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The Ongoing Work of Kinship among Donor Half-siblings in the Netherlands: Dilemmas and Strategies

Abstract

This article explores how Dutch people conceived via sperm donation attempted to make or unmake kinship with donor half-siblings, “strangers” who are recently found to be “relatives.” Research participants tried to gain a sense of agency in their kinship situation through DNA testing, but were challenged by how many unforeseen kin could emerge in this process. We examined how genetic ties were turned into social kinship and how they were unmade. In this work of kinship we differentiate three different phases: 1) searching for kin, 2) meeting half-siblings, and 3) kinning or dekinning. Our analysis shows that, while kinning and dekinning in phase 1 and 2 was at first mainly determined by physical resemblances, as the contact intensified in phase 3, shared values and social similarities became increasingly important. We discuss the female overrepresentation in the search for donor kinship, which indicates that kinwork is almost exclusively women’s work.

Keywords:

kinship; donor conception; siblings; the Netherlands; DNA

Introduction

This article explores the kinship work of people who trace their conception to the same sperm donor. In the Netherlands, there are an estimated forty thousand donor-conceived people¹ who have limited or no access to identifying information about the person whose sperm enabled their conception (Winter et al., 2012). An increasing number of these donor-conceived people have sought such sperm donor information via DNA databases and, as in the process, may find they have an unexpected and overwhelming number of donor half-siblings.² Our study focuses on Dutch adults who were conceived via sperm donation and who have recently met their donor half-siblings, and their considerations to make or unmake kinship. Our ethnographic approach focused on individual understandings of a state-regulated fertility practice, the effect of DNA testing on individual lives; and gendered differences in people's decisions to make or unmake kinship with donor half-siblings.

The question what kinship is and how it is made hits the heart of anthropology. In the late nineteenth century, kinship was the central subject of the discipline, defining its theories and scientific authority. Classical anthropology focused on the relationship between kinship and the state, built its theories on Western notions of biological kinship and nuclear family ideologies, and situated small nuclear families in “the West” and extended kinship networks in “the non-West.” This geographical division also entailed a divide between families based on “real” blood ties in the West and kinship based on “fictive” or social ties in the non-West. This theorization of kinship was sharply criticized in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. Schneider, 1984). Ever since, new directions in kinship studies (Carsten, 2000a, Carsten, 2004, Franklin and McKinnon, 2001, Holy, 1996, Schweitzer, 2000, Stone, 2001) have sought

¹ In this study we will use the term “donor-conceived people” to refer to people who were conceived via sperm donation.

² In this study we will use the terms “donor half-siblings” or “same-donor offspring” to refer to offspring of the same donor.

to transcend the West/non-West, modern/primitive, and nature/culture binaries by using different frameworks that distinguish between “what is natural and what is cultural in kinship,” and between “what is given by birth and unchangeable and what is shaped by the ordinary, everyday activities of family life” (Carsten, 2004). This quest has changed the central question from what kinship *is* into how kinship *is made*. In the field of donor conception, scholars have also embraced the idea that family should not be seen as a noun but as a verb, as something people do (Nordqvist, 2017, Morgan, 2011).

We join this discussion on making kinship from the perspective of Dutch donor-conceived people, as the question of how kinship is made appears to matter greatly to them. Initially motivated by the desire to learn more about their origins and to answer questions about identity and belonging, they subsequently shifted their attention to exploring the (im)possibilities of making kinship with donor half-siblings with whom they share genes but no history, no memory, and no daily family life. Genetic connections alone do not make kinship feel “natural”: instead, it appears that (social) work has to be done to create the emotional feeling of familiarity and belonging. Following the theoretical question in anthropology (What makes kinship?) that corresponds to an existential question of donor-conceived people (How to make kinship with same-donor offspring?), we examined what it means to share genes with an uncertain number of donor half-siblings. How is kinship made and maintained, or unmade, with “strangers” who are recently found to be “relatives”?

In answering these questions, our study of donor-conceived kinship builds on insights from the last decades of scholarship on extended kinship networks in Western societies. The nuclear family can no longer be considered the hallmark of these societies. Kinship scholars rather find a variety of extended families that are not “naturally” based on biology, heterosexual marriage, or a shared domestic space, but deliberately constructed and (often) mediated by technology; these include post-divorce kinship and patchwork families (Simpson,

1994), gay parenthood (Weston, 1997), scattered migrant families (Coe, 2013), and families created via reproductive technologies like egg or sperm donation (Cahn, 2013, Strathern, 1992). These scholars aim to transcend the nature/culture divide as well as the West/non-West divide by showing how “culture” reconfigures the “nature” of kinship, and how people’s preoccupation with kinship grows rather than declines in modern Western societies. Various aspects of modern life challenge the nuclear family as the Western family model, resulting in what Simpson (1994) calls the “unclear family.” The people in our study certainly wrestled with this lack of clarity: while searching for particular genetic kin, more and more unforeseen kin emerged, making kinship and questions of belonging ever more unclear. Their interest in kinship grew, as did their considerations about with whom they should make and/or unmake kinship

In line with current anthropological thinking, we study kinship as an activity (Strathern and Stewart, 2015)—as “kinning” or “dekinning” (Howell, 2006) and as “work” (Carsten, 2004)—but from a different perspective. Rather than studying how people turn social kinship, that is, relationships that have no basis in genes, into “real” or natural kinship (e.g., adoptive, fictive, gay kinship), we examined the decisions and efforts donor-conceived people made to turn genetic ties into “real” or social kinship, or to cut ties with these “relative strangers” (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). This approach foregrounds the element of choice in kinship by analyzing processes of in- and exclusion in these chosen families. Furthermore, we highlight the gendered dimensions in the search for donor kinship, showing that kinwork is almost exclusively women’s work. Finally, this study responds to the critique that sibling relations are undeservedly neglected in kinship studies (Alber et al., 2013). Knowledge gained from this research and similar sibling-focused studies may contribute to the improvement of psychosocial support for donor-conceived people who meet donor relatives in the future.

Methods

Our qualitative research focused on the experiences of donor-conceived people who met several same-donor offspring, in meetings facilitated by Fiom, a Dutch organization that has provided independent support in the search for genetic and biological relatedness since 1930. Fiom's KID-DNA Database, established in 2010 in collaboration with Canisius Wilhelmina Hospital, was developed for donor-conceived people who were conceived before June 2004, when anonymous donation in the Netherlands was abolished (Janssens et al., 2005, Ministry of Justice, 2003). Those conceived before June 2004, therefore, may have no access to information about the donor. By registering in the Fiom KID-DNA Database, donors who donated anonymously in the past and donor-conceived people can search each other and might come into contact with each other.

The number of registrations in the Fiom KID-DNA database has risen considerably in recent years due to the recognition of the Dutch government, the removal of the financial barriers of a registration fee and media attention (Bolt et al., 2019). At the start of this research in February 2018, there were 507 donors and 976 donor-conceived people registered in the database. At that time, 295 donor-conceived people matched with one or multiple same-donor offspring. Almost three and a half years later, in July 2021, there were 2.234 donor-conceived people and 824 donors registered in the Fiom KID-DNA database, and the number of donor-conceived people matched with one or multiple same-donor offspring had increased to 926. Since the beginning, there have been significantly more women who have registered in the KID-DNA database; as of November 2020 the sex ratio in the database is 33 percent male to 67 percent female.

The Fiom KID-DNA database aims to provide information about donors to donor-conceived people. Same-donor offspring can only be identified by the database after a certain number of same-donor offspring have registered. When a group of same-donor offspring has

been identified, Fiom offers to organize a group meeting for them, under the guidance of a counselor. The first group meeting of same-donor offspring took place in May 2017. Ever since, Fiom has offered to organize such meetings whenever the database identifies more than four people as donor half-siblings. By July 2021, there were forty-eight same-donor offspring networks (each with at least four same-donor offspring) in the database; the largest of these was comprised of sixty-six people. The donor is known to thirty-three of these networks. Fifteen same-donor offspring networks do not know the identity of the donor but DNA testing confirmed that the network members descent from the same donor and are therefore related to each other.

For the group meetings, the donor half-siblings came to Fiom's office with a person close to them, such as a parent, partner, or friend. Fiom-employed counselors were present to guide and structure the meeting, and to answer questions from the attendees. The donor half-siblings had an opportunity to get to know each other in a separate room from where they first meet, without the counselor, their parent, partner or friends. Afterwards there was a plenary session with all of the attendees to evaluate the meeting.

These networks may grow over time, as additional people register with Fiom. When new people are identified by the database as donor half-siblings of an existing network, Fiom counselors contact them to discuss how they can be introduced to those in the existing network. The network thus continues to exist after the initial group meeting, allowing newly matched people to join and others to leave.

All of the participants in this study attended such a group meeting between May 2017 and February 2018. In this period, six meetings took place with a total of eighty-two donor-conceived people. Most of the attendees were women (70 percent). Fiom invited these attendees to participate in our research, explaining that the study aimed to improve the support offered to donor half-siblings during group meetings. Between April and June 2018,

qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with nineteen participants from five different same-donor offspring networks; two had become friends and were interviewed together, the others were interviewed individually.^{3,4} The first author observed two group meetings at Fiom in 2018 in order to better understand the context of such meetings and to identify relevant topics for individual interviews. She studied the structure of the meetings and the dynamics between the same-donor offspring, counselors, and other attendees.

All of those who agreed to participate in this study were women. They were between fifteen and forty-two years old ($M= 30$; $SD= 8.6$), and had come from all over the

³ Invitations to participate in our study included an informational letter that explained how the data would be used and the possible risks of participation, and before interviews commenced participants signed a form giving their informed consent. Participants were either interviewed in their home, at another location of their choosing, or at the Fiom offices. Interviews lasted one and one-half to two hours. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on the article prior to submission to the journal.

⁴ Approval for this study was given by Fiom. Fiom is an independent knowledge centre that, in 2018, had no associated committee to ask for ethical approval. Therefore, this study was conducted in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct”, and specifically with section 8, “Research and Publication” AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION. 2017. *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* [Online]. Available: <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code> [Accessed]. *ibid.* Furthermore, Fiom carefully follows the General Data Protection Regulation in the Netherlands MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2018. *Uitvoeringswet Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming.*

Netherlands, but many resided in the west of the country, where several fertility clinics are located. They were members of five same-donor offspring networks (see table 1) that, at the time, consisted of anywhere from seven to thirty-four donor half-siblings matched in the Fiom KID-DNA Database (see table 2). The size of these networks may be larger because there are also other ways in which people find each other. By July 2021, the smallest network was comprised of thirteen people and the biggest network of sixty-six people, which shows the rapid development of such groups of newly found siblings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the use of set of open-ended questions about participants': (1) motives for searching same-donor siblings; (2) expectations regarding their contact with others in the group; (3) feelings prior, during, and after the group meeting; and (4) experiences of the support they received from their social network and Fiom counselors. In the interviews we noticed that participants experienced strong emotions: they were happy to share their story, not only because they wanted to contribute to improving support for donor-conceived people but also because they felt some relief in sharing their story. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach with a good foundation in the empirical data collected (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The data were coded, checked, and discussed by the first and last author.

The Work of Kinship

Stating that one needs more to have kinship than sharing genes alone, Carsten (2004) emphasizes the creative and time-consuming work that is required to build and maintain kinship. People do not have kin, she argues, people make kin. That kinship is “an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative energy, and their new imaginings” (Carsten, 2004) appears to be especially true for donor-conceived adults who desire to make kinship with strangers, sharing genes alone. Their work of kinship with their newly found

relatives is emotional and time consuming. Through this work of kinship people establish what Sahlins (2013) calls a “mutuality of being.” “Kin folk,” Sahlins (2013) argues, “are persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence and become members of one another.” For the donor-conceived participants of this study, such mutuality of being was not self-evident, as they did not share any history or memory. They neither lived together in houses and shared meals, or jointly participated in everyday or ritual activities, activities that over time may establish “natural” links between people who were originally unrelated (Carsten, 2000b).

Carsten (2004) argues that (intimate) sharing—of space, time, activities, and food—is central to the process of making kinship. The findings from our interviews with donor-conceived people undoubtedly confirm that kinship is not given at birth by genes alone but needs to be actively made and maintained in everyday life. For the people in our study, however, sharing a house, food, and other intimacies was not the most obvious choice to make after their first group meeting at Fiom with “relative strangers” (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). This is likewise confirmed in Carsten’s study (2000b) of reunions of adults who had been adopted in infancy and their birth kin. As it was for the adoptees in Carsten’s study, the main concern for the donor-conceived people in our study was to find answers to vital questions and to get a complete story about themselves and their origins. In this way they wanted to resolve the lack of clarity around their present kinship situation and regain a sense of agency in it.

Long before any of the sharing of space, time, activities, and food that makes kinship, other choices need to be made: Shall I register at the data base? Do I want to find my donor half-siblings? Do I want to meet my newly found relatives? What purpose would that serve, and what will be the consequences? Even though such as search does not directly result in newly chosen families forging new futures together, we consider the time, efforts, and

creative energy that donor-conceived people put into their search for donor half-siblings to be a work of kinship.

A striking fact in this research is the proportion of women involved; they outnumbered male registrants in the database and at group meetings, and only women agreed to participate in interviews with us. In the words Hannah, one of the participants: “We are so many girls; there are only two boys [in the network] so far and they really have a mountain of sisters.” The female (over)representation points to the gendered dimension of the search for donor kinship. In line with Di Leonardo’s (1987) observation that kinwork is gender based, we find that women’s kinwork is based on their elaborate kin knowledge and expertise, and their willingness to discuss family crises.

In the work of kinship among donor half-siblings, we differentiate three different phases: 1) searching for same-donor offspring; 2) engaging in same-donor offspring meetings; and 3) kinning or dekinning of donor half-siblings. Together, these formed a process in which participants sought to regain agency in their present kinship situations. Before elaborating on each of these phases in the three succeeding sections, we first turn to those kinship situations, in which relatedness was determined by the choices of other powerful agents: parent(s), medical doctors, fertility counselors, and legal systems.

Kinship as Determined by Others

The medical and societal discourse on donor conception in the Netherlands, and worldwide, has been dominated by dichotomous thinking about nature and nurture. Before 2004, the donation of sperm was mostly kept anonymous, and medical practitioners also largely advised parents to keep secret the fact that conception was achieved via donation of sperm (Novaes, 1998). This framework privileged the anonymity of the donor and, partly due to societal stigma about infertility and donor conception, the privacy of the parents (Novaes, 1998). Such

secrecy about donor conception was believed to be beneficial for the child, the parents, and the donor (Kremer and Leenen, 1991). As a result, many donor offspring did not have knowledge of the donor origins.

A distinction between nature and nurture had been part of how parents differentiated their relationship to the child from that of the donor, and it influenced how they stressed or downplayed genetic factors. Fourteen participants of this study (of nineteen total) were born into a heterosexual household. Some of their parents had for years stressed the importance of “nature,” and had undergone infertility treatments to conceive a child who was genetically related to both parents. When they finally opted to pursue donor conception, they began to stress the importance of social ties in parenthood and family life. This emphasis was, however, challenged in cases of divorce. Despite parents’ efforts to recognize the social parenthood of the father, in five out of the eight divorces of the heterosexual couples the child’s contact with the father was broken after the divorce. A focus on nurture was also present in the lesbian households in which four participants were born. Genetics were downplayed, and the biological mother was considered an equal parent to the social mother. For the three participants who were born into a single-mother household, the importance of having a father was often downplayed, and mothers tried to cover both roles. This shows that, right from the start, parents tried—by emphasizing genetics or social ties—to determine who should be considered the “real” parent and who should not.

The participants in this study were conceived in the period from 1975 to 2002. Most parents of the participants had used an anonymous donor ($n=18$), and in ten out of twelve heterosexual households the parents kept the donor conception a secret (83.3 percent). In contrast, all four participants born into lesbian households and all three participants born into single-mother households were told about the donor’s role in conception at an early age. In the case of six participants, the parents decided to disclose the donor’s role during the

participants' childhood or puberty. The remaining four participants found out in adulthood, after their parents' divorce or the death of (one of) their parents, or when they told their parents about their own wish to conceive children. Many participants who were not informed about the donor conception in childhood, had always felt different from their family members, especially from their father and/or siblings, and suspected that "something was wrong." Cahn (2013) observes that "the donor-conceived world is filled with secrets," and such secrecy indeed allowed for malpractice in some instances. In our study the fertility physician had used his own sperm to inseminate the mothers of three participants without their consent.

To fully understand the participants' feeling that they lacked both clarity about and agency in their kinship story, past problems with and even malpractice in donor conception in the Netherlands need to be considered. Dutch journalists report that, until recently, fertility clinics had not adequately kept records about sperm donation (Nagtegaal, 2016), and that the number of children per sperm donor had not been properly supervised and registered (Kreulen, 2017). Consequently, there remains little certainty about the number of people conceived by any one donor.

Phase 1. Searching for Relatives and Gaining a Sense of Agency

Media reports about malpractice in fertility clinics, including that of an infamous Dutch doctor who used his own sperm to inseminate an unknown number of women (Baard and Van der Mee, 2017), caused concern among several participants and fueled their motivation to search for the donor or donor relatives. They wanted to know if their parents had been correctly informed about the donor. Was it possible that the doctor had used his own sperm for the insemination? And how many donor half-siblings could there be? Should they take hereditary disorders into account? Should they take a DNA test to rule out the chance they were genetically related to their partner?

For many, the initial reason to register themselves in the Fiom KID-DNA Database was to find out more about the donor, not about siblings. Thirteen participants had registered only to search for the donor and had not even thought about other same-donor offspring before.⁵ Participants were curious to find out more about those to whom they were genetically related, but also to find out more about themselves through these shared genes. By searching for donor relatives, our informants primarily aimed to fill in the gaps in their knowledge about their personal background and family belonging. Twelve participants wished to extend their family, a desire that arose from feeling different in their own family or from missing family, such as a father or siblings. By starting the search, they hoped to gain a sense of agency over their own past—a past that till then had mainly been determined by other people’s choices—and to create some historical continuity in their sense of self (similar to adults engaging in adoption reunions, see Carsten (2000b)). Out of all these questions and anxieties the urge grew to take control over their own narrative by getting in touch with donor relatives, a quest that, for some, took years.

The participants in our study often had to deal with discontinuities in their personal life story. Obviously, there was a sharp discontinuity in the narratives of the ten participants who had been unaware of the donor conception for years, but there were also other discontinuities. For instance, in Claire’s case, the identifiable donor who her mother had deliberately chosen appeared to be untraceable. As the only child of a single mother by choice, Claire had always

⁵ When the participants registered in the KID-DNA Database it was not yet known that the technique the database uses is inadequate to demonstrate kinship between same-donor offspring. Often, same-donor offspring can only be identified by the database after a certain number same-donor offspring have registered. As a result, matches in the KID-DNA database between same-donor offspring frequently encompass larger groups.

known about the donor conception. When Claire was sixteen, she wanted to contact the donor to get more information about any possible half-brothers: “I found [the possible existence of] half-brothers very scary, I was afraid future boyfriends could be half-brothers.” She contacted the fertility clinic but discovered that they had destroyed all data about the donor. She felt powerless, disappointed, and sad: “It felt very hopeless. I really think I kind of threw in the towel, and at that point I really thought, ‘I will probably never know’. And that was very intense.” Registering in the Fiom KID-DNA Database when she was 19 gave her hope again. Unfortunately, for years she did not receive any information. After five years she decided to register in an international DNA database as well and soon she had a match with some donor half-siblings. She discovered that they had many similarities, which aroused her curiosity about the donor. She explained: “If I look like them, how much might I look like our donor? Who would it be?” That was the moment when she started to delve more into DNA. She fully devoted herself to family tree research and tracked down the donor herself.

Through her family tree research, Claire had found several men who could possibly be the donor. She phoned them in succession, until one man confirmed that he had been a donor in the past and had even donated for ten years. She managed to persuade him to register with several DNA databases so she would be able to find her donor half-siblings. She was anxious: “The moment I knew he had donated for ten years, I drove myself completely crazy. I could no longer walk in the street without comparing people. And the more I saw that not all donor half-siblings were alike, the more I felt it could be anyone.” Not long after the donor registered in the Fiom KID-DNA Database, a large network of same-donor offspring was identified. Ever since, this network has continued to expand. As Claire put it: “Our *halfjes* [half-siblings] actually keep dripping in since then.”

Claire’s story illustrates that as donor-conceived people try to get a better grip on their own narratives, they may be confronted with several new discontinuities. Claire had to relate

anew to her own history, including her knowledge of the donor and his motivations to donate sperm; to her present situation, now with a new sense of belonging to her newly found donor half-siblings; and to the future, which may likely add more donor half-siblings to her network. Like Claire, participants at first gained a sense of agency by starting a search for relatives, but the discovery of having large network of donor half-siblings again resulted in new challenges.

Phase 2. Looking for Resemblances: Meeting Donor Half-siblings

After matches were identified in the Fiom KID-DNA database, participants were invited to attend a group meeting at Fiom. The fact that the participants shared genes but were strangers to each other made the meeting emotionally charged. Prior to the meeting many participants were nervous and felt pressure to present themselves well. They also experienced feelings of satisfaction and excitement. Tess made a comparison with the tension in a job interview: “I had the feeling I was applying for a job where I needed to make a good impression.” Iris compared it to a blind date: “I heard someone coming up the stairs—it felt like a television show, a blind date—and here he comes!! It was really exciting.”

During the group meetings the first author observed the newly met half-siblings immediately exploring their physical similarities. Though connection was initially sought in terms of physical resemblances, the half-siblings sought out other signs of belonging, paying attention to how each person communicated, including language use, body language, and type of humor. They also looked for shared interests, lifestyles, and common experiences of being donor-conceived, and also explored resemblances in talents (e.g., musicality), jobs (e.g., working in health care), and physical complaints. Discovering these similarities was described by Lynn as exciting and surprising: “Everyone could link to each other in one way or another; in that sense, it was very bizarre.” These findings match with Cahn’s study (2013) on donor-conceived families in the United States and Carsten’s study (2000b) on adoption reunions in

the United Kingdom, which also found that people's curiosity about similarities in appearance and personality were the main motives underlying the search for genetic kin.

When resemblances were found, they evoked feelings of excitement and laid a foundation for possible emotional bonding. Decisions about whether to further invest in the relationship were primarily made based on these resemblances. Participants mentioned a convincing mix of resemblances to explain their decision to include certain half-siblings in their lives after the meeting; similarly, a lack of resemblances prompted the exclusion of others. Resemblances were emphatically articulated in our follow-up conversations and interviews when donor half-siblings described the foundation of their kinship bond.

Zoë, for example, found many similarities in her donor half-siblings' body language, physical appearance, and type of humor. Before the group meeting, she contacted three of the half-siblings through Facebook, and they arranged to meet at a café. She saw them sitting together and immediately she thought it must be them. She thought it was funny to see similarities, such as their way of talking and even their same way of laughing. She also immediately felt like they "clicked": they talked about so many things, and it was relaxed and fun. She said: "It felt familiar and very bizarre at the same time. You have never seen them before and meanwhile you have so much in common that you really think, 'How is this possible?'" During the group meeting at Fiom, she again saw a mix of similarities with the other donor half-siblings, such as their way of walking, and the fact that so many of them are "super clumsy. ... The coffee was everywhere. We don't know the difference between left and right, and we are pretty sharp tongued, so you can imagine how that went. It felt like coming home."

Although all participants expected to find resemblances with their donor half-siblings at the first group meeting, three participants did not find any. Amy was twenty-six years old when her mother revealed that her father was not her biological father. After the news she

stood in front of the mirror and thought: “What did I get from my mother and what from someone I don't know?” Her most important motivation to search for donor relatives was to find similarities, she said: “I had actually hoped that there would be a few with whom I had a nice click, with whom I could build a kind of bond.” She thought it would be nice to look at donor half-siblings and think “we look alike.” It was a bitter disappointment to find no resemblances, making the meeting “an anti-climax.” Even though one of her donor half-siblings was born on the same day, they did not look alike at all. The lack of resemblances reduced her belief in the importance of genes, she explained: “It [was] also a confirmation of how little it really matters that you have half the same DNA. I think I mostly just look like my mother's family.” Meeting up with her donor half-siblings confirmed for her that she wasn't missing anything; she did not then remain connected to the network of half-siblings anymore, as it was not worth her time or energy.

These cases illustrate that in sharing a mix of biological and social resemblances newly met donor half-siblings found a base for exploring further bonding and building kinship. In their narratives, our informants stressed the importance of genes when many similarities were found. And by doing so they emphasized the distinctiveness of their connection. But other informants, those who did not find resemblances, downplayed the importance of genes. The similarities, or the lack thereof, that were found during this first meeting were the basis for the making or unmaking of kinship. In phase 3 this work of kinning and dekinning continued, as donor half-siblings spent much more time and energy to create a sense of “real” kinship out of genetic connectedness.

Phase 3. Kinning or Dekinning?

Donor half-siblings who want more than just general information exchange about for instance the number of donor half-siblings or medical diseases, are faced with the issues of kinning or

dekinning. Our participants indicated that the “real” work of kinship started after the first group meeting, when they faced the challenge of finding a way to give meaning to the new relationships. They realized they had to work hard to build a “real” relationship, which meant they had to decide how much time they wanted to invest and consider how much their efforts would trouble their existing kinship relations. In addition, some were confronted with practical barriers, such as geographic distance, the burden of motherhood, or secrecy about the donor conception in their family.

In phase 3, the inclusion and exclusion processes continue to develop as the participants could not include all the donor half-siblings they resembled into their networks. While during the first encounter, in phase 2, physical similarities were of overriding importance, in phase 3, similarities related to ethics (norms and values) and social behavior (manners, unwritten codes of conduct, emotions, class) became important criteria for investing (or not) in half-sibling relationships. Participants explained they more intensely felt a sense of belonging when they shared a life stage with their half-siblings, or when they grew up in the same kind of socioeconomic environment. Additionally, they wanted their donor half-siblings to share their values and norms, as it felt incompatible if they didn't. In phase 3, the lack of “clicking” was no longer attributed to a lack of physical similarities, but rather lack of ethical and social similarities.

For instance, Emily, a twenty-seven-year-old, highly educated woman, explained how she became close friends with her donor half-sister Julia, who had been born into a highly educated, wealthy family like herself, but felt no connection at all to another half-sister, Ashley, who was born into a less educated, poor family. Emily told us: “There is a half-sister and her name is Ashley, I am not saying that I am worth more than Ashley, not at all. But I never had someone like Ashley in my classroom, never met her as a friend. And when you heard about someone like Ashley she was often from a different kind of background or

environment.” Although Julia lived further away than Ashley, who lived around the corner, Emily broke off contact with Ashley and made the relationship with Julia flourish. Not only did they come from the same social environment but they were also in the same life stage, both raising small children. Her interactions with Julia were “easy.” Even though Emily had to invest in this relationship, in terms of time and traveling, it did not feel like an effort. She benefitted from it and was energized by the relationship. This was a successful connection, even though her busy social life left little room for new relationships.

To convince other people how distinctive (for instance, in comparison to friendships) their connection to a particular donor half-sibling is, participants often referred to genes. Emily easily listed all the resemblances she shared with Julia: their marriages, the way they decorated their babies’ rooms, their hairstyles, and so on. She concluded: “I find it interesting. It makes you think of nature and nurture, that the lives of Julia and myself run so parallel.”

But some of their kinship work was not as easy; participants not only had to relate to newly found individual siblings but to a whole network of donor half-siblings as well. They often mentioned that group dynamics interfered with their personal lives, and that the formation of subgroups caused tension, jealousy, and rivalry. Kate, thirty-six years old, mentioned that she felt excluded when she was not invited to a meeting, saying: “Of course they do some things together. Normally I am invited, but this time I am not. When I organize something, I don't invite everyone. That is not possible; we are too many. Honestly, I am a bit jealous, but I keep that to myself. There are also half-siblings who can't keep it to themselves. They are really jealous and openly express it.” Some participants eventually decided to disengage from their networks or remain more on the sidelines, in part due to conflicts and dynamics, that might involve, for instance, miscommunications on social media, disagreements about meetings, accusations, different opinions, or not being invited to events.

Other participants report that some donor-half siblings have cut off contact with them against their wishes.

The networks, as mentioned earlier, continue to grow and sometimes quite rapidly. In four years, one of the groups increased 267 percent, from eighteen participants to sixty-six (see table 2). Several participants expressed concern about the continuous expansion of the network, as after each new match they had to adapt to a new group composition, adjust their role within the network, and consider how they might keep their donor half-sibling network manageable. Some participants noticed that their interest in meeting donor relatives faded when more and more people were added to their network. Kate, who had first been matched with the donor half-siblings one year earlier, explained: “I now find it a bit tiring. How many will there be? I think around two hundred. The novelty fades. I think, ‘There we go again, another match with several half-siblings.’ But on the other hand, I also feel sorry for the people who are new, that they are no longer greeted with enthusiasm, so I try to go to new gatherings.” Though some participants enthusiastically welcomed every additional member, others found it challenging to find a new balance. They felt closer to those whom they had met first and they decided it was impossible to be that close with everyone.

Discussion

What does sharing genes with an uncertain number of donor half-siblings mean? And how is kinship made or unmade with “strangers” who are recently discovered to be relatives? These central questions speak to understandings of kinship and feelings of belonging in the domain of donor half-siblings. The participants in our study did not “feel” kinship but rather sought new ways to invest into kinship in order to get that feeling of relatedness. In their search for kinship, they came to realize that kinship could not be discovered: they did not immediately find kinship by meeting their sperm donor or their same-donor offspring, but instead faced

genetic relatedness. Kinship, in contrast, needed to be made and it took time to discern similarities and what that meant for one's sense of belonging and feeling of relatedness. The challenge the people in our study faced was that more and more unforeseen kin could emerge in their quest, making kinship and questions of belonging a never-ending story.

Sibling relationships are “the neglected relationship” in kinship studies (Milevsky, 2016). Although many participants in our study initially searched for the donor and not siblings, previous research among 302 registered donor-conceived people in the Fiom KID-DNA Database showed that 92 percent was indeed curious about donor half-siblings (Fiom, 2020). While relationships with donor half-siblings are commonly viewed as generally more beneficial than those with donors (Nelson et al., 2013), our findings show that such relationships were also accompanied by many challenges.

In our study participants were generally in contact with multiple donor half-siblings (between eight and thirty-one) and met frequently in group settings rather than having individual (online) contacts with some, as described in previous studies (Blyth, 2012, Hertz et al., 2017, Jadvá et al., 2010). Hertz et al. (2017) analyzed how donor half-siblings and their parents interpreted these relationships with genetic relatives. They argue that kinning is determined by factors such as proximity, size of group, liking, and resemblances, amongst others. Our study answers their call to more precisely explore the conditions of kinning and dekinning among donor half-siblings.

We differentiated three phases of participants' work toward donor half-sibling kinship: searching for donor half-siblings, engaging in group meetings, and kinning or dekinning of donor half-siblings. We showed how participants tried to learn their origins and regain a sense of agency in their present kinship situation, which had been until that point determined by other powerful agents. In their attempt to better grasp their own story, however, participants were confronted with new facts and uncertainties as the networks continuously expanded.

This research shows that the creation of a real sense of kinship out of genetic connectedness is a time-consuming process. While searching for physical resemblances largely determined the initial interactions among donor half-siblings, as the contact intensified ethical and social similarities became increasingly important in the processes of kinning and dekinning.

Our participants' search for donor kinship was strongly gendered, and this finding resonates with other studies that argue that the work of kinship is almost exclusively women's work (e.g. di Leonardo, 1987, Notermans et al., 2016). Our study's female overrepresentation indicates that women were more likely than men to participate in the work of kinship, whether it concerned their own search for kin or their willingness to help others in their search. As no men responded to our invitation to participate in the research, this created a limitation in our research: due to the lack of data on men we were not able to analyze male perspectives in donor half-siblings groups.

Our participants reported experiencing a lack of clarity about their present kinship situation and a desire to regain a sense of agency. To support donor-conceived people we have produced a flyer (in Dutch), entitled "You have found multiple donor half-siblings, now what?" (Fiom 2020). The flyer, the content of which is based on our study results, helps people prepare for the questions and feelings that may arise when multiple donor half-siblings are found. Insights from this study will also be incorporated into Fiom's guidelines for linking donors to donor offspring, a process that until now has mainly focused on the offspring's relatedness to the donor instead of their donor half-siblings. A framework for donor half-sibling kinship, in the exceptional situation of a group context, will be valuable to counselors working to support people in acknowledging, understanding, and coping with ambivalence and ambiguity. Those involved are to some extent "relationship pioneers" (Grotevant, 2009) with all the uncertainty and creativity that this entails (see also, Indekeu et al., 2021).

Our data collection stopped one year after the first group meeting, at a time when the work of kinship was still in full swing. Hertz et al. (2017) show how, in the longer term, half-sibling networks can nurture latent ties that are made active when they are needed. One condition for this, as Hertz and Nelson (2019) point out, is that some form of interaction is required to maintain the network. Indeed, we observed that some networks did not even make it through one year before completely disintegrating, while others flourished. We recommend follow-up research to gain more insight into how networks and relationships evolve as time passes, and why some networks flourish while others do not.

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Table 1. Participation in group meeting, by Fiom KID-DNA database network

	Network 1	Network 2	Network 3	Network 4	Network 5	Total
Research participants	3	2	5	6	3	19
Total present at group meeting*	17	18	12	19	7	73
Women present	16	11	8	13	5	53
Men present	1	7	4	6	2	20

* The numbers in this table show the people present who were identified by the Fiom-KID DNA database as donor half-siblings. At some meetings people who were identified by international DNA databases as donor half-siblings of the same network were also present.

Table 2. Increase in network size in the Fiom KID-DNA Database over time

	Network 1	Network 2	Network 3	Network 4	Network 5
Month of first group meeting	2017 May	2017 Jun	2017 Jun	2017 Oct	2018 Feb
Network size at first group meeting	18	19	12	27	7
Network in April 2018	34	19	12	31	7
Network in July 2021	66	39	19	51	13
Percent increase network size	267%	111%	58%	89%	86%