

Identical Strangers: A Memoir of Twins Separated and Reunited

Elyse Schein and Paula Bernstein (2007). New York: Random House, 288 pp., \$US25.95.
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Reviewed by Dorret I. Boomsma

Paula Bernstein and Elyse Schein are identical twins who were separated at 6 months of age. After spending the first few months of their lives together with a foster mother they were adopted by different families and finally reunited in 2004, when they were 35 years old. The book, *Identical Strangers*, written by both twins in alternating paragraphs, describes how they found each other after Elyse contacted their adoption agency with a request about information about her biological mother.

The book has a double focus: it details the personal stories of how it feels to meet one's identical twin and it tries to get at the truth of why the twins were separated and adopted into different homes. The personal stories describe how it is to be forced into an intimate relationship and wonder about what is it that makes each of us who we are. After meeting each other, the sisters find it undeniable that genetics play a huge role in shaping their interests, personalities and psychiatric histories (both suffered from depression).

Part of getting to know each other is their quest for information about their birth mother and the reason for their separation. At the time of their adoption, neither the adoptive parents nor the twins knew that they had an identical twin. The adoptive families were told that their child was part of an ongoing developmental study. The key element of the study, child development in twins raised in different

homes, was not revealed. The 'secret research project' in which Jewish twins and one set of triplets unknowingly took part the 1960s and 1970s has been described before (e.g., Perlman and Segal, 2005; Wright, 1997). Dr Bernard, a child psychologist and consultant to the Louise Wise adoption agency, had strong beliefs that twins should be raised separately. The sisters get to visit Peter Neubauer, the psychiatrist and principal investigator on the secret study, who insists that at the time it was a matter of scientific consensus that twins were better off separated at birth and raised apart. The twins contact professor Tom Bouchard of the Minnesota twin study of twins raised apart who tells them, 'I never found anything in the psychological literature supporting Dr Bernard's claim'. The study ended in 1980. A year later, the state of New York began requiring adoption agencies to keep siblings together. At that point, Bernstein says,

Neubauer decided not to publish his results, which are sealed in an archive at Yale University until 2066 (when the twins will be 98 years old).

The book describes a personal story that is interspaced with results from recent twin studies, for example from studies on methylation differences in monozygotic twin pairs. Unfortunately, for the interested reader, no references (or often even the names of authors of the publications) are given, so that the personal story is the dominant theme.

References

- Perlman, L. M., & Segal, N. L. (2005). Memories of the Child Development Center study of adopted monozygotic twins reared apart: An unfulfilled promise. *Twin Research & Human Genetics*, 8, 271–281.
- Wright, L. (1998). *Twins: And what they tell us about who we are*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.