



## Transilient relations: Exploring the social in anonymity

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### review of

Konrad, M. (2005) *Nameless relations: Anonymity, Melanesia and reproductive gift exchange between British ova donors and recipients*. New York: Berghahn Books. (PB, pp. 306, £ 22.00, ISBN 978-1-84545-040-3).

In her intriguing study of anonymous ova donors and their recipients in England, anthropologist Monica Konrad examines how it is possible that new social relations emerge from such donations although those involved in egg donation practices have no possibility of getting to know each other. *Nameless relations* (Konrad, 2005) is a detailed ethnographic analysis of a situation marked by non-knowledge, and of the relations that those involved in it form under the conditions of anonymity and non-reciprocity. Konrad carves out the ‘creativity of non-linkage’ [6] and shows how her research partners establish ‘relations of non-relations’ [49] despite there being no chance of donor-recipient pairs ever meeting up in person. Her study of ova donation practices is an illustrative example for how anonymity can be explored as a form of sociality instead of as a barrier to social relations. The impossibility of establishing reciprocal relations in a situation where persons cannot trace each other is a defining feature in this particular form of anonymity. Konrad’s analysis of what happens to sociality when reciprocal returns are made impossible could therefore give direction to research that looks at how the social can be thought through the anonymous in a context that is far removed from reproductive technologies.

Her own field of research has changed considerably since *Nameless relations* was first published in 2005: anonymous gamete donation is now prohibited in the UK and in several other countries, and those conceived with the help of anonymised gametes have the right to obtain information about their donor at a certain age. However, those conceived before the laws were changed still have no legal right to obtain identifying information.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, countries such as Spain and the Czech Republic, that are popular destinations for those seeking fertility treatment, still hold on to the principle of anonymity in gamete donation. Besides, the right to obtain identifying information does not usually apply to the recipient or the donor, but only to the offspring. Hence there still is a high number of people that live under the conditions of non-knowledge, even though there currently is a general tendency towards legally and temporarily restricting anonymity in many countries. Overall, anonymity in gamete donation continues to be a contested issue, manifested especially in the political activities and the attempt to enforce their 'right to know' by groups of adults conceived with the help of gametes from anonymised sources. Non-knowledge still exists and is reproduced, leading to attempts of concerned groups to find genetic relatives, but also, and at the same time to the 'creativity of non-linkage' [6] described by Monica Konrad.

Konrad's key arguments are set out in the first part (Chapter 1-2) of the book, which explores the relationship between anonymity and gifting. The argumentation is further developed in the second part (Chapter 3-8) which evolves from her ethnographic data. Konrad conducts her fieldwork in the mid-1990s at three privately-run assisted conception units in England, where she follows daily life at the clinic and gets to know donors and recipients. Donor-recipient pairs undergo their treatment around the same time, but do neither meet each other nor receive any identifying information. According to British law (both at the time of Konrad's fieldwork in the mid-1990s as well as today), egg and sperm donors cannot be paid for their donations; they may only receive a small allowance for their efforts. Although they are linked to commercialised services offered in fertility clinics and a 'global multi-million-dollar human-egg industry' [17], donations are thus at least partly shielded from the dynamics of commodification. The data presented in Chapter 3-8 stems mostly from in-depth ethnographic interviews with donors who donate their ova out of 'complex and contradictory' [20] reasons and with recipients who undergo fertility treatment with donated ova. Especially in the final third part of her ethnography (Chapter 9-11), Konrad addresses the interdisciplinary audience that she hopes to reach with her book and presents possible applications

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1 With the exception of the Australian state of Victoria, where the law was changed retrospectively in 2016. The change came into effect in March 2017. Anonymity was retrospectively removed for all donors and donor-conceived persons were given access to identifying information. [[http://www.bionews.org.uk/page\\_621487.asp](http://www.bionews.org.uk/page_621487.asp)]

of her research to bioethics and policy work in the realm of reproductive technologies.

Konrad notes that ‘the notion of “gifts of life” enjoys wide appeal’ [19] in both clinical and popular discourses, and that it also appears in donors’ accounts of wanting to help others by giving them the chance to have a family [67]. The female donors in Konrad’s ethnography describe their donated eggs as a ‘gift of life’ [70] that could profoundly enrich the recipient’s life. When looking at anonymous ova donation with an ‘anthropologically trained’ mind, it seems however not quite apt to describe anonymous gamete donations as ‘gifts’: in his seminal essay *The gift* that first appeared in 1925, Marcel Mauss (2002) identifies reciprocal returns as the third obligation that marks gift exchange systems (following the obligations to give and receive). Fulfilling this responsibility does not necessarily entail the return of a gift that is exactly the same as the one that was received. However, in the case of anonymous ova donations, reciprocity cannot be fulfilled for two reasons: by virtue of being infertile, ova recipients cannot make return gifts in the form of ova; besides, no interaction between the different parties involved in the donation process can take place since they will remain mutually non-identifiable. Therefore, return gifts in the form of something else cannot be exchanged either. The ‘principle of balance’ [41] is blocked as reciprocity cannot be fulfilled.

Konrad asks what exactly happens to the gift in a situation where the ‘convention of return’ [41] is broken by anonymity: ‘Where does it go? How is it presented? Who in fact can lay claim to it?’ (*ibid.*). Her choice of approach is innovative and almost provocative as reciprocity has been assigned great value and importance in terms of creating and preserving social relations by anthropologists. Against the background of reciprocity’s idealisation in anthropology, Konrad sets out ‘to challenge the essentially negative connotations accorded to the concept of anonymity in mainstream social science literature’ [5] and to show that ‘anonymity, as a form of non-reciprocity, [does] *not* equate with the severance of social relations’ [42], emphasis in original]. Instead of arguing for or against anonymity in donor conception, her aim is to show that ‘the discourse of anonymity is multiple, complex, challenging, elusive’ [xiii]. Konrad’s work shows that the particular form of anonymity at stake, as radical as its cut is, is nevertheless not inherently a-social and does not equate with the destruction or breakdown of social relations. *Nameless relations* demonstrates that ‘anonymity may yield its own productivity through its strange, paradoxical surprises’ [xiii]. Konrad’s endeavor to show how the social can be thought through a radical anonymous cut is relevant not only to her own case study, but also gives direction to further research on situations in which reciprocal relations are made impossible by the conditions of anonymity. Konrad herself expresses the wish that her book ‘may facilitate an appreciation of some of the more unspoken aspects of the anonymisation of persons’ [xiii].

In situations that are marked by anonymity, sociality and social ties cannot be established and sustained through reciprocity, and a different mechanism of the gift unfolds itself: 'Where once the central mechanism of the gift was held to be reciprocity – the movements of return – in anonymous sociality relations of non-relations are mediated by the (non) knowledge of transilience' [242]. Konrad introduces the concept of 'transilience' to explain what exactly is happening between mutually anonymous donors and recipients who cannot make direct reciprocal counter-returns. Transilience is a polysemic concept that can be used to describe a leap from one thing to another. The knowledge of transilience and the expectation of sudden shifts become the basis upon which anonymous sociality is mediated in her cases. For Konrad, 'the substance of transilient relations is made from the anticipation of a future, as yet unknown, kinship whose processual activation sometimes may span several years' [49]. Transilient relations are imaginary anonymous relations that are 'killed off' by physical encounters in the 'real world' [214]. Not knowing for example the outcome of one's ova donation is 'compensated for by the continuous work of transilience that keeps ties alive as imagined relations' [115]. Relations between mutually anonymous donors and recipients are 'relations of non-relations' [98] that can be marked by 'a sense of intimacy at a distance' (*ibid.*). A childless donor may enact imagined relations when she opts for donating her eggs as an alternative route to maternity should her own wish to start a family stay unfulfilled. Konrad concludes that '[t]hrough her biological productivity is finite, she nevertheless transforms herself into her own "bio-engineer" who productive agency circulates "through" others as the spatio-temporal effects of transilience' [117]. The donor is in this context not a bounded sphere of thought and action and hence does not conform to a Western conception of the person. Instead, she acts as 'a medium whereby the past and the future, as the actions of others, continue to pass through her' [115]. Within such anonymous sociality, different notions of personhood without clear and distinctive boundaries are possible: anonymity becomes 'a symbol for a collectivity founded in and through the agency of a "someone" whose identity is neither necessarily traceable nor self-bounded as a known categorical order' [48].

Konrad's analysis employs different notions of the kinds of sociality and personhoods at stake to think through situations in which persons do not try to 'secure' their individuality by setting themselves apart, but instead try to disappear in the crowd. In order to approach the subject of anonymous sociality, Konrad – a social anthropologist by trade – juxtaposes her own ethnographic research conducted in England with findings from Bronislaw Malinowski and other anthropologists that have worked in Melanesia. Konrad finds traces of seemingly exotic practices and modes of thought observed in Melanesia in the processes that she witnesses when interviewing woman involved in fertility treatment as either egg donors or recipients, notably with regards to personhood and sociality. Britain

and Melanesia are not ‘directly’ linked in the book, and the women that Konrad talk to do not travel between the two regions, as the book’s title might suggest. Instead, Konrad carves out similarities of their ways of relating to others and the self with similar phenomena in Melanesia, where a person is thought of as constituting a ‘locus of relationships’ [45] instead of a closed unit. Within this Melanesian conception, which is radically different to Western notions of personhood, persons are partible and body parts have ‘the ability to activate social relations’ [46]. Konrad shows that similar dynamics can be observed in the case of egg donation where donated ova have the potential to activate social relations and establish an ‘anticipated kinship’ [49]. In an ‘economy of transilience’ [50], bodily parts such as gametes are not thought of as constituting personal property, but instead circulate ‘as the collective extensions of “someone”’ (*ibid.*). Konrad observes that donors are ‘trying to create an alternative non-biological context as the originary basis’ [69] for the donated ova that doesn’t ‘tie’ them to the donors as a form of personal property. The idiom of ‘chance’ instead of ‘ownership/property’ becomes the dominant rhetoric. This contradicts the way reproductive substance is thought of in law, which interprets it as personal property. Within anonymous sociality, ‘ownership’ is re-conceptualised ‘as a relationship of non-relations between persons’ [48]. Konrad’s work on ova donation carves out that ‘anonymisation stands also for the time of non-ownership and idioms of non-possession’ (*ibid.*).

Reproductive technologies and laws regulating donor conception have changed considerably since 2005, and new ‘modes of transilience’ [49] that require detailed ethnographic analysis are already emerging. But Konrad’s thoughts on donor-conceived persons and their search endeavors are even more relevant today than they were at the time of her fieldwork as donor-conceived persons conceived with donated gametes or embryos (as well as their parents and donors) are increasingly trying to find genetic relatives and to enforce the ‘right to know’ their genetic heritage. Konrad, whose own research is mostly focused on the mothers, and not the children, sees the searches of the children as ‘the enactment of prospective transilience’ [216]. Recipient couples who undergo IVF with donated eggs may decide to anonymously re-donate embryos that are left over and have been cryopreserved after their own treatment is finished to those still awaiting treatment. The decision to re-donate ‘spares’ to infertile recipients instead of donating them to research or having them destroyed can be ‘marked by a non-possessive modelling of biosubstance’ [197]. Embryos are passed onto others not as personal property, but as ‘chances’. Those conceived through the continuation of the donation process may be successful in their attempt to locate notably siblings to some extent, but there will always be ‘thwarted non reunions’ [216] and ‘the relational space of the “non-link”’ (*ibid.*).

Today, new online-based registers help to connect those that have been conceived with gametes from the same anonymised donor. Such ‘donor-siblings’ could not have emerged as a kin category without ‘the intimacies of social media where propinquity is not necessarily synonymous with proximity’ (Edwards, 2003: 291). Little is known so far about the novel search strategies of the donor conceived. One important recent contribution is the work of anthropologist Maren Heibges (née Klotz) (2016) who looks at how donor-conceived persons employ subversive practices of knowledge management and establish relations that are unprecedented and officially unintended. Through circumvention of official regulation and usage of complex digital infrastructures, donor-conceived persons can achieve agency over both their past and those who officially manage the genetic knowledge they seek to find out about (Klotz, 2016). More research that looks at how search strategies vary depending on the legal and infrastructural context and that examines how on- and offline search attempts are related is needed. Within my Ph.D. project that builds upon the work of Konrad, I focus on persons in the UK and Germany that were conceived with the help of gametes from anonymised sources and on how infrastructures, regulations, and social practices relate to the formation of new social relations among them. Commercial genetic testing sites figure prominently into most stories that I have been told so far and were even described to me by one woman as ‘the holy grail’ of the donor-conceived community. These sites which were originally intended for those wishing to learn more about their health and ancestry are an interesting case study that can be used to examine how ‘active not-knowing sets up “unfinished” relations whose unconcealing makes persons “transilient”’ (Konrad, 2005: 180). Even those who manage to make a ‘match’ will probably not stop their search endeavors once they’ve been successful as there is always more to be discovered; after all, there might always be more donor offspring who have not yet been told about the details of their conception. The search endeavors of the donor-conceived are an example for how transilience is ‘activated by known “half-knowns” or by what is simply imagined and not yet known. Its cultural space is the occupancy between concealment and revelation’ [181]. Genetic testing services are likely to change how anonymous sociality ‘works’, as new players appear on the scene. For example, on a recent field trip to England I met a donor-conceived woman in her mid-30s who had discovered a cousin on one of these sites. The cousin agreed to give her non-identifying information about the donor who was her uncle, but disclosed neither her own nor the donor’s identity. New players like the cousin with whom my research partner was still in regular contact, but whose identity remained hidden from her as well as the way the various databases work are decisive for how and what relations are set up, and how ‘finished’ or ‘un-finished’ they are. As anonymous sociality changes and new players and concerns emerge, new

regulations and infrastructures might evolve as well. Different kinds of relations that should be the subject of future research are likely to be imagined.

More than a decade after its publication, *Nameless relations* remains a fascinating and stimulating book not only for anthropologists studying donor conception. Instead, it is an insightful read for everyone who wants to challenge anonymity's devaluation as an object of research and contribute to its reconceptualisation as a social form. Konrad shows that anonymity can indeed 'yield its own productivity' [xiii] and that new 'relations of non-relations' can be established between persons that remain mutually anonymous. Konrad's complex theoretical ideas only became intelligible after reading the theoretical and empirical parts alternately and repeatedly. Presenting more of her own fascinating ethnographic data before delving into complex theoretical ideas would have made the book more accessible for a wider audience. Given the central position that the concept of transilience takes up in Konrad's attempt to explain the dynamics of anonymous sociality, a longer and more concrete definition of this concept would have been beneficial. Similar to Konrad's other theoretical ideas, transilience gets only accessible to the reader after reading the ethnographic chapters and then returning to the beginning of the book. Whereas notably the first part of *Nameless relations* can be difficult to follow, the middle part in which she presents the findings of her empirical work is fascinating and more accessible. One of her main concerns is 'to put back into the picture the subjective experiences and voices of actual women' [19] that are involved in ova donation practices. Their accounts are marked by a 'narrated ambivalence' [19] that makes the second part the most fascinating and arguably the strongest section of the book. Notably her account of donors' voices which are 'deeply imbued with paradox' [60] is intriguing, given how little is known about their motivations and thoughts.

Although *Nameless relations* is not an easy read, the hard work of going back and forth between ethnography and theory does pay off. By drawing upon scholars that have worked in Melanesia and on Melanesian concepts of property, person and relation Konrad makes the stories that she is told by British donors and recipients more understandable and familiar. At the same time, *Nameless relations* demonstrates that work on seemingly exotic, distant places is far from irrelevant when one attempts to understand sociality in general and anonymous sociality in particular. Konrad shows that such accounts can be highly instructive when trying to understand more current phenomena that occur closer to the part of the world in which the researcher her- or himself was socialised. This seemingly exotic and largely forgotten book on ova donation practices presents an especially radical form of anonymity. Monica Konrad carves out precisely, how this particular form of anonymity challenges not only the way we think about anonymity, but also how we conceptualise social relations as well as reciprocity and personhood.

Furthermore, Monica Konrad gives us insights into the highly productive relations of transilience that can emerge out of anonymity. As such, this ethnography should become part of the essential reading for anyone who tries to approach anonymity as a form of a social relation, and especially as one that is socially productive instead of destructive.

## references

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