5. Micropolitics of not-knowing
Imagining continuities and relations

The search for "origins" or "roots" was an omnipresent theme in almost all interviews, and the formulaic character of statements such as "I just want to know where I come from" or "You need to know where you come from" was striking. In her research on adoption reunions, Carsten (2004) has made very similar observations. Adoptees were looking for their birth family "in order to know who I am," "to find out where I came from," or "to be complete" (2004: 104). Carsten found that some of those who grew up not knowing their birth kin experienced a "sense of incompleteness" (ibid.). She argues that such a "deficit should make us pause" (ibid.), and that "this suggests a notion of personhood where kinship is not simply added to bounded individuality, but one where kin relations are perceived as intrinsic to the self" (2004: 106–107). This kind of relationality is, I suggest, also evident in the narratives of the donor-conceived.

Finding out "where you come from" can become a necessity if what people know about themselves and their kin relations is called into question. This was the case for the vast majority of the people that I interviewed. Most of them could point to a specific moment in time when they were told that they had been conceived with donor sperm, and thus found out that they were not genetically related to the person most of them still referred to as their father. While genetic relatedness is something that cannot be terminated on one's own accord (you might be able to decide that you do not want any contact with your genitor, but you cannot reject the fact that you share a genetic connection), the people that I interviewed experienced a potentially challenging situation: a connection that is considered indissoluble has dissolved, as it turned out to be non-existent. It is thus "not their biological bodies that are compromised but instead the kinship they know as significant" (Edwards 2018: 171–172, note 13). Their life receives a new temporal dimension, as they look back to a time when they had not yet been told.

Temporality is thus my second point of reference and analysis in this chapter, next to relationality. I am interested in the temporal and relational dimensions of anonymity, kinship knowledge and the way they are problematised by the donor-conceived. This chapter thus constitutes a micro-political exploration of becom-

ing donor-conceived from a relational and temporal point of view, and I follow a similar approach in the next chapter. I do not interpret micropolitics as something that translates political decisions made at a macro-level into the choices of individuals, and thus as a counterpart to 'large-scale' politics. Instead, I am interested in investigating what kind of negotiations take place on an everyday level and how anonymity and knowledge about relations become significant and potentially problematic (see Macdonald 2010 for a similar approach to micropolitics).

In this chapter, I will first introduce one of my interviewees in whose narrative the need to know played a central role. Her desire to "complete" herself highlights that while continuity might be an illusion, it is nevertheless firmly embedded in everyday life (Becker 1997: 191). I will then examine another element that marked many accounts, namely the assertion that one had always intuitively felt the truth about one's origins. A focus on how people narratively work with the "cultural model of continuity" (Becker 1994: 401) as part of their retrospective reasoning allows for a shift in perspective that goes beyond an analysis that would merely reproduce these narratives. Following this, I will explore how continuity and similarity emerged as key modes of relating in the accounts of the donor-conceived, who often told me that they did not fit into their families. In the last part of this chapter I will examine how my interlocutors built imaginary relations with their unknown relatives by searching for similarities in strangers and/or friends, a process I have termed "scanning". Overall, the empirical examples discussed in this chapter touch on relational aspects of personhood that remain obscured in discussions about the right to know, despite or maybe because of "the very ordinary quality of this relationality" (Carsten 2004: 107). At the same time, they also testify to the central importance of temporality and continuity for the making of persons and kinship relations.

5.1 Half a family tree: Lost identities and recreated continuities

Sitting in her living room in an industrial town in Northern England, 23-year-old Lindsay Billington told me that she had "no knowledge or even inkling" before her parents told her shortly after her twenty-first birthday that she was not genetically related to her father. Her anger at them was accompanied by an intense sense of shame, as she was firmly convinced that she should have been able to figure out the truth by herself. A sense of embarrassment and disappointment manifested itself in the tearful voice in which she told most of her story. There were several moments during the interview when I thought that she would burst into tears, which gave me a slightly uneasy feeling, as I was unsure about how to react. It was obvious that some of my questions evoked painful memories for her. This seemed to be reinforced by the fact that the room we were in was the room where her parents had first told her about the circumstances of her conception. However, I was

surprised at how focused Lindsay remained throughout our two-hour conversation, even though some parts of the interview were noticeably upsetting for her. She seemed determined to talk about these painful experiences and had prepared for meeting up with me: on the coffee table in front of us she had put several documents that she thought might be of interest to me and that she allowed me to photograph. This included the response letter from the HFEA that contained non-identifying information about her donor and donor siblings (see section 7.3). Her openness and desire to tell her story had already been indicated in her first email, as she had offered to come to Cambridge (where I was based during my time in the UK) for an interview, even though it was several hours by car from her hometown. She stated that although she did not know much about gamete donation and its legal regulation yet, she would still like to participate in my research, and that she had a lot to say on the subject of anonymity.

Her parents as well as her in-laws, whom she had known for a long time since she had already been dating her husband as a teenager, lived just around the corner of her house in the town where she had grown up. Her life made a thoroughly orderly impression: Lindsay's house was neat and tidy, the interiors were colour-coordinated, she was married and worked in a law firm, thus fulfilling her long-standing wish to work with the law. The town centre of her hometown seemed to be rather dull and abandoned, and I was not surprised to read online that the locals tended to go shopping in a nearby shopping centre. It appeared to be the kind of place you have to grow up in if you want to feel comfortable there in the long run, and Lindsay had indeed grown up there. The continuity and predictability of her life had been shaken when her parents told her one evening about the circumstances of her conception:

> Lindsay Billington: "I was completely taken aback. And upset at the time because … you feel like your whole world comes crashing down because you feel like you're going through life and you know who you are, and you know where you've come from, and you know your family history. And then all of a sudden, you've just got this black hole. You've got half a family tree. Do you know what I mean? Because you don't really know where you've come from. So then I started to sort of lose my identity, I didn't really know who I was as a person because I didn't know where I'd come from."

The use of genealogical models such as the family tree mentioned by Lindsay is a means to establish order in what can otherwise be a set of chaotic relations. Such models have the potential to "significantly shape people's self-positioning and perception" (Pálsson 2002: 351). The tree metaphor in particular, with the tree being turned upside down, has "not only survived but flowered into the present" (Pálsson 2004: 188) after family trees first appeared in medieval imagery, despite "the botan-

ical absurdity of the image of a tree that extends its roots into the sky"(ibid.).[1] The persistent popularity of this metaphor can be seen today in the naming of FamilyTreeDNA (FTDNA), one of the genetic databases used by the donor-conceived.[2] The family tree Lindsay was speaking of consisted of the persons with whom she was genetically related. Since her donor was anonymous, half of her genetic roots were missing, and her own place in the present was less firm. Lindsay had already started seeing a counsellor before the disclosure talk with her parents, as she had always struggled with anxiety. It was the counselling that had made her realise that it might be the right time to try and find her donor. At that time, she had in fact already received non-identifying donor information from the HFEA (see figure 3 in section 7.2 for a replica of the table Lindsay received). Shortly before we met up, she had decided to consciously "look into it" even more in the hope that more knowledge about her genetic origins might give her a sense of completeness: "If maybe I can complete myself and know who I am, where I've come from, that might help my anxiety."

Many of my interlocutors told me about similar experiences and talked about feeling "incomplete". Not only did they no longer know where they came from, but they also no longer knew where they belonged in the here and now. Such accounts illustrate that roots are important in two ways: they "are not only about linking a person to the past but also about locating them in the present" (Edwards 2000: 230). The feelings of identity loss in particular, which came up repeatedly throughout many interviews, illustrates an argument made by Carsten: "When people find out new information about their kin, […] that knowledge becomes incorporated into their sense of identity […]." (2007: 405) If it is information about an anonymous donor, this may result in the kind of "black hole" Lindsay talked about. As Carsten argues in her study of adoptees, "knowledge […] has the power to create, and also potentially to dislodge, a sense of self" (2007: 415). Carsten also suggests that "[…] the constitutive power of new kinship knowledge might be reinforced when such knowledge has been concealed. And that is because identity for Euro-Americans rests not just with self-knowledge, and hence kinship knowledge, but also with a sense of control over one's own life." (2007: 421–422) The accounts of the

1 As Gísli Pálsson (2004) shows, the tree imagery has undergone significant changes over the centuries. Whereas today family trees are mostly depicted with their roots in the sky, they were initially depicted as regular flowering and growing trees, "which underlined the joyful proliferation of the lineage, drawing its vital energy from the earth and stretching into the divine light in the heavens" (2004: 188). However, this imagery came to be seen as problematic because it did not "project the past in glorious terms" (ibid.). The image of the flowering tree was met with resistance, as it put "the ancestors (and the gods) in the soil and degenerated contemporaries in the heavens" (ibid.).

2 www.familytreedna.com (last accessed May 28, 2020).

donor-conceived suggest that similar dynamics are at play in the case of anonymous gamete donation and late disclosure. For those who grow up without the knowledge of the circumstances of their conception, their sense of self can potentially become dislodged under the conditions of anonymity and broken secrecy. At the same time, it seems reasonable to assume that for those who grow up knowing about the circumstances of their conception, and who want to know more, not being able to know their donor might not be as problematic as it is for those who grew up in secrecy. Given the composition of my sample, my insights into how those who grow up knowing make sense of their conception are very limited. My guess is mainly based on the interview I conducted with Jacob Moore, who always knew that he was donor-conceived, and whom I will introduce in more detail in section 7.5.[3] His egg donor, whose "non-identifying" information he had already received from the HFEA, was still anonymous. Although he was interested in finding out more, the thought of never being able to find her did not worry him and had not dislodged his sense of self: "I mentioned to quite a lot [of friends] that I'd like to find out but ultimately, if I never find out, I will never find out. It's not going to bother me all that much, it's not going to be something I'm lying on my death bed worrying about."

For many people, finding out that they were donor-conceived had changed not only how they felt about their past and present, but also how they felt about their future. Lindsay, too, described that she was unsure not only about where she came from, and about her identity, but also about where she would be going in the future:

> Lindsay Billington: "I just feel like if I had been told when I was younger, you sort of grow up knowing and it's just part of your life, but then it's told at 21, when you're going through life and you're getting married, and you think you know where you're going, you think, 'I'll get married, and then in so many years I'll maybe have children,' and you sort of plan your life out, and then when that happens, you think … what are you going to *do*, I don't know … it's just hard to explain."

Concerns about no longer knowing "where you are going" illustrate that in "kinship time" (Carsten 2000b: 692), the past, present and future are intertwined, which I will explore in more detail at the end of the next chapter (section 6.4). Against this background, the attempt to find the donor constitutes not only an attempt to find out more about one's past but also an effort to establish "continuities of identity which can link together […] past, present, and future" (Carsten 2000b: 700), as

3 Amber Jones, who also always knew she was donor-conceived, was not interested in her donor. Interestingly, the main reason why she did not want to find out anything was because she was afraid that she might learn something that would have a negative effect on how she saw herself. She seemed to be afraid that donor information might dislodge her sense of self (see section 7.3).

Carsten argues in the context of adoptees searching for their birth kin. The donor-conceived's desire to find out where they come from, who they are and where they are going implies that the temporal reasoning of my interviewees was based on the assumption of linearity, as neither conceptions of the future nor of the past are possible without at least "a degree of linear temporal reasoning" (Jansen 2016: 454). This presumed linearity is also a precondition for the possibility of hope (ibid.), an orientation towards the future that I will come back to when exploring how official registers in the UK create a space of hope and uncertainty (chapter 7).

In the conversations with those who had experienced receiving information about their donor-conceived origins as a painful rupture, I repeatedly noticed that they had detailed ideas about how their lives could have developed if they had always known where they came from. They believed that they would have fitted better into their families, that they would have gotten along better with their relatives, and that they would never have had a gap in their lives – if their parents had talked about the circumstances of their conception early on, if the donors had been contactable or, as imagined by some, if they were not donor-conceived. I draw on the concept of the "disnarrated" to explore these alternative visions of what life could have been like. The disnarrated, a concept originally coined by American literary scholar Gerald Prince (1992), has been described by him as "all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (1992: 30, emphasis in original). It is hence different to that which is not mentioned because it is taken for granted (Vindrola-Padros and Johnson 2014: 1604). When analysing a narrative and its disnarrated elements, "the main question […] is, if the event did not happen, then why is it part of the story" (Vindrola-Padros and Brage 2017: 17). Anthropologists Vindrola-Padros and Brage argue that "the disnarrated makes the reader consider alternative realities" (ibid.). It can give insights into reflections, needs and desires (2017: 20).

In Lindsay's account, disnarrated elements seemed to be particularly strong and painful because in retrospect it seemed as if a different course of events had been possible. Unlike other parents who had been told to keep the donation secret, her mother and father had been advised by the clinic where the treatment took place in the early 1990s to tell their daughter early on. They had even received a book from the clinic that was designed to help couples with the process of telling, and which they had given to her shortly after she had been told. She had put the book on the coffee table so that I could have a look at it during the interview. It seemed to be a physical and painful reminder of a direction her life could have taken if her parents had followed the clinic's advice. When asked why they had decided against telling her at an earlier age, her mother had told her that they just missed the right moment. Lindsay concluded that "they found it difficult to say it". She was noticeably upset by her father's confession that he would have taken the information to his grave if events had not "pushed" him into telling the whole

story (see section 6.1). Lindsay's vision of how her life could have developed under different circumstances was linked to an idea of what difference a non-anonymous and contactable donor would have made:[4]

> Lindsay Billington: "If I had known when I was a child, and maybe had the opportunity to meet the donor, not have a relationship with him, but just to piece it together as a child, then maybe you grow up being a bit more stable, I don't know, because that has not happened to me, I'm just sort of thinking how I would have liked it to have happened. And how I feel like it would have suited me better, if I had known and had the opportunity to see him and know a bit about him as well, where he's come from and what he's doing and if he's got children, what they're like … because I feel like in my dad's family, I've never fitted in, really, so I just feel like I'm constantly looking for somewhere to fit in."

Lindsay interpreted knowledge about and contact with the donor as the factors that would have enabled her to develop a sense of stability and possibly escape the feelings of anxiety and nervousness that had plagued her for a long time. She would not have developed the need to "complete" herself if she had known about her origins and met the donor, as her life would have been a coherent and continuous whole. The conditions that not only characterised her alternative vision of her life, but that also made the disnarrated scenarios that others included in their stories "tellable" (Vindrola-Padros and Brage 2017: 18) were the same conditions that are at the very centre of narratives, which "arise out of a desire to have life display coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" (Becker 1997: 12).

Becker has shown in her work that narratives themselves are "empowering" (1997: 25) and argues that they "represent action and, thus, agency" (ibid.). In her ethnographic study of reproductive technologies in the US, Becker interprets "actions" not only as the decision to undergo treatment but also as "*all* the decisions they [women and men making use of IVF and other technologies] take on their own behalf" (2000: 102, emphasis in original). A similar idea has been put forward by Carsten, who argued that "both telling […] stories and having them listened to is constitutive of the process of rearranging the past to assert one's own creative control over events shaped by others" (2000b: 698). In the case of those who have been conceived with gametes from anonymous sources, talking about what happened and what might have happened constitutes a form of "taking action"

4 Her wish to meet the donor differed from the demands voiced by others who stated that they "just wanted to know" and expressed no or only little desire to meet up in person (see section 3.5). A wish for contact would not necessarily be fulfilled under current UK or German law. Although those who donated after 2005 or 2018 respectively have agreed to their identifying information being released to those who request it, they are not legally required to meet up with their donor offspring.

(Becker 2000). For the donor-conceived, telling their story, regardless of whether it concerns disnarrated elements or not, can be a means to 'narratively take action' against the experience of discontinuity. It restores a certain order in their lives, which is arguably why someone like Lindsay, for whom the interview clearly brought up painful memories, decided to talk to me and remained very focused throughout the interview. However, narratives alone cannot create or restore "generational continuity through biological linkages" (Becker 2000: 213), which is, according to Becker, "at the root of the cultural ideology of continuity" (ibid.). Telling alone will not bring back the other half of a family tree that is missing due to the donor's anonymity. Nevertheless, talking about the experience of being donor-conceived has still become a powerful resource in the fight for change. The stories of the donor-conceived can also enter a public and political realm, which illustrates Becker's point that "taking action […] can also lead to large-scale collective action" (2000: 102). As I have shown in chapter 4, speaking publicly about the experience of being conceived through anonymous donations has become a crucial part of the donor-conceived's fight against anonymity.

5.2 Truth will out: Retrospective reasoning and feeling the truth

The effort "to consider life as a history" (Bourdieu 2000: 300) by understanding and narrating life as "a coherent and finalized whole" (Bourdieu 2000: 299) was part of an element that kept reappearing in many narratives. In contrast to Lindsay, several of the people I interviewed told me that they were not really shocked by the information that they were not genetically related to their father. They mentioned that they had always intuitively felt the truth, which had then eventually come out, even in their early childhood days. Since they had little or nothing in common with their father and other family members, they had always had the impression that they did not really "fit" into their families. As I will argue, the idea that one had somehow been able to feel the truth about one's origins allowed people to re-establish a sense of continuity. It gave them the narrative means to rework the disruption they had been experiencing, as it could be interpreted as something that they had always been anticipating. The feeling of being different from one's family was also a central concern in the stories of those who had not experienced a painful "loss of identity". What I am interested in here is how the idea of intuition can act as a narrative vehicle for the expression of certain ideas about anonymity, secrecy and kinship. In order to explore these dynamics, I will first focus on retrospective reasoning on a more general level and examine the specific understanding of childhood that underlies these representations. Following this, I will give an example of a donor-conceived person who mentioned that he had always felt the truth. I will

conclude by exploring the question of what it can mean for a person to have 'failed' to do so.

When my interlocutors told me that they always felt that something about their origins was 'odd', this was always connected with a look at their past and especially at their childhood. Retrospective reasoning is based on the idea "that knowledge rests in the recesses of one's mind" (Edwards 1999: 75). Of course, "look[ing] to the past into order to explain a current concern is a commonly evoked form of evidence" (ibid.). Retrospective thinking is hence not something that is unique to the accounts of the donor-conceived. Retrospective reasoning is instead central to the sensemaking process (Czarniawska 2004: 23). What makes the accounts of the donor-conceived interesting and special, however, is the fact that for those who can remember a specific moment of being told, the information they have received is constitutive for their identity. Retrospective reasoning can be a means to reorder experience and counteract the potentially "destabilizing effect" (Carsten 2007: 409) that this constitutive kinship information can have.

In her ethnographic analysis of how people that experienced infertility reordered their experience and restored order in their lives, Becker describes metaphor as "a cultural resource" (1994: 404) and as "one mediator of disruption that enables individuals to recreate a sense of continuity and to reconnect themselves to the social and cultural order after a disruption" (ibid.). I suggest that retrospective reasoning, which can entail a strong sense of "having known it already", performs a similar function. This kind of reasoning, too, can act as "a conduit for locating new meaning" (1994: 384) and can be way to 'edit' a narrative (Becker 1997: 28). By linking information about the circumstances of one's conception with stories and events from the past, a sense of being lost can be prevented or at least limited. Looking back to what happened does not produce insights that are 'more real' than predictions about the future, since both histories and futures are "imaginative constructions built out of people's perceived realities" (Malkki 2001: 328).

In the case of my interviewees, these constructions were connected to and conditioned by a particular idea about childhood. In accounts that contained a description of having felt the truth as a child, the pure character of a childhood self, which has not yet been corrupted despite the lies and secrets of one's parents, was contrasted with the dishonest behaviour of adults. Moreover, it was common for people (both interviewees and acquaintances) to tell me that "children can feel the truth". Charles Lindholm (2008) argues that the idea that children are innocent and more 'authentic' than adults is an idea that has deep roots in European philosophical and pedagogical thought.[5] In *Culture and Authenticity* (2008), Lindholm argues

5 Lindholm, whose work has shown that authenticity is a distinctively modern value (2008; see also Fillitz and Saris 2013 for an analysis of modernity's 'obsession' with authenticity),

that these ideas have been profoundly influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he describes as the "'inventor' of modern authenticity" (2008: 8). Rousseau was convinced that children "were repositories of humanity's fundamental innocence" (2008: 9), and thus more authentic than grown-ups, as they are not yet corrupted by external, societal influences.

Retrospective reasoning and a look back at childhood events were central elements in the story of David Winkler. His search for his donor and his very intense preoccupation with donor conception that had resulted in him talking to a journalist (section 4.2) did not appear to be painful for him, and his behaviour towards me seemed to match his positive attitude towards his origins. Not only did he seem to be in a good mood already at the beginning of our encounter, which took place on a weekday afternoon in a busy but not overcrowded café in the city where he lived, but he also seemed to really enjoy the actual interview. His interest not only in my project but also in donor conception in general became clear when he sat down and took several documents out of a bag. One of them turned out to be my study information, which had been distributed through Spenderkinder's mailing list. It was full of handwritten notes, indicating that he had prepared for the interview. Other papers seemed to be printouts and notes from his general research on everything related to reproductive technologies. His thirst for knowledge seemed inexhaustible, and David explained that he had invested "200 percent energy" in it in recent months.

Before the interview, he had sent me the text with which he had introduced himself to the members of Spenderkinder via their internal mailing list. In the text, which he had written a couple of months before we met up in March 2017, he had described how he had found out that he was donor-conceived. He had also mentioned that even before being told, he had felt that something was wrong with his family. This had made me curious, and I started the interview by picking up on this part of his email:

> Amelie Baumann: "You mentioned that you found out a year and a half ago that you were conceived through sperm donation, but that you had a suspicion that something wasn't entirely right already before that."

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points out that there are "two overlapping but distinct modes for characterizing an entity as authentic: genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (expressive content)" (2013: 363). For example, a piece of furniture made in a particular historical period can be considered truly authentic "if its source can be traced, and if its characteristics mark it as fitting properly into a recognized category" (ibid.). An individual in turn can be described as authentic if it lives "life as a direct and immediate expression of [its] essential being" (ibid.). A person's conduct is labelled authentic if it is "connected with, and somehow expressive of, the core of the actor's personality" (Ferrara 1998: 5).

> David Winkler: "Well, actually … I keep thinking about whether I'm over interpreting things, and I keep realising more and more how things fall into place and how they prove to be true. I feel like all my life, I always somehow had the impression that something was missing. With me or in me, but what does missing actually mean, well that I don't really fit into this family. Because I was always the one who always had completely different interests and dispositions [*Neigungen*] and whatever, and I never really felt that I was one hundred percent part of it. Something was missing from one hundred percent. If I compared that with my circle of friends, there were families with siblings as well, a nuclear family of four, there was this feeling of unity that we didn't have. But … I never thought much about it. I've just always noticed that it's different with us, or with me anyway."

David then told me that he had only become really suspicious many years later when he had observed his son playing. The way he moved around had very much reminded him of his own behaviour as a child, and David remembered that this had not surprised him at all: "Of course, that's my son, and I see him, and I see my own reflection." Suddenly it had become clear to him why he and his brother had so little in common, and why he was not his father's reflection: everything would make sense if he and his father were not genetically related, and if he and his brother, with whom he had never gotten along, were genetic half-brothers. A secret paternity test had confirmed his suspicion, and after he had finally confronted his parents with the results, they had told him, albeit hesitantly, about the circumstances of his conception.[6] They also told him that his brother had been conceived in another clinic. Given the circumstances of the treatment – his research had shown that 'fresh', unfrozen donations had been used, mostly from medical students – it seemed highly unlikely that the two brothers had the same donor. By referring to his intuition, which early on had pointed in the direction of truth, he could tell this story as one in which there were no major breaks, even if he only learnt as an adult about the circumstances of his conception.

Usually, stories about not fitting into one's family were very emotional and marked by tears, anger and frustration. This was not the case for David. He mentioned that his parents had desperately tried to maintain a "constructed normality". Although David felt this had always been a doomed failure, he stressed that he was not upset or angry about the absence of family harmony in itself "because there are simply reasons for that". The "reasons" he referred to were the lack of genetic connection between him and his father, and the fact that he and his brother had probably been conceived with sperm from two different donors. While his insistence on the importance of genetic connection for the emergence of strong family

6 Since secret paternity tests are not legal in Germany, David Winkler had sent a bottle that his father had drunk from to a laboratory in another country.

bonds might suggest that he subscribed to a heteronormative view of kinship, his decision to become a sperm donor for a lesbian couple (see section 4.2) tells a different story. The complexity of his views illustrates that narratives constitute "versions of reality" (Ochs and Capps 1996: 21) that are always "embodiments of one or more points of view rather than objective, omniscient accounts" (ibid.), resulting in narratives often containing seemingly contradictory elements.

Like Lindsay Billington (section 5.1), David had an idea about how things could have been if his parents had chosen to be honest with him and his brother. He was convinced that they would be "a completely easy-going family" (*eine total entspannte Familie)* that would occasionally make jokes about the two brothers coming from "elsewhere". Others were much more critical of the fact that their parents had not told them earlier. Several of my interviewees firmly believed that their family relationships would have been better if their parents had been open and were convinced that they themselves would have been happier and more confident. They believed that their parents' secrecy had resulted in them always having self-doubts and felt that they had only been able to trust themselves once they found out that their feeling of not fitting into their family had been justified. They clearly believed that truth had "transformative power" (Gandsman 2009: 454).[7] Although they had been a lot more hurt about not fitting into their families than David had been, they, too, were happy about finally knowing the truth, and usually stressed that secrets in general, and family secrets in particular, were toxic for relationships and personal development.

Looking back in time to specific moments, conversations and family gatherings and re-interpreting them on the basis of the newfound truth about one's conception was a common practice amongst my interviewees. Even those who had not been suspicious about their origins commented that despite initial feelings of surprise or shock, certain things that had occurred in their life suddenly "made sense". Truth had 'shown through' secrecy in such moments, but they had not been able to fully see the truth until much later. David, too, not only talked about his deep-seated feeling that something was wrong but also mentioned several incidents from his childhood and youth that suddenly "made sense" now that he had accurate information about his origins. He told me that he "collected these memories" that kept coming to his mind from time to time. David mentioned, for example, that his father had once desperately proclaimed, "No, you are not my son, you are not my son" when David had struggled with his homework in mathematics and had asked his father, who was good with numbers, for advice. At first, he did not think this was significant at all, but he mentioned that "in hindsight, something probably

7 See also the experience of Alexandra Gerstner (section 8.3). Alexandra, who had been struggling with autoimmune diseases for a long time, told me that her health had improved since she had learnt about the circumstances of her conception.

came through, which he perhaps wasn't even aware of". Similar to David, others told me that they could not imagine that it was really possible for parents to permanently ignore the true origin of their child, and that parents would unconsciously reveal something through their actions and words. In David's case, his father's behaviour was turned into an "episode in a story" (Mattingly 2010: 49) which made his statement intelligible, whereas this and other memories were previously not only inexplicable, but also irrelevant.

While 'collecting' memories had a reassuring effect on David and others by confirming and explaining their early intuitive feelings of not fitting in, looking back to the past could also have the opposite effect. This got particularly clear in the case of Lindsay. Not having been able to 'detect' the truth was an extremely painful and vivid memory for Lindsay, who told me with teary eyes about her constant, nagging feeling of intense shame and failure. She repeatedly mentioned that she felt incredibly "stupid", as she was convinced that there had been "so many different signs that pointed to something not being right". With a tearful voice, she then described several situations that she believed should have made her suspicious, and that could have been opportunities for her parents and other relatives to tell her the truth. Since Lindsay believed that she had failed to correctly interpret her parents' behaviour and various events in her life, which was in hindsight full of obvious "signs", she interpreted her story as a story of personal failure.

In contrast, David and others who had spoken about their deep-seated feeling of not belonging to the families they had been raised in managed to edit their narratives in a way that established a sense of closure. In this sense, looking back at what one had already known intuitively as a child is not only a narrative resource that enables people to re-establish continuity, but also a resource for expressing ideas about anonymity and secrecy in kinship. Since the donor is perceived to become visible or perceptible in the child who inherits certain traits from him, both secrecy and anonymity are interpreted as mechanisms that have failed at keeping the donor away. His influence cannot be ignored, and he was described as a form of 'absent presence': he might not be there physically, but he manifests himself in the child through traits that are passed on, resulting in the child not 'fitting in'. The attempt at permanent secrecy appears as a plan doomed to failure since the truth will come out eventually: even though the donor might still be anonymous, the genealogical origins of the child cannot be hidden. However, looking back can also point towards a perceived personal failure if the individual has not seen the "signs". If this is the case, then the error appears to be not only with the parents, who did not tell the child, but also with the child that 'failed' to sense the truth.

5.3 Similar relations: Generational flows and curious continuities

Descriptions of feeling the truth were connected with my interlocutors telling me they had never fitted into their family. Since they differed from their parents and other relatives in aspects that they considered constitutive of their personality, they felt they were not really part of the family in which they had grown up. The question of whether the traits that they regarded as special and characteristic of themselves had been passed on to them from the anonymous donor seemed to occupy most of my interviewees. What struck me early in my research was the wide range of characteristics, talents and interests that were mentioned when people commented on what distinguished them from their parents and what had possibly been passed on to them from the donor: among other things, a love for swimming, general sportiness, a talent for languages, creativity, musicality, and educational success, which was mentioned very often. If potential similarities in term of looks were brought up, they were mostly merely mentioned and not talked about in detail. It was noticeable that overall, people very much focused on aspects of their personalities that are coded as positive, which is remarkable since "inheritance is totally amoral, you inherit for good and bad" (Bestard 2008: 25). In the following I will first discuss the significance of similarities for the establishment of relations on a more general level. I will then present and discuss two examples from my ethnographic material, showing that similarities are central to the way people construct imaginary "non-relations" (Konrad 2005a) with their anonymous donor.

The importance of similarities for the creation of relationships has been explored and critically commented upon by Strathern in her reflections on the Scottish Enlightenment (2018). She describes the legacy of the Enlightenment as the "premise that degrees of similarity and difference indicate closeness and distance, that likeness or similarity is the basis of solidarity and common feeling while difference leads to strangeness and estrangement" (2018: 183–184). Strathern argues that this assumption is not "necessarily benign" (2018: 184) and that "the very possibility of formulating similarity and difference as 'likeness and unlikeness' perpetuates similarity as a key mode of relating" (ibid.). In order to show that there are other "possible markers of intimate relationships" (2018: 185), Strathern cites the example of naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian who brought back specimen and illustrations from a trip to Surinam in the early eighteenth century. Strathern refers to her illustration of an entire lifecycle of a frog that depicts its transformation from one distinct form to another, thereby showing that "radically different things might metamorphose into one another" (ibid.). Since the different forms of the frog differ markedly from each other, it would not have been possible to infer a relation between its various developmental stages that Merian depicted if one had exclusively focused on similarities. Strathern concludes that Merian can offer "a present-day

comment on the persistence of this particular premise [regarding similarities and relations]" (ibid.).

She points out elsewhere that "Euro-American understandings of the similarities involved in human reproduction are not at all neutral as to the nature of the relationship at issue. A relationship is thought to inhere in a continuity of (personal) identity." (1995: 354) Continuity is thus central to the way kinship is conceptualised in its Euro-American rendition: "The very idea of continuity between generations is contained in the idea of a downward flow of characteristics. The reverse lies in the desire to trace origins, establish roots, claim inheritance." (Ibid.) However, Euro-American kinship evokes not only ideas about continuity but also change (1992: 166) or "spontaneous hybridisation" (1992: 54). Strathern points out that "[w]hile the child claims its origins in its parents' make-up, it itself evinces a unique combination of characteristics, and the combination is regarded as a matter of chance. This lays the basis of its individuality." (1992: 166) Parents do not reproduce themselves completely, but "only reproduce parts of themselves" (1992: 165). A child, like any other reproduction, "repeats the original, but not in quite the same way" (Strathern 1999b: 209). In this sense, identities are understood "as inherited while inheritance leads to individuality" (Lawler 2008: 39).

While similarity is central to how kinship relations are made in a Euro-American realm, ethnographic research has shown that this is not the case worldwide. Studies conducted in Amazonia are of particular importance here, as they have shown that alterity instead of similarity constitutes "the fundamental premise of [Amazonian] kinship" (Carsten 2017: xxii, foreword to Costa 2017; see also Vilaça 2002) and that "Amazonian kinship is constructed from difference" (Costa 2017: 131). In his ethnographic study of kinship amongst the Kanamari people of Western Brazil, Luiz Costa argues that for the Kanamari, the birth of a child "does not create a kinship tie but instead threatens those that already exist" (2017: 99). The parents and other adults need to be protected from this danger through a series of perinatal practices, and the making of kinship ensues gradually through the feeding relation (2017: 22).[8]

It was striking that even those who did not speak of a "loss of identity" were still very much interested in possible similarities and perceived differences. Not being able to know the donor's identity was not a traumatic or hurtful experience for everyone. Although virtually all of my interlocutors mentioned that parents should inform their children about the circumstances of their conception as early as possible, not all of them felt that late disclosure had been harmful for them. They often stressed the fullness and completeness of their busy lives and the strength of their

8 The practices Costa (2017) refers to and explores in his work are couvade rituals. They are performed by fathers before and after the birth of a child, with fathers symbolically taking the place of the mother and mimicking her behaviour.

family relationships, which had not been disturbed by the newly found information about their origins. But even though they did not feel they had to fill a "gap" in their lives, they still wanted to find their donor, and their curiosity was very much fuelled by what set them apart from their parents and other relatives, and by what they might have inherited from the donor. This was the case for Kai Silberschlag from Germany who had been conceived in the former GDR and taught history at a local school. Even though he had not told many people about his origins when I met him in March 2017 and was thus not as used to talking about his experience as others, the conversation with him never came to a standstill. Kai had been interested in learning about the history of his surname, which he said was extremely rare in Germany, when he found out that he was donor-conceived. His last name had been passed on to him by his father, who had already died when Kai was only seven years old. On the day of the baptism of Kai's youngest child, which took place in late 2009, he had once again asked his mother about his name. She then told him that he had been conceived with donor sperm, and that his search was therefore pointless; after all, he had no genetic connection to his surname. Although this information had come as a surprise, Kai stated that his mother's spontaneous revelation had not thrown him off track, as his father had been dead for more than two decades by the time of the baptism. Besides, his parents had been divorced at the time of his father's death, and he had not been an everyday part of Kai's life already for quite some time. Kai's initial Internet research on DI in the former GDR had not resulted in a lot of information. Since he had a lot to do professionally and privately at the time, and also did not suffer from not knowing, Kai had quickly dropped his investigations.

It was only after watching a documentary in which two members of Spenderkinder and their search for information were portrayed that Kai decided to re-start his search in 2015: "That made me think again, and I said, this can't really be it, not as a historian. That was sort of in the back of my mind all the time, I would like to know more about my origins and especially about these special circumstances [of DI] in the GDR." Shortly afterwards, he contacted the organisation Spenderkinder, whose website he had already discovered during his initial search for information. In the meantime, he had also done a DNA test and, among other things, had visited an archive in the town where he had been conceived in order to search for information about his mother's doctor. For Kai, curiosity seemed to be a fundamental part of his personality, and his decision to actively search for his donor and conduct historical research was more in line with his curious nature than his previous passivity. Curiosity has been described as one of the most common motivations for trying to find one's donor and/or donor siblings (see for example Jadva et al. 2010: 528–529; Beeson et al. 2011: 6; Persaud et al. 2017: 19). Hertz and Nelson even make the following claim: "All children are curious about how they came to be born." (2019: 33) This reflects the general

taken-for-grantedness of the "need to know" and does not take into account the cultural and historical particularity of such a claim. Since "more transparency, more information, and more openness within families are imagined as enhancing and lubricating relationships" (Edwards 2018: 167), curiosity and the attempt "to explore a space that must still be furnished for us" (Nowotny 2008: 3) are hardly neutral. If having knowledge is seen as something that is inherently good, then "curiosity and the desire to explore the unknown" (ibid.) is seen as desirable, or potentially almost mandatory. In turn, a lack or low level of interest in the donor was something that many of my interviewees described as incomprehensible, even though it was generally emphasised that the donor-conceived should be given a choice as to whether they wanted to access information (see section 3.5).

Although Kai did not mention a deep-seated feeling of always having felt the truth, he also emphasised that he was very different from his family. He had always wondered how he "fit into that", which in turn had made him curious about his donor:

> Amelie Baumann: "Do you see for example certain character traits or interests in yourself or maybe in your children that make you think, well that could be from that side, something that you can't see in your mother's family or in your wife?"
> Kai Silberschlag: "Does it absolutely have to be about character traits, or could I start by mentioning something else, because there's indeed something else that I've always wondered about, even before I knew about the thing with the origins. I'm the one who has by far the highest degree of education within the family because I've studied at a university. And when I look at my social father's family, I've always asked myself how I fit into that. […] And it's the same with my mother's family, sure, they all have some sort of job, and ones that, without a doubt, come with responsibilities, but there has never been anybody that studied. And there was never anyone who did Abitur [German university entrance certificate]. And I've always asked myself [laughs] what's the background to that, and it's the same now, was that person [the donor] somehow a student or whatever, where did he come from, this old question whether genes are responsible or whether it's just the family that you grow up in, or is it both. And if it were only the family that was responsible, in that case I would also ask myself, where does it come from, that I went so far regarding that aspect."
> He then mentioned his wide range of interests, his bustling nature as well as his sportiness as differentiating him from his maternal and paternal family.

Having so little in common with his relatives, it seemed inconceivable to him to attribute his academic success to the influence of his family. Others seemed to consider it possible that their interests and talents had developed without any kind of genetic influence. They wondered whether the qualities that distinguished them from their families had actually been passed on to them by their donors, or whether

they had simply emerged from within themselves. My interviewees were interested not only in what they might have in common with their donor but also in potential differences that might characterise their connection to him. These differences, however, concerned characteristics that they actually expected or anticipated to be similarities.

Differences and similarities played a central role in the way Sabrina Frey, who had been conceived in Germany in the 1980s, thought about her donor. At the time of the interview, she was in her mid-30s and on parental leave after the birth of her second child. She had last worked as an engineer and commented in an email she sent to me later on that the interview had been a nice change from her temporary life as a full-time housewife and mother. Unlike Kai, I did not meet her at home, but in a café in the pedestrian zone, while her children were still in a day care centre. Sabrina was only a few years older than me and offered me, after we had entered the café, almost immediately to switch from the formal "*Sie*" to the more informal "*Du*". She made an extremely relaxed, open first impression on me, and this did not change during the following three hours. Just like Kai, she had known about the circumstances of her conception for several years by the time she had started searching for her donor and donor siblings. Although she had found out at the age of 20, her interest in the donor had only been awakened about a decade later when she had her first child. As her son resembled neither her nor her husband, Sabrina kept wondering if he might look like her donor. She started to look online for information on donor conception and came across Spenderkinder. Through the organisation, she learnt about the possibility of finding her donor and donor siblings via a DNA test, and she soon ordered a test kit. Her search was immediately successful, and Sabrina found three donor-conceived half-sisters through the database. One of them had received the donor's name and his donor number from the clinic where Sabrina herself had been conceived as well, and this half-sister had also found another half-sibling via the homepage of Spenderkinder who had already met the donor in person.[9] At the time of the interview, Sabrina thus thought she had already identified the donor, as well as four donor siblings.[10]

9 Sabrina Frey's donor-conceived half-sister had found a fourth donor sibling who had received the same donor code and included it in her public "search profile" on the homepage of Spenderkinder. The homepage contains search profiles of 54 members of the association (May 2021). These profiles contain their date or approximate time of conception, include assumptions about the donor, state whether the member is registered with FTDNA, and contain a personalised email address in the form of name@spenderkinder.de (www.spenderkinder.de/verwandtensuche/suchprofile/, last accessed May 28, 2021). Several donors (nine in May 2021) have search profiles as well (www.spenderkinder.de/verwandtensuche/suchprofile-spender/, last accessed May 26, 2021).

10 The story of Sabrina Frey is a particularly complex example of how kinship can be made. It illustrates that knowledge management connotes not only human agency but also the in-

Similar to Kai's account, her story was not marked by feelings of pain and loss, which seemed to be related to her extremely positive attitude towards sperm donation (see section 6.1). However, Sabrina herself mentioned that she would probably have experienced a crisis if she had not been successful in her search for information immediately after her registration with FTDNA. She seemed to be astonished about this herself and suspected that this probably had to do with her needing to have some sort of additional "activity" (*Beschäftigung*) during her parental leave. Her past ideas about what her donor might be like had been shaped by her own educational achievements, for which she had previously had a different explanation:

> Amelie Baumann: "Did you have any idea about what he might be like before you found out about him [the donor that one of her donor siblings had met]?"
> Sabrina Frey: [laughs] "I need to quickly think about what that was like. So, I always somehow thought it might have been a medical student, that's also what my parents were told. Well at least that many medical students would donate there. But I didn't really think about anything else in terms of looks. I only knew that he would have blue eyes because my children now also have blue eyes. And well, I have to somehow carry it in me genetically so that I can pass it on. And apart from that I didn't have any real ideas. So … the only thing I could think of was that he probably also has a more advanced school education because I am the only one in my family who has an Abitur [German university entrance certificate] and who has studied. Whereas before I knew about the sperm donation, I actually always thought, 'How amazing is this, even in socially weak families, children can actually do that, well, they can get this kind of education.' […] Yes, and now in the end, after I knew that I was the result of a sperm donation, I did actually think, well it is probably also down to the genes a little bit. I imagined that he is also an intelligent man."

While the picture of the donor that one of her donor-conceived half-sisters had shared with the rest of the donor sibling group did not look anything like Sabrina, what she found out about him seemed to match her life perfectly. Like Sabrina, he seemed to have a talent for both languages and science. In addition, he also seemed to share her passion for travelling. The information about his professional

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volvement of infrastructures (Klotz 2014: 55). At the time of the interview, the five donor siblings already had doubts about the validity of their discoveries. Sabrina had realised that the donor, whose date of birth they knew, would not have been of age at the time of her conception. She doubted that the sperm bank would have allowed underage donors to donate. Shortly after we had met up, it turned out that these doubts had probably not been unfounded. The half-sister who had not yet taken a DNA test eventually registered with FTDNA. However, she was not matched with Sabrina and the others, and Sabrina 'lost' one half-sister. Besides, she suspected that the one who had been matched with her had received false donor information from the clinic. Sabrina's search for the donor therefore continued.

background in particular immediately evoked associations with her own life. He was neither a doctor nor an engineer like Sabrina but worked in an area which she had considered as a possible professional alternative at the beginning of her studies. Sabrina seemed almost overwhelmed by the extent to which their lives matched:

> Sabrina Frey: "I saw these parallels to him and said to myself, oh my God, I have so much in common with him, with this man although I don't know him at all, and then he's apparently also talented in natural sciences. In that moment I really thought, I got all of that from him. And it has nothing to do with how my parents raised me. Because before that I really thought that well, my parents raised me in such a way that maybe I'm just interested in learning or in school, and now that I have the information, I do actually assume that I've had it in my genes. So now I do actually think that genetics are very important for it after all."

Although the donor was still a stranger, he suddenly came very close, as he seemed to have a lot, and maybe even too much, in common with her. Her individuality that was based on inheritance seemed to dissolve, and Sabrina had the impression of being almost identical to her donor. Since "the child […] signals the way variety and diversity are brought into existence" (Strathern 1999b: 209), feeling as if she was a copy of her donor was an uncanny experience for her (see also section 7.5 for a discussion of a similar fear, namely the fear of having too many 'clone-like' donor siblings). Similar to those of my interviewees who felt overwhelmed by the thought of possibly being physically close to a donor sibling or donor without realising it (section 5.4), the knowledge of having a close genetic relationship but no social relationship at all seemed to unsettle Sabrina. Finding out that she was donor-conceived had changed how she explained and classified her own achievements. Her narrative almost seemed to resonate with a sense of wounded pride: what had been the result of her upbringing and her own talents now seemed to be down to the influence of the identified yet distant donor.

Like Sabrina and Kai, many people in both countries stated that they were the first ones in their family to have received a university entrance certificate, and/or that they were the first ones to study. Even those whose parents were academics usually described their specific intellectual abilities and talents as something that distinguished them from their family. As for the educational background of my interlocutors, my sample of donor-conceived persons was indeed very homogeneous. Most people had at least one academic degree or were still studying when I met them. Given the nature of our encounter – a research interview in the context of a doctoral project – it is arguably not surprising that most of the people who contacted me did have an academic education. Since most of my interviewees had either already completed a degree, were still studying or were thinking about doing a PhD, my own experiences in German and Swedish academia, and espe-

cially with postgraduate studies, were often a subject of conversation before and after an interview. Nevertheless, it is not self-evident that education, intelligence and academic talents were the categories people referred to particularly frequently when talking about what set them apart from their families, and when reflecting on what they might have inherited from their donor. Many imagined them to be doctors, partly because their parents had been told that the donors were medical students. I suggest that the way in which they oftentimes imagined the donor as a well-educated, intelligent, multi-talented and successful person can be read as a means to imagine and situate themselves as middle-class. Just as children can be a symbol of their parents' class position (Ortner 1992: 5), anonymous (or, as it was the case for Sabrina, presumably identified) donors can become a symbol of the donor-conceived person's own class status.[11] My research contacts tried to situate themselves as belonging to the middle class by imagining their donors in categories that evoked notions of both class and biology.

5.4 Scanning for similarities: Active not-knowing and unfinished relations

While my interviewees focused less on possible outward similarities when talking about what they might have inherited from the donor, appearances played a larger, but not all-determining role in a process I have termed "scanning". Many people told me that they often caught themselves scrutinising others, searching for similarities and thinking about whether a stranger or someone they already knew might be their donor or a donor sibling. Scanning was generally described as being particularly prevalent in the period following the initial disclosure talk with one's parents. It could take place in public, on trains and buses, or in supermarkets, when people examined other passengers or shoppers and wondered if their donor or a donor sibling was one of them; it could occur when people watched TV and suddenly discovered an actor who had some resemblance to them, or take place in a gymnastics class; some scanned not only strangers but also their friends. My choice of words is inspired by Sabrina Frey. She told me that she and two of her newfound donor siblings had "scanned" each other (*man scannt sich erstmal direkt*) at their first meeting to figure out if they had any similarities. They found that

11 Sherry B. Ortner (1992) argues that middle-class parents are particularly preoccupied with the fear of losing their class status, which their children might not reproduce. She suggests that "[i]t would be vulgar and reductionistic, and even downright silly, to claim that everything parents feel for their children, and do for and to their children, is only a matter of insuring class reproduction" (1992: 7), but claims that "it would also be silly to deny that, in some very broad sense, this is a large part of what is going on" (ibid.).

they were all talented in foreign languages as well as natural sciences and enjoyed travelling. In my analysis of scanning, I will first draw on Konrad's ethnography of ova donation (2005a), and more specifically on her notion of "active not-knowing" (2005a: 170). Afterwards, I will discuss scanning in more detail, using two examples from my research. In doing so, I will show that the process of constructing imaginary relations is not exclusively agency-driven.

Throughout *Nameless Relations*, Konrad shows that donors as well as recipients make "effective action from out of the uncertain knowledge set up by the conditions of anonymity" (2005a: 117), which counteracts tendencies to ascribe them a passive role in reproduction (2005a: 14). She cites the case of a donor called Penny who views her donation as "a form of pseudo-procreation" (2005a: 117), should she remain childless, to illustrate her point. While others were disappointed about not being able to know the outcome of their donation, it is precisely this uncertainty and the possibility of someone else having conceived a child with her donation that matters to Penny (ibid.). Konrad suggests that Penny transforms herself into "her own 'bio-engineer' whose productive agency circulates 'through' others as the spatio-temporal effects of transilience" (ibid.). Konrad's work thus shows that in the context of anonymous ova donation, not-knowing is not a passive condition that women simply endure. Instead, Konrad argues that "within anonymous sociality, active not-knowing sets up 'unfinished' relations' relations whose unconcealing makes persons 'transilient'" (2005a: 180). These relations cannot be 'finished' because that which is imagined cannot be known. Another example for active not-knowing are ova recipients who frequently wonder about their donors and ask themselves whether they will ever be able get in touch with them (2005a: 170). Similarly, my interlocutors told me that they kept wondering about whether the donor ever thought about his past donations, and his donor-conceived offspring at least from time to time (with many of them believing that this would be the case; see section 6.4). The scanning of others is a particularly interesting case of active not-knowing, as it was usually described as a process from which one could not escape.

While scanning was mostly focused on strangers, Jade Foster from the UK also scanned people she already knew. She had only started her studies a few months before we met up in a coffee shop in the town where she studied. Despite expressing her opinions with great determination, she seemed a bit nervous especially at the beginning of the interview and kept moving back and forth on her chair. Jade had not talked to many people about the circumstances of her conception since her parents told her four years ago that she was donor-conceived. Her younger brother, who had been conceived with sperm from a different donor, had not yet been told by their parents that he and his sister were donor-conceived (see section 6.3 on "sibling trouble"). Like others of my interlocutors, Jade said she was interested in finding out who her donor was "as a person" (section 7.3). For this reason, she had requested information from the central HFEA register. Even if the HFEA letter,

which she had not yet received, would not contain the kind of donor information she had hoped for, especially if it turned out that the donor had not removed his anonymity, it would still give her basic information about the existence of donor siblings. For her, the thought of having donor-conceived half-siblings was both exciting and unsettling, and her hopes regarding the register information seemed to be focused on them and not on the donor:

> Amelie Baumann: "Do you hope that it [the HFEA letter] will answer some questions?"
> Jade Foster: "Yeah, I really hope that I do have siblings, but I don't want to get my hopes up in case I don't. But I think it would be really exciting, it's like a secret family. And it's exciting that they could be people that I know because of, you know, people conceived at a similar time and a similar area. It could be someone from my school, I could already be friends with them, but it's exciting. And terrifying. […] I'm worried that it'll be someone that maybe that I do know and don't like, that would be disappointing if it's someone that I know and aren't friends with."
> Amelie Baumann: "Have you ever met someone where you thought this could be"
> Jade Foster: [interrupting me] "I'm terrible for doing that, every time I see similarities in someone to me in any sort of way, 'Maybe, maybe', even if there's no chance and I know their whole family and I know that they're not donor-conceived. And still part of me will be thinking, 'Maybe they could be, we look similar, or we have similar personalities, similar interest. Maybe there's a chance.' And whenever someone says, 'Oh, Jade, you look like my friend so and so', 'Do I? Which friend? Give me their number!' [laughs] It's tiring [laughs] and frustrating, I'm always looking, I'm looking for similarities in everyone."

The thought of finding donor siblings was an exciting one for Jade, as it would put her in a situation where she could hide something from her parents, who had kept information about her origins from her for 14 years. This time it would be Jade herself who could decide whether information should be passed on or not. Her excitement illustrates that "the power and attraction of the secret lie in the possibility that it may be disclosed" (Beidelman 1993: 41). Not knowing whether she had any half-siblings conceived with sperm from the same donor, Jade found herself in a situation where scanning others and making imaginary connections with strangers, acquaintances and friends was an almost endless undertaking. Although the persons she was looking for might have been near her, they could not be identified by her as donor-conceived. This caused restlessness in her, which was also described by others who had initially been intensely involved with scanning. While scanning illustrates that not-knowing comes with its own imaginative possibilities, which is a point that has also been made by Copeman in his ethnographic study of voluntary blood donation (2009: 10), it also shows that not-knowing comes with its own challenges and frustrations.

Melanie Weber from Germany also described scanning, or "inspecting" as she called it, as exhausting. While scanning for Jade was still an ongoing process or rather constant condition, Melanie reported that she no longer constantly looked for similarities in others when I met her less than a year after her parents had told her that she had been conceived with donor sperm in the 1970s. She stressed that she had very quickly forgiven her parents for their secrecy, knowing that her father would have been stigmatised by his relatives if the truth about his infertility had come to light. Melanie described her handling of the late disclosure and her way of thinking about her anonymous donor as "relatively soft". Although she was curious about the donor, she said that the thought of never being able to find him did not worry her. Her description of the first weeks after the disclosure talk with her parents contrasted with the overall "soft" undertone of her story, which extended into the actual interview situation: the atmosphere of the interview, which took place in the house of her and her husband in a quiet and strikingly green suburb of a big city, was very relaxed. While we sat on very comfortable sofas in her living room, her daughter, who was not yet a year old, crawled back and forth between us and other parts of the room. While I had initially feared that this might be distracting, it contributed even more to an almost homely atmosphere.

Her relaxed manner and "soft" view differed from what she had experienced in the weeks after the conversation with her parents. She described that at first, she could hardly believe that she was not genetically related to her father, as she was very similar to him in appearance and character traits. For this reason, she had initially thought of doing a paternity test, which she felt was her attempt to "hang on" (*festklammern*) to his paternity. Apart from the fact that she could hardly believe her parents at first, what bothered her in the beginning was her constant urge to look at men who might be her donor, whom she alternately referred to as her "donor", "genetic father", "donor father", or, as it is the case in this passage, simply "father":

> Melanie Weber: "I had difficulties in the first months, I really looked at every man who was around 50, inspected him and always asked myself, 'Oh my God, you could be my father, or you could be my father!' So that drove me crazy at first. And then I thought, he could walk around somewhere here. I can actually imagine that the likelihood of him still living in [large town in which she had been conceived and which was close to where she lived] or somewhere around here is relatively high. Yeah, that drove me a little crazy."

Although she had never felt that her life and her family relationships had been destroyed or damaged after she had found out that she was donor-conceived, she was still drawn into "inspecting" men who might be her donor. Finding out that there had been something she had not known for over three decades seemed to draw her attention to something she still could not know, even though she had been told: she

could not find out whether the donor was near her. For this reason, her scanning seemed to be especially strong at the beginning, as was the case with others. Since the town she lived in was, as Melanie laughingly remarked, "overcrowded with pensioners" of the right age to be her donor, and since there was a big city nearby, the potential number of men she could scan seemed pretty much unmanageable. However, her initial worries had soon been removed by the birth of her daughter, with whom she had been pregnant at that time, and the new family's bliss.

Since her "soft" approach was distinctly different from the persistent feelings of loss described by others, I found it all the more striking that Melanie was also drawn into "inspecting" for at least a few months. Although more systematic inspecting/scanning with the purpose of finding the donor could be ignited by the (mostly sparse) donor information individuals had received (see for example Nadine Fuchs in section 8.2; she had 'scanned' the Internet for pictures of her donor), scanning could also occur in a more diffuse way that seemed to have an almost uncontrollable dynamic from which people could not escape. Similar to the way in which people felt compelled to at least try and find their relatives (see section 8.3 on "having to try" DNA testing), the practice of scanning was not entirely agency-driven. Usually it was something that people did not consciously initiate, although some people at some point consciously tried to stop scanning and analysing their environment. Despite this commonality, I suggest that scanning is different from the more goal-oriented process of searching for one's donor or donor sibling. While a search was usually conducted with the aim of destroying a "brick wall", as Sarah Holmes had put it when talking about donor anonymity, scanning was usually characterised by a different relationship to the unknown.[12] Instead of addressing it directly and trying to undo anonymity through targeted search-actions, those who scanned others seemed to be circling around that which they could not know for sure.

The thought of possibly being physically close to donor siblings or the donor and not being able to determine whether there was an actual genetic relationship was a challenging, stressful or at least irritating one for many. When people know that they were conceived with donated gametes but do not know the identity of their anonymous donor and/or donor sibling, they know that they could potentially meet them in a public or private environment without knowing that they are related to them. The fear of unknowingly entering into an incestuous relationship seemed to play a subordinate role and was rarely discussed by the people I interviewed (but see section 7.5 for an exception). Instead, the constant scanning of others seemed to

12 Sarah Holmes mentioned that not being able to talk about her origins with her parents and not knowing her donor had kept her from "really knowing who I was", adding that there was "not only […] a void, it was a brick wall in my quest because I couldn't go anywhere for that information".

bother them because although they could speculate about whom they were related to or not, they could not find out whether their assumptions were really accurate. The number of their imaginary relations could become too big. Some tried to solve this problem by consciously deciding not to scan others for similarities anymore, thus trying to limit anonymity's imaginative possibilities.

5.5 Recapitulation

When people receive new kinship information, their kinship time and the way they relate to past, present and future relations is disrupted. Often, the people I interviewed had an idea about how their lives would have been if such a disruption had never occurred. I have analysed these scenarios as disnarrated elements that shed light on how people imagine a desirable alternative to the secrecy and late disclosure they had experienced. These alternative visions were mainly characterised by continuity, which is what the donor-conceived had lost. Apart from these alternative scenarios, another recurring element in many narratives was the look back at past events. Reinterpreting memories based on the experience of having felt the truth as a child, despite the secretiveness of one's parents, could help to counteract a feeling of lost continuity. The news about the circumstances of one's conception could be interpreted as something that in itself was not really new and therefore not an actual disruption. At the same time, having 'failed' to see the truth could be extremely painful.

Accounts of always having "felt the truth" were accompanied by a description of what distinguished a person from their family, which illustrates that establishing and identifying similarities is central for the way in which relations are made. As ethnographic studies on Amazonian kinship have shown, similarity is however not always central to the making of relationships. When people talked about how they were different from their family, and about what they might have inherited from their donor, they mentioned particularly frequently that they had a higher degree of education than their parents. On the one hand, I interpret this as an imagination that is inspired by the widespread idea that donors were medical students. On the other hand, it also constitutes an effort of the donor-conceived to position themselves as middle class. While these imaginations seemed to be very positive, another instance of active not-knowing was mostly perceived as very unpleasant. Especially in the beginning, right after being told, many searched for similarities in the people they saw in their everyday life or on TV and tried to figure out whether they had seen their donor siblings or their donor, a process which I have termed "scanning".