountered challenging situations in their work with regard to the anonymisation of persons and organisations. It became particularly evident that the topic should be dealt with more intensively in teaching.

2.2 Online recruitment for offline research

In her ethnography of anonymous ova donation in the UK, Konrad states that when she conducted her fieldwork in the mid-1990s, "donors and recipients were not easy populations to meet" (2005a: 22), mostly because they "did not pre-exist the researcher as cohesive groups" (ibid.). Konrad therefore had to "make these 'communities' appear" (ibid.), which she managed to do by approaching clinical teams at fertility clinics who then agreed to put her in contact with donors and recipients. My own research, which I conducted more than 20 years later, began under completely different conditions. Unlike Konrad, I was able to enter my field largely by directly contacting the groups that the donor-conceived themselves and/or gamete recipients have founded. While this did not mean that access did not have to be negotiated, the gatekeepers were different from the medical professionals Konrad encountered during her fieldwork. The various alliances that have formed since she conducted her study made it a lot easier to find donor-conceived persons than it would have been ten or 20 years ago. Since the Internet is of central importance for the donor-conceived, who use it to network with each other and search for their donors and donor siblings, trying to find people online turned out to be an effective strategy. Finding interviewees online would have been less effective in the past: not only because specific interest groups and their online forums were still in their infancy, but also because having access to the Internet was less common. Internet usage rates are high in both the UK and Germany and are close to 100 percent for people in their 30s and 40s. In contrast, the proportion of Internet users over 65 is significantly smaller (Office for National Statistics 2019; Statistisches Bundesamt 2020), which might be another reason why I talked to only one person who was in her 60s. People of that age are less likely to be involved in online groups and forums where they could have found out about my study.

The donor-conceived are organised differently in the two countries where I conducted my research. Searching for research contacts in Germany was therefore different from searching in the UK. Besides, my respective approach was similar to what people from both countries told me about their ways of obtaining information and making connections: similar to my interviewees in Germany, who would oftentimes tell me that they went online and straight away landed on the homepage of Spenderkinder (section 4.4), I had come across the association's website early on. Although Spenderkinder has its own homepage, I had actually first gotten in touch with them after emailing Donor Offspring Europe, a European umbrella organisation that consists of several advocacy groups from various countries.[8] A member

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[8] In addition to Spenderkinder, the website lists organisations from France, Belgium and the Netherlands as members (www.donoroffspring.eu, last accessed May 26, 2021). The website occasionally publishes news that are relevant to donor-conceived persons on an international

of Spenderkinder replied and offered to distribute information about my study via their internal mailing list. After an initial phone call, emailing back and forth several times, and her suggesting specific changes to my study information which pertained to my presentation of the legal situation, it was sent out twice several months apart. Like the information sheet that I used in the UK, it stated the purpose of my research project and who was funding it; details about the interview and the kind of topics it would cover; what I would do with the data; and information about my academic background. All in all, I interviewed ten persons who were either only part of the mailing list or also members of Spenderkinder. Since membership to the mailing list is restricted – only those who are donor-conceived are able to join – access to members was thus enabled but also controlled by certain gatekeepers on whose support I was dependent. Given the extent to which information about my study was circulated online, it is all the more significant that no one conceived in Germany contacted me because they had discovered information about my project somewhere else than through the mailing list of Spenderkinder. If donor-conceived persons from Germany want to network with others, the association seems to be their central and often only platform for doing so.

Apart from Spenderkinder, I also had gotten in contact with the German association DI-Netz. I had been told by Claudia Brügge that there were several families in the association whose children were already 18 or older and who could therefore be potential participants for my research. Here too, my study information was distributed online. However, no one contacted me after this email, although I do not know whether the information was sent directly to the adult children or first to their parents. In the end, I interviewed one son of a member of DI-Netz. I had previously met her at an event. As her son indicated during the interview that he had the possibility to obtain identifying information about his donor but chose not to make use of it, I did not include the interview with him in the detailed coding process. I had previously assumed that his donor was still anonymous. Nevertheless, the interview did contribute to the interpretative framework of my research. In the UK, I interviewed another person who was not interested in her donor and some of her statements were very similar to his (unlike him, however, she had chosen to contact me on her own initiative). Besides, the way the interview with the German student had been arranged was in itself an interesting and revealing moment in my research. Since Spenderkinder largely dominates public reporting in Germany on the topic of donor conception, the young man's mother seemed anxious to provide an empirical counterpoint in my research.

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level, such as information about the workshop held at the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that I mention in section 3.1 (Donor Offspring Europe 2019).

As there is no organisation similar to Spenderkinder in the UK, I had to make use of a variety of organisations and platforms when trying to find British interviewees. This mirrored the way in which my British interlocutors would oftentimes join several groups and online forums when searching for information. I first contacted the interest group DCN. The DCN advocates early disclosure, organises workshops and annual conventions, and offers a wide range of advice materials on the topic of disclosure. I interviewed a total of six donor-conceived adult members of the DCN. In addition, one person offered to put me in contact with her sister, who was also donor-conceived and agreed to meet with me. Since the DCN is committed to early disclosure, I was surprised to learn that only two of the members I interviewed had grown up knowing how they were conceived. I was equally surprised to learn that some of them were very critical of gamete donation per se (and not only of the way in which it has been regulated in the past), while the DCN is working to increase social acceptance of the practice. The people I interviewed had mostly joined the DCN because they were searching for a way to get in touch with others who were donor-conceived, or because they were looking for more information about donor conception. They did not necessarily support the goals of the DCN, although they too often emphasised the importance of early disclosure.

While I found almost half of my British interviewees via the DCN, I had initially not assumed that contacting the organisation would even be a means to get in touch with donor-conceived persons, as I had pictured the DCN mainly as an association of parents. However, I did still send them an email, hoping for more background information that might be relevant for my research. After sending them some general information about my project, I was told that I could also submit a project proposal to the DCN's research panel. If accepted, information about my study would be sent to the donor-conceived adult members. In order to receive approval, I had to fill out a detailed checklist. Among other things, I had to indicate whether I had already received ethical approval for my research. Since it is not common practice for anthropologists working at German universities to obtain an institutional ethical approval, I explained that I was nevertheless committed to the obligations laid down in the ethics guidelines of professional organisations. Fortunately, the DCN's panel did not raise any objections and did not ask me to submit an application for a formal ethical review, which would certainly have slowed down the research process. As international funding organisations increasingly require applicants to obtain certified ethical approval, there is an ongoing debate in German anthropology on whether ethics review boards should be used more frequently. For reasons of space, I cannot comment on this debate in detail. Nevertheless, I would like to briefly argue that while a certain institutionalisation of the process, as is already common in other countries, may be helpful in terms of applying for funding, publishing, and making research contacts, it is not the only and arguably not the ideal way to foster ethical conduct. Given the specificity of ethnographic research, which involves close and often ongoing contact with interviewees during which unexpected developments can occur, researchers are required to remain flexible throughout the entire research process. A formal, one-time ethical review might hamper such flexibility. I suggest that apart from thinking about how to respond to the demands for ethical review by establishing institutional processes, there should be a debate, especially at the level of teaching, about how to make research ethical (see von Unger et al. 2016 for a similar argument).

Apart from the internal mailing lists of Spenderkinder, DI-Netz and the DCN, information about my project had also been distributed online in ways that I could not always follow and observe (which also applies to the mailing lists, as I am not a member of the respective organisations). As I will explain in more detail in section 4.3, donor-conceived persons increasingly network on an international level in closed and partly secret online groups, many of which are on Facebook. I knew that information about my study had been posted on the secret Facebook group of the DCR, the UK's voluntary register, after I had contacted the organisation. Two donor-conceived persons contacted me after seeing the post, and I also interviewed a former donor who was registered. In addition, several people I interviewed and donor-conceived activists from the US, with whom I had been in email contact, offered to post information about my study in various networks. Since I was not able to join their groups and forums myself, I was not able to follow the exact course of this 'online snowballing'. The lack of control that is characteristic of the fieldwork experience (Pratt 1986: 38) sometimes felt uncomfortable, especially when I was once told in an interview that I had been discussed online (section 4.3). Another person contacted me after reading the call for participants I posted on Anonymous Us, a website created by an American donor-conceived activist.[9] Besides, I had met a person who had been conceived in the UK through an open Yahoo group. The group's moderator had replied to my email, explaining that the group was mostly inactive, as most of the discussions were now on Facebook. Nevertheless, he agreed to an interview and later gave my contact details to another person, whom I also

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[9] Anonymous Us (www.anonymousus.org, last accessed April 09, 2020) is an interesting example of how complex and varied anonymity can be negotiated. It is described on its website as an "online story collective on reproductive technology and family separation themes" (Anonymous Us, n.d.). Readers can post short stories about their personal experiences with donor conception and gamete donation, which have to be approved by the organisers before they can be published. The donor-conceived founder of the website, who is very critical of donor conception and anonymity, offered me to publish a short piece about my project after I had contacted her via email. While my post included my contact information, those submitting personal stories are normally asked not to use identifying information in their texts, all of which are published anonymously. According to the website, this approach was chosen because it allows people to speak openly about their experiences.

interviewed and who put me in touch with one of her donor-conceived friends as well.

2.3 Overview of data collection

The fact that I had searched for and found interviewees online meant that my research was not limited to one geographical location. Although my interviewees belonged to the same online groups and forums, they lived in different parts of the UK and Germany. In the UK I was only contacted by people living in England, even though this was not a selection criterion for me. The dispersed nature of my sample meant that interviews in both countries usually involved long train journeys and oftentimes overnight stays. I also conducted one interview via Skype with a person who lived in Australia but had been conceived in the UK. Most of the people were very accommodating when I contacted them to arrange the details of an interview. Some even offered to come to another city for an interview if they lived particularly far away. However, all interviews took place in the cities or villages where my interviewees lived, worked and/or studied, usually in their homes or in a café. The length of an interview varied from one hour to four hours, with the majority of interviews being around the two-hour mark. I spent much more time than that with many people, and we usually talked for a long time after I had already turned off my recording device. Only then did some of them mention things they did not think were important and therefore had not brought up during the actual interview, but which helped me to understand the recorded conversation better.

I taped and transcribed all interviews apart from two where permission to record was not granted. In both cases, I took more notes than usual during the interview and wrote down as much as possible from memory afterwards. I suspect that for various reasons both persons did not trust me at first, although neither of them explained in detail why they did not agree to a recording.[10] In addition to transcripts, I kept notes on all encounters, which I attempted to write down as soon as possible after an interview. They included descriptions of details that would get lost if I was to only rely on the transcript, such as notes on what we talked about before and after the interview; a description of the places we met up in; notes on any objects that people showed me; and notes on how I felt during and after an

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[10] I was not given consent to record by the doctor I interviewed. Shortly before the interview, he had been sued by a donor-conceived person. He seemed anxious to stay out of more trouble and, at least in the beginning, seemed to think of me as a kind of 'spy' from Spenderkinder. Besides that, one donor-conceived person did not want to be recorded either. He mistrusted researchers, believing that they ignored the dangers of donor conception. He was the only person who seemed uncomfortable during the interview and only became more relaxed afterwards.

interview. These first notes also included reflections about themes that seemed to be emerging from an interview and that I wanted to explore more. I found myself often coming back to these notes as my analysis progressed. Although my analytical framework kept evolving, these first ideas often turned out to be important analytical resources.

Especially those who were very critical of donor conception per se and/or the way it has been conducted and regulated in the past (i.e. with the principles of anonymity and secrecy) seemed to see my work as a possibility to make their opinions visible in an academic and public arena. Several people seemed to be interested in my study because they hoped that their story and the fact that it would be included in my PhD thesis would warn others of gamete donation, anonymity and secrecy, and a few explicitly mentioned that this was their reason for participating. While my intention was not to 'give voice' to the donor-conceived, and act as an academic 'PR officer', but to explore how they constitute themselves as a powerful political and public voice (chapter 4), it was sometimes apparent that I was seen as a mouthpiece for the concerns and demands of the donor-conceived. In these cases, I did not seem to be perceived much differently from a journalist (and a lot of my interviewees had already had contact with journalists). For others, the interview seemed to be more like a welcomed opportunity to reflect on what had changed in their lives since they found out they were donor-conceived. They would sometimes ask if they could receive a copy of the transcript because they felt that they had summarised their feelings and opinions particularly well. Even though people had different reasons for talking to me and teaching me what "being donor-conceived" meant to them, I would argue that telling one's story in the context of an interview *and* having it listened to was always part of the process of "becoming donor-conceived". As I will show in the empirically oriented chapters of this book, being able to (re)frame and (re)construct one's story – as a matter of rights and as a continuous whole – was an essential part of becoming donor-conceived; and by listening to their stories, I became a part of this process.[11]

While I was rarely asked how I felt about the topics I was doing research on, many people were interested in hearing what others had told me. This was especially the case for those of my British interlocutors who were not involved in an active exchange with others, while my German interviewees were all in contact with other members of Spenderkinder and/or the mailing list. Although I did not share any identifying information, I did answer their more general questions, such as whether others had found donor siblings or their donor. Since several people had never met anyone who was also donor-conceived, they seemed to view me as a kind

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[11] See also section 5.1 for a discussion of the ways in which telling stories, and being listened to, can act as an "assertion of agency over one's own past" (Carsten 2000b: 698).

of interesting link to a community they had not yet joined.[12] Furthermore, those who were still studying, had just finished their studies and/or were thinking about applying for a PhD position were often curious about my academic experiences.

Originally, I had planned to conduct more than one interview with each person in order to enable a more processual analysis of the way in which people form new networks and kin relations, and to trace the transformation of anonymity over a longer period of time. However, this proved to be challenging due to the tight timeframe of my doctoral research project, and I eventually decided against it. Nevertheless, even without follow-up interviews, processes of transformation were noticeable during the time of my research. For example, as I will explain in chapter 8, the DNA databases used by the donor-conceived grew enormously during and after I conducted my empirical research. Although I did not conduct any formal follow-up interviews, I arranged to meet with two of my British interviewees when I returned to the UK for a conference in 2018. In the meantime, one of them had managed to identify her donor, and we talked at length about the growth of DNA databases. I also met some of the people I interviewed in Germany at various events, such as a two-day conference on legal and ethical challenges in reproductive medicine. This gave me an insight into their public engagement and interaction with other stakeholders. Furthermore, I remained in email and phone contact with the majority of people. I usually emailed them with follow-up questions, and many of my interviewees replied to me with very detailed answers. While I had no further contact with a few people who did not respond to the emails I sent them after an interview, I kept close contact with others. Some of them also contacted me occasionally on their own initiative, for example when they had found a donor sibling, or to inquire how far I had progressed with my work and when I would publish.

In the first email people sent me, they usually mentioned when and where they had been conceived and when they had been told. After describing my study and answering any questions that people had, I started an interview in many cases by asking them to tell me more about the circumstances in which they found out. This usually led to detailed accounts that went far beyond the mere description of the disclosure situation. Often these initial answers already contained many of the

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[12] This is reminiscent of Konrad's experience of becoming "a potential link-person" (2005a: 23) between mutually anonymous ova donors and recipients. Even if she suspected that she had met a donor-recipient 'pair', she chose not to divulge any information to her interviewees. She thus "respected and worked within the parameters of the system" (2005a: 24). Likewise, I never indicated my hunch that one of my interlocutors might be a donor sibling of someone else I had interviewed. Since most of them had already done a DNA test, the probability that I met donor-conceived half-siblings who did not know they were related is very low.

topics that came up again and again later in the interview. I found that these 'finding-out-narratives', similar to "coming-out-narratives" (Weston 1991: 15) of lesbians and gays, had "the advantage of representing a category meaningful to [research] participants themselves" (ibid.). My interviewees would tell these stories not only when being interviewed by me but also when joining new groups and networks (see section 4.3 for international networks and Facebook groups, and 4.4 for the German association Spenderkinder). Therefore, they constituted a useful "point of departure" (Weston 1991: 15) in many interviews.

Apart from this first question, my interview manual covered topics such as how people reflected on their anonymous origins; how openly they dealt with the information; their opinion on the legal regulation of anonymity and gamete donation; what meaning they attributed to genetic and social connections; and whether, why and how they searched for their donor and/or donor siblings. My guide evolved over the course of my research as new topics emerged from the interviews I had already conducted. At the same time, I tried to let my research contacts steer the conversation and address the topics they wanted to bring up. I thus followed the idea that ethnographic research "relies on the assumption that we may not know what the important questions are, or why, or how to ask them" (Franklin and Roberts 2006: 82) and that researchers should attempt "to remove as many limits as possible from a potential response" (ibid.). While this worked well in most cases, there were occasions when responses were very brief, for example when I asked a question that had an obvious answer, at least in the eyes of my interviewees. I usually tried to minimise my own role in the interviews; in these situations, however, I tried to elicit more detailed answers. In particular, I found that mentioning specific examples from previous interviews or other sources often led to detailed comments, especially if people disagreed with what others had told me. They would then usually explain their own views in a more detailed way. In the interview passages that I quote, I mention if and how an answer was prompted by certain questions or comments on my part.

In addition to conducting interviews, I attended several events that dealt in various ways with reproductive technologies. These included two 'fertility fairs', one in the UK and one in Germany, which were attended by couples and singles. Both events brought together clinics and sperm/egg banks from several countries as well as various interest groups and were very useful for establishing research contacts. In both cases, exhibitors participated from countries where reproductive technologies are regulated differently, where more and different techniques are allowed than in the UK and Germany, and where different regulations on donor anonymity apply. This also gave me an interesting insight into how these dimensions play a role in the marketing of treatment options and were for example addressed in the brochures of the different exhibitors.[13] Apart from transcripts, notes on interviews and any events that I attended, I also kept notes on conversations and encounters I had outside of an 'official' research context. When I talked about my project, it often happened that friends, acquaintances and sometimes even strangers told me about their own experiences with infertility and their reproductive family secrets. Especially the questions I was asked were often particularly insightful, as they made the empirical material that I was already familiar with more unfamiliar again. They also helped me to understand how the donor-conceived are imagined by others. In section 3.5, I refer explicitly to a question I was asked particularly often, namely whether my interviewees were looking for their donors because they were interested in their money.

2.4 Analysis, writing and representation

The analysis of my material was not a process that took place separately from conducting the interviews. Instead, I already began analysing my data and in particular the narratives of the donor-conceived by taking notes during and after a conversation, which in turn influenced the outstanding interviews, for example in relation to the questions I asked, and continued analysing throughout the actual writing process. In my analysis I always started from the assumption that narratives are neither straightforward reflections of an objective reality, nor "descriptive free-for-alls" (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 250). Instead, they are constituted through "the interplay between experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling" (ibid.). They are always "more than a chronological sequence of events" (Ochs and Capps 1996: 25). By forging different elements into a structured plot, narratives create order and coherence, which in turn empowers those who tell them (Becker 1997) and turns isolated actions into an unfolding, intelligible history. Anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly suggests that a narrative is more than "a kind of artifact (a text) or a genre of speech act" (2010: 44). She argues that "we locate ourselves in unfolding stories that inform our commitments about what is possible and desirable" (2010: 43) through an ongoing "narrative work" (2010: 49) that is shaped through "culturally shaped narrative expectations" (ibid.). I will explore the "narrative work" of my interviewees in more detail in chapter 5. The expectation of continuity, which was part of this work, shaped how people made sense of being donor-conceived, and will be explored throughout this book.

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[13] For example, some cryobanks advertised on their posters and brochures that they offer future parents a particularly wide range of donors and that recipients can choose between anonymous and non-anonymous ones.

The transcription of the interviews I conducted, during which I spent hour after hour with my material, listening and re-listening to stories, was part of the analysis process. All transcripts were imported into the MAXQDA software for qualitative data analysis. Once they were imported, I reread all interviews and began coding them, using codes that evolved from my research questions and from the material itself. Although I found the software helpful in keeping all interviews in one place, in my experience there is also the danger that a 'flood' of codes can break the interview into tiny pieces, which in turn can lead to the overall context being lost. For this reason, I wrote short 'condensations' for ten interviews, aiming to record the main points that were not necessarily succinctly formulated in a specific passage. I selected the interviews for which I wrote these texts on the basis of the topics that had been particularly striking up to that point of the research, and which seemed to be particularly present in these interviews.[14] These were first and foremost the right to know, which was a particularly prominent theme; the search for origins; the frequently evoked connection between "identity formation" and knowledge; the search for relatives and information; and openness, transparency, as well as the toxicity of secrets. I examined the selected interviews primarily on the basis of the following questions: what in the interview is more than a code? What does a specific interview stand for? How am I positioned by this person? From whom or what do they distance themselves? What gets problematised? What narrative patterns and metaphors are used?

Only after completing the first 'loose' coding step and writing condensed reports on ten interviews did I move on to a more detailed coding phase. In doing so, I was guided by the model developed by Emerson et al. who suggest coding data in a two-step process consisting of open and focused coding as a way to find "concepts that are grounded in and reflect intimate familiarity with the setting or events under study" (1995: 166). They draw on Grounded Theory approaches but combine them with more reflexive elements. Grounded Theory as a qualitative research paradigm aims to develop theories that are 'grounded' in data (Glaser and Strauss 2010). The researcher is supposed to discover theories by leaving behind any preconceived ideas that did not originate from the data itself. Emerson et al. (1995) argue that such an approach is problematic, as it depicts data analysis as an autonomous process with neat boundaries. They argue that it should rather been seen as something that is pervasive throughout the entire research process (1995: 143–144). Emerson et al. suggest that instead of trying to 'mine' for theories 'hidden' in the data, ethnographers should think of analysis as the act of "creating what is there by constantly thinking about the import of previously recorded

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[14] I wrote 'condensations' for the following persons: Lindsay Billington, Elizabeth Chapman, Sabrina Frey, Nadine Fuchs, Alexandra Gerstner, Tamara Haste, Sarah Holmes, Amber Jones, Timothy Parsons and David Winkler.

events and meanings" (1995: 168). This approach is more reflective than traditional Grounded Theory and allows for immersion in the data as well as an analytically distanced position (Klotz 2014: 75). This process was not just divided into two steps, but something I repeated over and over again. After I had already started writing, I kept going back to my material and moved from an open coding phase to a more fine-grained analysis, and then back to writing.

Writing my doctoral dissertation was thus very much part of the analysis and not something that I started only after I had completed the coding. Especially when working on my empirically oriented chapters, I continuously refined some ideas, discarded others, and linked my material to new concepts that I had discovered in the literature, or to those that I had already read about long ago. For example, while I knew early on that I would write something on DNA databases, it was only later that I developed the idea of thinking through my material on genetic testing with literature on IVF (sections 8.3 and 8.4), although I had read the relevant ethnographies early on. When writing, I was, at least after completing the first drafts, less concerned with mentioning every person in every chapter, but rather with making my main arguments clear, and this book more readable, through a detailed discussion of selected examples.[15] I sometimes decided to develop several points using examples from one particular interview instead of mentioning as many interviewees as possible. Most of the people I mention particularly frequently are among those whose interviews I have 'condensed', although here too I mention some more than others. A few people are rarely or not at all mentioned by name, which does not mean that their stories were less important for my analysis, less interesting or less complex.

As is customary in ethnography, I 'cleaned' interview passages that I included in the empirically oriented chapters, not only removing most filler words, such as "you know", but also editing out incomplete sentence fragments and making grammatical adjustments. As Franklin and Roberts point out, these "decisions are far from straightforward" (2006: 91). They describe this strategy as a form of "textual etiquette" that has the aim of "present[ing] the speakers faithfully but also courteously and respectfully" (ibid.). Although I have cleaned the quotes, I have tried to preserve their original character as much as possible. Since people told their stories at specific moments in time, I chose to use the past tense when presenting ethnographic material, thus avoiding the "ethnographic present" (Fabian 1983) that "locates the other in a time order different from that of the speaking subject" (Pratt 1986: 33). While others have argued that ethnography constitutes a "written truth in the historical moment and must, therefore, be constructed in the ethnographic

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[15] In the beginning, I had tried to include as many examples as possible, precisely because I did not want to leave out any of the people who had shared their stories with me. However, this had resulted in overlong chapters, which in turn had prompted me to edit out many sections.

present" (Hastrup 1990: 57), or that the use of the present tense sustains the immediacy of ethnographic research (Borneman 2015: 28), the past tense seemed more appropriate to me, as people's lives did nor remain frozen in time. The dynamic nature of my field will become particularly evident in chapter 8, when I discuss the growth of commercial DNA databases.

I assigned first names and surnames to all interviewees. In doing so, I follow anthropologist Kath Weston who has argued that "introducing strangers by given names alone paradoxically conveys a sense of intimacy while subtly withholding individuality, respect, and full adult status from research participants" (1991: 31). For reasons of readability, and because the relationship with interviewees is a dialogical one and differs from the way I position myself in relation to other researchers whose works I cite, I mostly use first names when writing about individual persons in more detail. By doing so, I lose "the different nuances of distance and closeness in address available in the German language but not in English" (Borneman 2015: 28). Most of the people I interviewed in Germany addressed me with the formal "*Sie*" and my surname ("*Frau Baumann*"), while a few of those who were similar to me in terms of age would offer me to switch to the informal "*Du*" right after I had met them. We subsequently addressed each other with our first names. Addressing them by their given names without them bringing it up first would have been inappropriate, as it would have pushed them into a linguistic closeness that they did not necessarily want to have, thus running counter to my aim of letting them lead the interview process. The use of the polite "*Sie*" in a situation where people shared intimate details of their lives, which they would normally probably only share with people they have known for a long time, underlines that interviews "transgress conventional social boundaries between the public and the private, mixing the domain of personal experience with that of professional activity" (Franklin and Roberts 2006: 89). This was particularly noticeable and also challenging in situations where people shared stories that were upsetting for them and brought back painful memories, even though I only entered their lives for a short time. Nevertheless, they too seemed determined to tell their stories, and I continued to feel impressed by their openness.

As Klotz points out, the kinship terms that people use "imply certain relationships and positionings concerning the nature in – or of – kinship" (2014: 77), and different terms have "different emotive and legal connotations" (ibid.). My interviewees themselves used various terminologies and sometimes switched between different terms during an interview (see for example Melanie Weber in section 5.4). For example, some talked about searching for their "donor", but occasionally used the term "genetic father". Others strictly refused to use the term "donor" at all, arguing that money had been exchanged for sperm, and instead just spoke of their "father". While I analyse their terminology (see section 4.4 for a discussion of the German term "*Spenderkind*", and section 6.4 for an analysis of statements such as “dad is still dad”), I myself use the terms “father”, “mother” and “sibling/sister/brother” for those “taking on classical kin positions” (Klotz 2014: 77) within family relationships. I speak of “donors”, “offspring/donor offspring” and “donor siblings” when referring to those related through clinical gamete donation. While those whom I refer to as “mother” and “father” can be said to “produce” the child, donors assist them (Strathern 1995). Strathern suggests 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” (1992: 3), when the social relationships between the child and its procreators is in fact contingent (Strathern 1995). For this reason, I do not use the term “genetic parent”. I do not use the term “social father/social parent” either, which was used very little by my interviewees themselves, as I do not want to imply that the absence or presence of a genetic link determines how people parent.

I do use the term “donor-conceived” when referring to people conceived with donated sperm or ova.[16] This is the term commonly used in academic publications and chosen by many of my British interviewees as a self-designation, despite many people arguing that a gamete donor did not “donate”, but earn money.[17] However, a variety of labels has been used in the past. In an early medical report, the term “donated child” (Barton et al. 1945: 41) was used, whereas the Warnock Report spoke of the “AID child” (Warnock Committee 1984). Erica Haimes suggested the term “people conceived by DI”, arguing that it not only “situates this group in relation to the practice of DI rather than to any other party” (1998: 54), but also “follows the trend of favouring phrases such as ‘People with AIDS’ and ‘people with disabilities’, which are more open-ended and which place the person first before qualifying him/her as a particular type of person” (ibid.). The question of what people conceived with donated gametes should be called is still very controversial in Germany. I will elaborate on this debate and the contested term “*Spenderkind*” in section 4.4. In general, I would caution against any attempt to find a ‘neutral’ term. As Haimes noted, “the choice of one label over others does not resolve the debate: it simply establishes another claim” (ibid.). Although the term “donor-conceived” has become commonly used and accepted in English, one could of course object that it is too narrow; after all, my interviewees might also be described as “parent-raised”. Given the importance that most of them attached to the parent who had raised but not conceived them, I guess that they would not object to such a term. Besides, all of them were also conceived with one gamete that did not originate from a donor and might even

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[16] I also use the term “donor-conceived half-sibling/sister/brother”. In Euro-American kinship, “half relatives” are those that are “connected by substance through one avenue rather than two” (Edwards 1999: 69).

[17] It is also one of the hashtags Spenderkinder uses in their social media campaign (see the introductory chapter).

be described as “parent-conceived”. Since my research was after all about donor conception, I chose to foreground the “donor” aspect of their conception through my choice of words. Finally, I would argue that it is precisely the fact that they were conceived with donated gametes that people emphasise when they try to enforce their right to know and fight anonymity. Therefore, they do qualify themselves, at least in certain situations, as a particular kind of person. They *become* donor-conceived and turn “being donor-conceived” into a powerful identification, without denying that they are also something or someone else, for example the parent of their own children (section 6.4).