# 9. Conclusion

In this book, I have examined the transformation of anonymity in gamete donation, focusing on how those who were conceived with gametes from anonymised sources in the UK and Germany are involved in this process. Whereas in the past anonymity was either mandated by law or accepted as a standard part of clinical treatments involving donated gametes, this has changed within just a few decades; and while those conceived with donated gametes were primarily seen as the successful outcome of a medical procedure, they now constitute themselves as powerful authorities and make claims about what ought to happen in the world of donor conception. I argue that it is only through employing certain social, political and public practices, using and repurposing technologies and infrastructures, (re)framing their stories in specific ways, and making new relations that "being donor-conceived" becomes constitutive of the self, and not through parents deciding to reproduce via donor conception.

By interviewing 24 people who were conceived with anonymously donated gametes in a clinical setting in the UK or Germany, I have explored how anonymity is transformed at the intersection of these different factors. Many years or even decades have passed between the conception of my interviewees with anonymously donated gametes and my ethnographic research, and I suggest that this temporal distance opens up a special perspective on anonymity. Temporality is a central aspect of anonymity in gamete donation: when donors are guaranteed anonymity, they are promised that they will remain anonymous either forever, or at least until a certain point in time.[1] Information that is "identifying" is only to be released – if at all – by an authority that manages its storage and release. However, my research shows that the possibility of being able to keep such a promise is called into question by the blurring of the boundaries between identifying and non-identifying information.

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[1] In the case of the German donor register, which allows parents to request identifying information immediately after the birth of their child, this period can be more limited than in other jurisdictions. However, here too, the promise of anonymity is upheld at least during treatment and pregnancy.

In the introduction, I described the social media campaign with which the German association Spenderkinder, an advocacy and interest group for and of donor-conceived persons, tries to reach out to former sperm donors. According to the accompanying press release, the association had decided to launch the campaign because its members have so far not received any information from cryobanks and clinics (Spenderkinder 2020b). I suggest that the campaign can be interpreted in several different ways. In particular, it is not only a story of a search for relatives, although, as I will argue shortly, it can indeed be read this way. The different ways in which the campaign can be read speak to different aspects of *becoming donor-conceived,* all of which have been explored in this book. I will present a summary of these different dimensions in this final chapter, using some of the campaign's hashtags as headings for the different sections.[2] Moreover, I will discuss the extent to which official and clinical authorities are responding to these changes. In the final sections, I will take up an argument that Carsten made in her exploration of constitutive kinship knowledge (2007). She argued that "although kinship knowledge is constitutive of the self, kinds of knowledge and what people do with them are infinitely variable" (2007: 423). I suggest that this statement applies not only to donor-conceived siblingship but also to the practices and politics of donor-conceived persons in general.

### *#righttoknowyourorigins #unknownfather*

The campaign of Spenderkinder can be read as a fight for the rights of the donor-conceived.[3] Anonymity was criticised by the majority of the people that I spoke to because it makes it impossible for the donor-conceived to exercise their "right to know". Since knowledge about genetic origin is seen as something that is essential for "identity formation", an argument that has also been taken up and perpetuated by psychosocial studies on donor conception, this assertion has become an unquestionable fact for many people. In chapter 3, I have attempted to break up the taken-for-grantedness of the "right to know" argument by examining its history, the discussions in which it is embedded, and the specific argumentations that have been particularly powerful.

Regulations are important in my research in two ways: on the one hand, they are a space in which anonymity can be established, for example by laws that prescribe permanent or limited anonymity. On the other hand, I have also shown that

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[2] For the hashtags that I have translated from German, I include the original word or phrase in a footnote. The hashtags that precede the individual sections are taken from several different Instagram posts; not all of them show a member of the association. Spenderkinder's Instagram account was only created shortly before the launch of the campaign.

[3] #rechtaufkenntnisderabstammung (#righttoknowyourorigins).

national laws and international human rights treaties are used to enforce the right to know of the donor-conceived. Treaties such as the CRC and the ECHR have become powerful narrative resources that opponents of anonymity use to raise their arguments to a higher legal as well as moral level, which is seemingly detached from personal sensitivities. These human rights documents have become an important means of arguing for the temporal limitation of donor anonymity. This is particularly noticeable in the UK where Article 8 of the ECHR, which provides for a right to respect for "private and family life", was invoked in support of the donor-conceived claimants in the 2002 EWHC ruling. The verdict contributed to the change in UK law that came into effect in 2005, which meant that those conceived after 1 April 2005 are able to obtain "identifying" donor information from the age of 18. In relation to Germany, I have shown that the right to know one's descent was something that was relevant to the enforcement of maintenance claims at the beginning of the twentieth century, not to the protection of personal identity.

While recent verdicts tend to foreground a strong or even causal link between information and "identity formation", the centrality of choice is another cornerstone of the "right to know" debates. Anonymity is rejected as a violation of the right to make a choice because it deprives the individual of the opportunity to make a choice about whether or not to access information. While demands for de-anonymisation are an expression of an idealisation of transparency, they are also an expression of an idealisation of choice. Since openness and transparency are seen as very valuable for the donor-conceived and their families, parents are not seen as having the right to choose secrecy and/or anonymity. Those who believe that the state has a duty to enforce disclosure argue that not knowing how they were conceived makes it impossible for the donor-conceived to exercise their right to make a choice. Besides, those who are in favour of including information about the donor and/or the use of donated gametes in official documents such as birth certificates argue that the rights of the donor-conceived should be aligned with those of adoptees, who can usually obtain information about their birth family through such records. Referring to the "lessons learnt from adoption" has become a particularly powerful argument of those opposing anonymity, which I have interpreted as an example of people drawing on what they already know about kinship to make sense of reproductive technologies (Edwards 1998: 156; 1999: 67).

While some donor-conceived persons chose to go public with their stories because they thought of donor conception as a violation of their right to live with their "real", genetic parents, the ideal of the "open family" was evoked far more frequently. A few of my interviewees even took on an ambassadorial role and wanted to contribute to the normalisation of donor conception by telling their stories in a public realm. Stories also play an important role in online spaces. Only those who can tell a personal story and are willing to share it can connect with others online, with groups usually asking new members to describe how they found out about the circumstances of their conception. Facebook groups and mailing lists do serve as a way to get information, but they have been described to me primarily as safe spaces where one can meet others with the same 'fate', without fear of hurtful comments from uninformed outsiders. Being an outsider myself, I was not able to join these groups, which tend to be closed and, I was told, mostly secret. I therefore do not know to what extent members make themselves identifiable to others.

One group that has both a closed online presence in the form of a mailing list and a public website is the German association Spenderkinder. It was founded in 2009 and has become a key player in the field of reproductive medicine and donor anonymity in Germany. Spenderkinder dominates media coverage of donor conception in Germany, with members having a flexible approach to their own identifiability. While they were mostly unidentifiable on the website, some chose not to use pseudonyms when appearing in public. I argue that the terms they use and propagate, such as "*Spenderkind*" ("donor child") and "*Familiengründung zu dritt*" ("founding a family in threes/with three people"), reflect an adherence to the idea that biological ties embody permanence, regardless of whether or not a relationship is activated. While my interviewees often argued that they only wanted to know the donor's identity, Spenderkinder, as part of their social media campaign, calls on donors to assume responsibility for their children *as fathers*, thus adhering to the idea that genetic substances are the essence of family relations. The use of the hashtag "#unknownfather" is thus another example of the way people make sense of reproductive technologies, and of the "dispersed kinship" (Strathern 1995) that these technologies create: the meaning of new technologies and new "procreative actors" (ibid.) is always negotiated in the context of what people already know about kinship.

### *#whoareyou #whoamI #wheredoIcomefrom*

While the social media campaign of Spenderkinder can be read as a fight for rights, I suggest that their Instagram, Twitter and Facebook posts can also be read in a different way: they illuminate the temporal, relational and micro-political dimensions of kinship knowledge.[4] The campaign is not only about finding information about the donors; the members of the association are also interested in finding out something about themselves. This is reflected in an Instagram post that was published in March 2020. The questions of the person that is pictured in the post are as follows: "Who are you? What qualities did I get from you?" (Author translation) Especially the desire to find out more about one's origins was omnipresent in the

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[4] #werbistdu (#whoareyou); #werbinich (#whoamI); #wokommeichher (#wheredoIcomefrom).

vast majority of interviews I conducted. Whereas “right to know” discourses, verdicts and laws take an individual that is marked by uniqueness and boundedness as their starting point, the frequently voiced need “to be complete” and “to know where you come from” points towards a relational notion of personhood.

The desire to (re)build a sense of continuity and completeness was also evident in my interviewees’ attempt to tell their stories as continuous wholes, with many of them claiming to have “felt the truth” before finding out about their donor-conceived origins. “Failure” could be disastrous for those who have not “managed” to “feel the truth”. If there is a duty to practice “see-through kinship” (Edwards 2018), then there is also a duty to see through “kinship lies”. I have shown that the desire to (re)construct continuity was also evident in the way people constructed imaginary relations with their anonymous donors, whom they expected to be similar to themselves. While not knowing who the donor is was usually described as unfair and painful, it was noticeable that many had very positive ideas about their unknown donors, often imagining their donor as an intelligent and well-educated person. The active character of not-knowing was also evident in the fact that people felt compelled to “scan” others they encountered in private and public spaces, asking themselves if they were related to them. While “scanning” was not necessarily agency-driven, I suggest that both imagining similarities as well as searching for them are processes that point to “the sheer inventiveness of anonymity” (Konrad 2005a: 242).

### ***#secret #family #parents #truth***

Non-knowledge is problematised not only in a legal context but also in everyday life.[5] Moreover, it is not only anonymity that is problematised by the donor-conceived but also micro-political aspects of knowing and not-knowing, as anonymity often appears together with other forms of non-knowledge, such as secrecy. When I speak of micro-political dimensions and negotiations, I am not referring to the opposite of large-scale politics. Rather, I am referring to the tendency of my interviewees to think very carefully about how knowledge is (to be) distributed. Such micro-political considerations are less prominent in Spenderkinder’s campaign, probably because their complexity makes it rather difficult to translate them into short, witty captions and tweets.

For many of my interviewees, a central question was not only who the anonymous donor was, but also who else knew, and/or should be told, about the circumstances of their conception. Sometimes they even seemed more concerned with these questions than with the identity of the donor. Efforts to find out and control “who knows what” are linked to intricate constellations of knowledge and power.

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[5] #Geheimnis (#secret); #Familie (#family); #Eltern (#parents); #Wahrheit (#truth).

Knowing who else knew means not only knowing who else knew about the circumstances of their conception, but also knowing who else knew that they had not known, as well knowing whom they can tell that they know. Besides, finding out about the circumstances of their conception could also mean finding out that a sibling was a genetic half-sibling, or that their parent was not the genetic grandparent of their (future) child. While kinship knowledge is 'culturally coupled' with identity (Strathern 1999b: 68), my research thus shows that it always has a relational component to it.

It was striking that the often invoked "right to know" seemed to play a subordinate role when people thought about whether or not they should tell others about their origins. They were more concerned with how telling others would affect their friendship and kinship network. Protecting relationships is arguably also a concern for many parents. Those who opt for donor conception may choose an anonymous donor and not tell their child, attempting to avoid what I have referred to as "kinship trouble" (Mohr 2015; Wahlberg 2018). The donor-conceived not only looked back at how their parents had managed kinship trouble but also intervened in the process themselves: by telling or not telling friends and relatives; ensuring that their sibling would be told; telling their own children in a "normal and natural way"; or by waiting to tell their children. Although my interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of honesty, transparency and openness, "considerations of care and kindness" (Konrad 2005b: 92) were usually more important to them when it came to managing kinship trouble.

### *#searchforpersons #searchmission #showyourself*

The campaign of Spenderkinder can also be read as a story about searching for connections and persons, and the association itself frames the significance of its social media posts this way, using hashtags such as #personensuche ("search for persons") and #suchaktion ("search mission").[6] In this book I have investigated the different avenues that are used and created by the donor-conceived in their search for information. I have examined both formal registers and informal means of obtaining information, not only discussing their technical and formal procedures, but

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[6] The hashtag "#showyourself" is also the slogan of the campaign. According to a Twitter post from Spenderkinder, the campaign's slogan was inspired by a song of the same title ("*Zeige Dich*") from the German soundtrack of the Disney movie *Frozen 2*, as a lot of donor-conceived persons feel that their feelings about searching for genetic relatives are reflected in the song. One refrain of the song reads as follows: "Show yourself, I can't wait / Show yourself, I want to see you / I have so many questions, I've been looking for it for so long / Show yourself, I want to understand you" (own translation).

also focusing on the hopes, expectations and uncertainties that arise in different contexts.

Interviewing donor-conceived adults from the UK, where the way in which donor information is managed, stored and released is marked by a high degree of formal control, allowed me to explore the impact of these formal types of infrastructures on the donor-conceived. Those of my British interviewees who were conceived before the establishment of the HFEA, which is the authority that oversees fertility treatments, regulates embryo research and manages the central donor register, could join a voluntary, government-funded register that has its own DNA database. Those conceived after 1991, but before 2005 could apply for what the HFEA classifies as "non-identifying" donor information, which is stored in the central register, and join a voluntary sibling register. Their donors can choose to "remove" their anonymity. The different regulations and registers in the UK create a situation where the donor-conceived can remain hopeful, knowing that one day they might find their donor and their donor siblings. However, they can never be sure that they will actually make these connections. In Germany, the uncertainty that the donor-conceived experience is related to the fact that there are no official registers at all, at least not for those conceived before July 2018. Until then, how and where information was stored was largely decided by medical professionals who were not controlled by an authority like the HFEA. For this reason, the donor-conceived in Germany cannot be sure whether they will receive information from doctors and clinics. At the same time, this uncertainty also opens up possibilities for action, and some of the donor-conceived decide to sue doctors in order to obtain information.

In recent years, donor-conceived persons have increasingly started to register with commercial DNA databases in both countries. These databases have grown enormously during my research, although their growth now seems to have slowed down. The tests sold online by commercial testing companies are mostly bought by people interested in genealogy and personalised health reports. Users are "matched" with other members; algorithms can determine a "relationship range", but not the exact nature of a "match". Although commercial tests are available worldwide, their "relationship ranges" operate with a kinship terminology that is not universal, but distinctively Euro-American. I have shown that some of the donor-conceived invest a lot of time and effort to make the best use of their results and do not stop their search even if they do not have "close matches". They communicate online with other users; exchange information and family trees; combine this information with what they have found in their additional offline and online research; and often purchase multiple tests to increase their chances of finding a "close match". My research thus shows that DNA databases do not replace other means of obtaining information but are oftentimes combined with other online and offline resources in a complex process that I have termed "infrastructuring". It is not necessarily the case that crucial information is provided by formal registers or doctors when people “infrastructure” DNA. Instead, distant “genetic cousins” are likely to become important players in the field of anonymity by providing the donor-conceived with the additional information needed to identify a donor. Infrastructuring involves a certain level of commitment to making connections: DNA databases enable *and* require the donor-conceived to become active and “put themselves out there”, as some of my interviewees put it, whereas formal registers are more about applying for information. In this sense, Spenderkinder’s campaign slogan “Show yourself” can also be read as an invitation to the donor-conceived to become active and “put themselves out there”.

Especially for those who had not received any information from formal registers, clinics or doctors, not taking a DNA test was not an option. A lot of people ordered one as soon as they learnt about genetic testing. While searching for the donor and donor siblings could give people the comforting feeling that at least they can do *something*, taking a DNA test was not entirely agency-driven. Most people took a test not because they thought they would definitely have a “match”, but because they felt they *had to try* to find their genetic relatives. This was also the case for those who said that they were not desperate to know. Some of those who were not immediately successful decided to stop their active search and decided to just “wait and see”, hoping and trusting that they would have a “match” sometime in the future. Others tried to increase their chances of finding a match by reaching out to the public, which is what Spenderkinder is trying to do with its social media posts. The campaign is not only intended to motivate former donors to take a DNA test. Rather, it also follows the following logic: the more people register, the more likely it is that the donor-conceived will get a match that is ‘close enough’.

### *#searchedandfound*

In view of the growth of DNA databases, researchers have already announced “the end of anonymity” (Harper et al. 2016).[7] However, based on the assumption that anonymity is always partial and relational, I argue that these developments illustrate instead that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between potentially “identifying” information and “non-identifying” information. At the same time, this distinction has probably never been as clear-cut as regulations on the release of information suggest. The decisive factor is not the amount of available information, but how pieces of information that were previously unconnected can now be linked. The developments discussed in this book have weakened the control that physicians, official authorities and parents have traditionally had over information. Donors may become identifiable, even if they are not registered with a database; they may decide to register in the hope of getting matched with

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[7] #gesuchtundgefunden (#searchedandfound).

their offspring, who may take a test because they are interested in "ethnicity estimates" without knowing that they are donor-conceived; donor siblings may come into contact with each other, even if there is no formal sibling register available to them; donor-conceived persons may learn of the circumstances of their conception through their registration, even if their parents want to keep the use of donated gametes secret; and the children of a donor may learn that their father was a sperm donor if they decide to take a DNA test and are "matched" with his donor-conceived offspring.

At the time of my research, not everyone who decided to search for genetic connections ended up being "matched" with a sibling or the donor. The hashtag #gesuchtundgefunden ("searched and found") did not yet apply to everyone. However, more and more people seem to actually be 'successful': according to a blog entry published in January 2021, the organisation Spenderkinder knows of 265 donor-conceived persons who have taken a test, and 184 have already found a half-sibling and/or their donor – almost 70 percent (Spenderkinder 2021).[8] It seems to be only a matter of time until someone has a match. At the same time, the question arises of what happens to those who still have not found anyone: are they encouraged by the 'success stories' of others, or are they increasingly frustrated because they still have no luck? I cannot give a definitive answer to this, although I would guess that the meaning of "having to try" might be changing. Most of the people I interviewed felt that they had to try DNA testing because it was, as one person put it, "an easy thing to do", and not necessarily because they expected to have close matches. I would guess that by now, more people feel compelled to try because they expect to find someone.

### *#DNAmatters*

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that while *matching* recipients and donors according to physiognomic characteristics was, and still is, a way to keep the donation a secret (Bergmann 2014), *genetic matching* via DNA databases has turned into something that troubles both anonymity and secrecy. The question is whether, and if so how, sperm banks and/or legislators will respond to these changes. What will happen to donation programmes if donors can no longer be guaranteed that they will remain anonymous forever, or at least for a certain period of time? Will clinics and countries change their policies and laws? In the UK, the HFEA seems to be at least aware of these developments, even if regulations on anonymity and the release of identifying and non-identifying information have not yet been changed. Emma Wheeler,

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[8] This represents a growth compared to the previous year: in January 2020, the association knew of 193 donor-conceived persons who had taken a test, and 124 had found a half-sibling and/or their donor – almost 65 % (Spenderkinder 2020a).

the HFEA's Donor Information Manager, whom I interviewed in September 2016, had already noted then that "there will be the potential for a lot more things to be discovered accidently or inadvertently through these testing sites". She also told me that a few months ago, she had had a conversation with someone whose daughter had only found out about the circumstances of her conception through a DNA test. On the HFEA website, the *Donor-conceived people and their parents*-page, which tells potential applicants how to apply for information, contains the following note:

> "Home DNA testing and matching websites have implications for donor-conceived people. Using one of the home DNA tests these sites offer plus opting in (or not 'opting out') of their 'matching services', could mean that your donor, or donor-conceived genetic siblings become identifiable to you and vice versa. It's also possible that a donor-conceived person might be identified by inference, if they have a close genetic relative using home DNA testing and matching services. Even if the donor-conceived person has not used such a service themselves, the information from the matching service may be able to be combined with other publicly available information about the relevant person, and their donor conceived status and/or their identity could be possible to infer." (HFEA, n.d.)

This note was not yet part of the Authority's online presence when I began my empirical research in 2016. In section 7.1, I have pointed out that the HFEA's application forms and website texts tend to present register information as emotionally challenging and potentially even distressing. In comparison, the text on DNA testing, which does not contain any links with further information or advice, seems rather descriptive. There is only vague mention of "implications" for the donor-conceived.[9] A meeting paper from September 2018 (HFEA 2018a) discusses commercial genetic testing in more detail. The author notes that "[d]onor-conceived people or their families are free to identify their donors (or vice versa) by accessing DNA testing and matching websites" (ibid.) and points out that the HFEA "has no regulatory powers in relation to this" (ibid.). The author suggests raising awareness about the use of DNA testing and its implications and starting "a dialogue with the

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[9] At the time of writing my thesis (April 2020), there was no comparable note on the information page for donors. However, a similar text could already be found in the Code of Practice (HFEA 2019b). While the Code states that fertility centres are not required to proactively contact past donors, it does point out that clinics should inform the donors they currently register about DNA testing: "The centre should inform and make clear to donors that at any time, outside of the managed system of information provision […] direct to consumer DNA testing and matching services potentially enable anyone born as a result of their donation (or a close genetic relative) to identify the donor." (HFEA 2019b: 126) In May 2021, the information page for current and future donors contained a short note saying that children can "find out your identity before they reach 18 using home DNA testing and matching services that are available online" (HFEA n.d.).

larger UK-based DNA testing websites" (ibid.) with the aim of asking them to include information about these implications on their websites.

An American sperm bank is taking a different approach. In February 2019, online news sites reported that a woman who had conceived her daughter with sperm from NW Cryobank, which is located in Washington State, got into legal trouble because of genetic testing. She had given DNA tests to her 5-year-old daughter, her father and close friends for Christmas. Her daughter had immediately gotten a close match. Believing that it could be the donor's mother, she had decided to reach out to her. In one article, the woman is quoted as follows: "I wrote her and said, 'Hi, I think your son may be my daughter's donor. I don't want to invade your privacy, but we're open to contact with you or your son' […] I thought it was a cool thing." (Mroz 2019) Shortly afterwards, she was contacted by NW Cryobank. She was threatened with a US$20,000 fine "for 'flagrantly' violating the agreement she'd signed by seeking the identity of the donor and contacting his family" (ibid.). She was also told that she would not receive any more sperm from the donor with whom she had conceived her daughter should she decide to have a second child. While the bank is not trying to prevent parents or donor-conceived persons from taking a DNA test, it is trying to prevent them from turning commercial databases into search tools:

> "Leora Westbrook, general manager and vice president of NW Cryobank, said in an email that the bank does not prohibit clients or their offspring from taking a DNA test. But "we seek to prevent the use of that information to identify a donor who has made a donation in reliance upon anonymity." Once the child is no longer a minor, Ms. Westbrook added, he or she may not only take the DNA test but may also contact the bank to determine if the donor is open to being contacted." (Mroz 2019)

Belgian bioethicist Guido Pennings (2019a, 2019b), on the other hand, proposes to 'solve' the situation differently. He argues that while a recipient's wish to have an anonymous donor and a donor's desire to remain anonymous are "no longer enforceable" (2019a: 788), their wishes "should still be respected in good faith" (ibid.). Pennings argues that "if more evidence comes in that shows that the findings of these tests are causing turmoil in people's lives and are socially and psychologically disruptive, it makes sense to forbid them to offer this service" (2019b). However, Pennings does not question that it is possible to distinguish between identifying and non-identifying information. Instead, he argues that "[t]he difference between identifiers and non-identifiers is only clear in isolation" (2019a: 787) and points out that "a combination of non-identifiers may well lead to identification" (ibid.).

Meanwhile, an American sperm bank is trying to enforce a "no testing" rule on its customers (Donor Sibling Registry 2019). A Danish cryobank only mentions on its website that "there is always a risk that donors, clients and children can trace or be traced via DNA analysis which can compromise the privacy" (Cryos, n.d.). A uniform approach to DNA testing does not seem to be in sight. Given that reproductive technologies and anonymity have always been regulated differently in different countries, this is arguably not surprising. The fact that it has generally become more difficult to distinguish between potentially identifying and non-identifying information, and that DNA testing is not necessarily required to identify an anonymous donor, is mostly not considered or discussed by cryobanks, policy makers, regulators and fertility experts.

However, if a supposedly non-identifying donor profile is unique or comprehensive enough, it may only take the skilful use of a search engine to identify the person behind the profile.[10] The authors of the Nuffield Report pointed out as early as 2013 that "easy access to personal information through the internet may increasingly challenge the distinction between identifying and non-identifying information" (2013: 24). They concluded that the role of the HFEA may need to change: "The current role of the HFEA as the gatekeeper of identifiable information about donors may thus gradually be forced to evolve in recognition of the extent to which such information may be obtainable in other ways." (Ibid.) It remains to be seen whether, and if so how, the institutions managing donor information will adapt to these developments, although the above-mentioned statements from the HFEA indicate that at least the British authorities are thinking about implementing some changes. At the same time, it is questionable whether the attempt to enter into a "dialogue" with DNA testing companies will be successful. As the HFEA itself points out, the Authority cannot force them to publish 'warnings' on their sites. Moreover, even a ban in one country would not stop people from taking a test. They would still be able to obtain tests that are prohibited or not easily available in their home country, for example through friends living abroad.

### *#halfsiblings*

Since the campaign of Spenderkinder was designed to reach anonymous donors, donor siblings – who, unlike regular half-siblings, do not have a parent in common – were rarely mentioned in the organisation's social media posts at the start of the campaign (this has changed in the meantime).[11] In section 7.5, I have outlined how donor sibling relationships are established in the UK through the voluntary

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[10] Commenting on the use of detailed donor profiles, Pennings notes that the large amount of detailed information "provided in an extended donor profile in most commercial sperm and egg banks holds at least the possibility of tracing a donor" (2019a: 787). He suggests that in order to protect the donor's anonymity, cryobanks should provide "as little information as possible on the donor" (ibid.).

[11] #halbgeschwister (#halfsiblings).

register DSL. The DSL can delay siblingship, either because people have to wait until they are old enough to join the register, or because they know (through data from the central HFEA database) that their donor siblings are not yet eligible to join. Unlike DNA databases, the donor's "own children" cannot join the DSL. However, most of the people I talked to were more interested in siblings who are also donor-conceived. Donor siblings are not only genetically related, but they also "partake in each other's conception" (Edwards 2013: 291). The donor-conceived oftentimes wanted to reach out to their donor siblings precisely because they did not know anyone else who was donor-conceived.

While it could be argued that donor siblings exist whether they are found or not, knowledge of the existence of donor siblings does not necessarily have to be activated. While people cannot 'unknow' the knowledge about their genetic connections, it is up to the individual whether or not they want to find their donor siblings and form a close relationship with them. Moreover, knowledge of genetic connections, even if already activated, may become less important for donor-conceived persons at a later stage (Edwards 2015: 117–118). Whether these connections develop into close relationships that are not exclusively "latent and removed from everyday life" (Klotz 2016: 50) cannot be conclusively answered in this book due to my research design and the timing of my project. I conducted one-time interviews followed by email and telephone contact, and those of my interviewees who had already found donor siblings at the time of the interview had mostly had a "match" only a short time before meeting me. A longer-term study involving ongoing contact with donor sibling groups, would be needed to see whether activated relationships develop into active relationships.

These unprecedented connections point to an "imperative to connect" (Edwards 2009b; Knecht 2009), which can be described as "an emergent cultural pattern where making connections becomes a moral good in itself" (Klotz 2014: 288).[12]

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[12] This "tendency to connect for connection's sake" (Klotz 2014: 267) has been explored by Edwards in her analysis of the growing popularity of ancestry research in the north of England (2009b). She found that "[g]enealogical research is emotional work" (2009b: 10), with the "excitement of discovery" (ibid.) being part of the narratives of all genealogists. The joy of making new discoveries was particularly evident in a conversation I had with Elizabeth Chapman. I knew that she was a genealogy-enthusiast who had started doing genealogical research long before she had learnt of the circumstances of her conception. Nevertheless, I thought she was talking about a close relative when she told me, noticeably excited and thrilled, that she had managed to identify the father of one of her cousins who had been an illegitimate child. Elizabeth had managed to identify her cousin's father through her research on Ancestry, which consists not only of a genetic database but also of a collection of digitised documents. By combining both resources, she had succeeded in identifying the right person. Elizabeth enthusiastically declared, "DNA works!". After a couple of minutes, I realised that Elizabeth was talking about a distant genetic cousin who had lived in the eighteenth century.

This imperative is linked to kinship in the searches of the donor-conceived, and a new form of siblingship emerges. Donor siblingship is both voluntary and involuntary and was often seen by my interviewees as an opportunity to draw indirect conclusions about the donor. To say that it is some kind of "phantom kinship" ("*Phantomverwandtschaft*"; Bernard 2014: 156) because the donor is neither known nor present, and to argue that these sibling relations are bereft of meaning because those conceived with sperm from the same donor do not grow up together (Wehling 2015: 113–114), is, I suggest, misleading. Not only do these statements disregard the imaginative possibilities of anonymity by portraying the anonymous donor as a kind of 'phantom' or 'ghost'; they also ignore that kinship can be made in a wide variety of ways, without one way of making connections displacing another way of 'doing kinship'. That is not to say that there are no donor-conceived people who think donor siblingship is 'pointless'. This was the case with Amber Jones from the UK. Not only did she have no interest in her donor (section 7.3), whom she did not want to see "as a person", but she also had no interest in her donor siblings. She explained to me why she could not understand why others would be interested in people conceived with gametes from the same donor, and why she did not think she could ever see them as actual siblings: "You've had completely different upbringings by completely different people, are you ever going to be like brother and sister when you've not shared a parent?"

#### *#donorconceived*

What people do with kinship knowledge will vary, and not everyone will decide to search for donor siblings. Amber chose not to do anything with the knowledge that she probably had genetic half-siblings. Besides, several of the people I interviewed told me that they had a sibling who was not interested in finding out anything about their donor or donor-conceived half-siblings. However, the majority of the people I interviewed were not only interested in their donor siblings, but also in their donor. Although I spoke to two people who were not interested in either their donor or their donor siblings, I would hesitate to make general assumptions about people who are not interested in their genetic connections and/or for whom it is rather meaningless that they are donor-conceived. Commenting on the fact that she only spoke to adoptees who had chosen to search for their birth parents, Carsten points out that there is a "methodological difficulty involved in trying to study people who are defined by something they don't do" (2007: 415). Although "interest in the donor/donor siblings" was not a selection criterion for me, it is arguably not surprising that most people who contacted me were among those who wanted to know more about their donor and/or believed there was a need to talk about anonymity and donor conception. It may be that other people do not feel the need to talk about donor conception and search for the donor because they do not attach importance to the circumstances of their conception. Some people may fear that new information about their genetic origins and connections will unsettle them and choose not to search for the donor or their donor siblings for that very reason. For one reason or another, donor-conceived persons may choose not to activate their donor relations. As I pointed out in section 7.2, it is not possible to know how many people are interested in their donor and/or donor siblings: first, it is not known how many donor-conceived persons even know about the circumstances of their conception; second, estimates of how many people were conceived with donor gametes can never be accurate because there are massive gaps in the official statistics. In the UK, information about donations and treatments has only been collected centrally since 1991, and the central German register that stores information has only existed since 2018.

Similar to donor siblings, one could argue that donor-conceived persons exist anyway – whether or not they know that they are donor-conceived, and whether or not they attach any importance to the circumstances of their conception. However, I argue that knowledge about the use of donated gametes has to be activated in a certain way for "being donor-conceived" to become a meaningful and powerful identification. In this sense, persons *become donor-conceived* through acting on their kinship knowledge: by (re)framing their stories as a matter of rights; employing the rhetoric of human rights; presenting their stories on a public and political stage; joining forces with others; making imaginary or actual connections with donors and donor siblings; (re)constructing continuous narratives; managing kinship trouble by telling or not telling others; requesting information from formal registers; and infrastructuring DNA. Not all of these factors need to occur simultaneously, and for some people certain elements may not be compatible: for example, some may choose not to find out about their donor because they want to manage kinship trouble.

While there are variations in what people do with kinship knowledge, these variations are masked by the use of a hashtag such as "#donorconceived", which Spenderkinder uses in its social media campaign. On social media platforms, hashtags serve a dual purpose: "They locate texts within a specific conversation, allowing for their quick retrieval, while also marking texts as being "about" a specific topic." (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 5) Hashtags have "the effect of blurring boundaries and levelling out that which is unique and incommensurable" (Bernard 2019: 76–77). While discovering that an unknown procreator was involved in your conception means discovering information that is constitutive of the self, not every donor-conceived person will do the same with this knowledge. However, a hashtag such as "#donorconceived" obscures these differences by marking a specific post and its content as applying to every donor-conceived person. As I have already argued, in a study like mine, a researcher is more likely to capture the perspective of those for whom "being donor-conceived" has become an important identification. While this might be seen as a limitation in a study aiming for statistical representativeness, it is precisely this identification that has interested me. The activation of kinship knowledge and the emphasis on "being donor-conceived" as a constitutive part of one's self are among the causes and effects of the transformation of anonymity in gamete donation.