

CASE STUDY

Identical Strangers

Identical twins Paula Bernstein and Elyse Schein met for the first time at age 35. Adopted as infants and raised in separate homes, neither knew about her twin sister. Then one day Schein, who had been searching for information about her birth mother, received a letter from the adoption agency informing her that she was the "younger" of twin girls born in October 1968.

Unbeknownst to them, the women had been part of a psychological study in the 1960s and 1970s that separated identical twins. In an effort to determine the influence of nature versus nurture, or heredity versus environment, researchers tracked the development of the study's participants. Although the adoptive parents were aware that the children were participating in some kind of scientific study, they were not informed of the study's true purpose. Shockingly, they were not told that the children had been separated from their twins.

Bernstein, left, and Schein after their reunion



These photos show Paula Bernstein, left, and Elyse Schein, not long after they were adopted.

At the time that Schein and Bernstein were born, the state of New York did not require adoption agencies to keep siblings together. Indeed, Viola Bernard, the psychiatric consultant for the adoption agency that placed Schein and Bernstein, supported a policy of separating twins. She believed that doing so allowed the children to establish their own personalities.

For psychiatrist Peter Neubauer, the adoption agency's policy presented an opportunity for a unique twin study. Scientists have used twin studies for decades in their efforts to determine the roles of heredity and environment in the development of personality, intelligence, and certain diseases. The studies continue to be a valuable research tool. However, a study like Neubauer's would be considered unethical today. Modern guidelines regulate behavior studies and require the informed consent of the participants.

Surprisingly, Neubauer never published his study. He instead donated his findings to Yale University, which will keep the papers sealed until 2066. Schein's and Bernstein's repeated efforts to gain access to the data have been unsuccessful. However, the two women have made their own observations about nature and nurture.

In their adoptive families, the sisters had different experiences. Schein's adoptive mother passed away when she was 6, and her father remarried soon after. Her older brother, also adopted, was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Schein attended a state university in

New York and then studied film in Prague. When she discovered her twin Paula, she was living alone in Paris.

Paula Bernstein had a happy childhood in suburban New York with her parents and older brother, who was also adopted. She attended the prestigious Wellesley College and earned a master's degree in cinema studies at NYU. When the adoption agency contacted her about her twin Elyse, she was living in Brooklyn with her husband and daughter.

When they met, Schein and Bernstein were amazed at the similarities between them. Schein was a filmmaker and Bernstein had worked as a film critic. As she talked to Elyse, Paula was shocked to see how many facial expressions and mannerisms they shared. They both had the same liberal political views. Both had faced bouts with depression.

Amidst all the similarities, there were also differences. Both women had cultivated their own styles and attitudes toward life. They looked alike, but neither would have been mistaken for the other.

The sisters believe that heredity is important. In an interview, Bernstein acknowledged that genetics play a huge role. She commented that she could see her personality in Schein. Schein even wondered, if they had been raised by each other's families, would Schein have turned out like Bernstein and Bernstein like Schein? After some time together, both twins think not. As far as these twins are concerned, both nature and nurture have played an active role in shaping who they are today.

What do you think?

1. Why would Neubauer's study be considered unethical today?
2. Which do you think is more important, nature or nurture?