

DIVIDED TWINS, DISSOCIATED RESEARCHERS

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A review of the Book

Deliberately Divided. Inside the controversial study of twins and triplets adopted apart

By Nancy Segal, 2021.

Rowman and Littlefield Lanham, MD. 520 pages.

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The subject of the book is the practice by the Louise Wise Services and a Child Development Centre (LWS-CDC) in New York in the 1960s and 70s. Following the ideas of Dr Viola Bernard, who thought twins impeded each other's development, the centre started to place twins apart. The research led by Dr Peter Neubauer, began to look at the twins and triplets reared apart. So far so good. There have been a few such studies, where, for various reasons, twins had to be separated very early in life. Early in her career, the author, Nancy Segal, contributed to one of these, The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart (Bouchard et al 1990). The big difference in the LWS-CDC study was that neither the twins nor their adoptive parents were told of the existence of the other twin/triplets. They simply did not know of the existence of the sibling(s). The adoptive families were intensively followed up until the child was aged 12 years and still the information was withheld. Segal describes the distress and anger the adopted young people and their adoptive parents felt when they discovered that they had been deceived.

A study such as this would not now pass the scrutiny of a research ethics board, but as Segal describes, there have in the past been studies ranging from the highly dubious to the horrific like those of Dr Mengele who experimented on twins in Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Not mentioned by Segal, and also conducted within a fascist regime, was the practice in Franco's Spain of giving babies, some of whom were twins, to supporters of the regime, often having told their mothers, Republican sympathisers, that they had died. One purpose was to ensure that babies were not brought up with Republican leanings (see for example Tremlett, 2011). No such

blatantly evil political intent can be levelled at the LWS-CDC study. Neubauer and Bernard defended their views to the last.

As (almost) all would now recognise, however interesting the facts obtained may be, *how* they are obtained is not value free and must conform to ethical standards. But the issues are sometimes not clear cut, very occasionally the ends may justify the means, or as the French would say, “to make omelettes you need to crack eggs”. Equally, as Segal discusses, well intentioned actions sometimes have unforeseen consequences, or, to offer (apologetically) another proverb, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”.

This book contains a subtly nuanced, and balanced discussion of these issues and a sympathetic study of the personalities and attitudes involved, and the scientific and moral climate at the time which led to this twin study. It can serve a lesson to researchers of how the allure of making significant findings can blind them to the ethics of what they are doing.

There are few scholars more eminent in the field of twin studies than Nancy Segal with at least eight books and over 250 publications to her name. It is therefore unsurprising that she manages to draw together with ease, economy, and clarity the findings on twins relevant to this, her latest, book. When she was asked to write about this controversial area, she had misgivings, but in the end she agreed. This highly readable book is the result, in which she deftly steers a course between the science of twins, the ethics of research, the interests and feelings of those twins studied and the histories and personalities of the people involved. She examines the issues in forensic detail, drawing on numerous interviews and archive records, as well as the science.

She starts with a brief overview of the twin studies relevant to these events: twinning rates, studies of twins reared apart, and the coming together of such twins later in life with the extraordinary immediate mutual affinity often seen, and the quality of the relationships between twins.

Inevitably the old nature - nurture debate is discussed. Twin studies were usually undertaken to throw light on this. Opinion swung over the decades from Galton's 1875 twin study which concluded that nature prevails enormously over nurture, to the prevailing view in mid-century USA that nurture was decisive. Unsurprisingly the debate seemed more polarised in the USA than elsewhere. Segal quotes a comment by some of the researchers claiming that this “was a monumental study, a once in a lifetime opportunity to put to rest the dilemma of nature and nurture forever”. Segal believes that the allure of this scientific goldmine was a major factor causing the study to become lost ethically.

To an ethologist, the polarised nature-nurture debate is a non-issue, causal influences come from both sources. Robert Hinde's (1970) view is one of the best: behaviours range between being environment stable (more nature) to environment labile (more nurture), in other words, some behaviours emerge almost whatever environment the young animal grows up in, others require more specific environments. For example, all (non-disabled) humans use language (stable), but which language they speak depends upon the precise environment /culture in which they are raised (labile). The polarised nature -nurture debate is now hopefully disappearing. But in the 1950s and 60s it was a significant issue in some disciplines.

In her discussion of the policies and people involved, Segal is sympathetic, balanced and fair, being clear about the many admired, and admirable, qualities of the main players, and the many facets to their complex characters. For instance, Neubauer himself was kind-hearted and smart, able to cut through problems, and able to talk empathetically with children and adults alike, but he was also a poor researcher and could be seen as narcissistic, distant, and obstinate, dismissing some scientific evidence and doing things his way. (It always needs to be remembered that the

views a person holds about another will often reflect their own attitudes and biases as much as the nature of the person described.)

The next chapter describes in some detail the workings of the study itself and describes how there was often secrecy surrounding the study at the time and afterwards. For instance, researchers from outside the project found it impossible to get to the adoptive families. Neubauer and others rarely discussed the study. Researchers in the study seemed not to know who the others on the team were. Segal also points out some apparent flaws in the methodology.

Later in the book Segal remarks, “The twins and their families still wonder why the findings from this study have not been published, why the records were sealed and why the twins have had so much difficulty in acquiring them.” (Bernard and Neubauer left their records sealed in University vaults, not to be opened until 2021 and 2065 respectively.) She finds only three papers and a book recording the findings, plus a few other references. All are marked by failing to give adequate information, even possibly sometimes omitting that the children were twins in some cases. Being psychoanalytical in approach, Neubauer gives many detailed descriptions in the 1990 book, something which Segal welcomes as being fascinating and informative. I, like Michael Billig (Billig, 2019; Richer 2020), share this attitude towards detailed description, although I for one could do without Freudian theoretical baggage! Segal writes that “the investigators concluded that our genetic blueprint, or dispositional organisation, largely guides human behavioural and physical maturation, but are subject to environmental contingencies. This, Segal points out, is not a novel finding, it is one that runs through every previous reared-apart twin study.”

A central issue in the book is that of informed consent. The USA had signed up to the Helsinki Declaration of 1964, and informed consent was in the FDA regulations soon after (Sparks, 2002). But, Segal noted, “the years 1974 and 1978 were pivotal in bringing informed consent issue to the fore in behavioural and medical science research”. Evidence of obtaining such informed consent from adoptive parents prior to their participation could not be found. In a 1984 meeting a Professor Black of the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services is minuted as suggesting “that the “worst” that could happen would be charges by the twins that their twinship had been concealed”. “He concluded, “*Yet it was no part of the study to inform each of the other*”, and next to this, [Viola] Bernard had pencilled in ‘good point’” [italics mine]. To which one is tempted to say ironically, “Oh that’s all right then”. The italicised quote is a telling one, implicitly using fact (of the methodology) to justify value, and shows how easy it was for some people to get carried away and confuse what they might see as sound scientific methodology, with what was acceptable practice. It is an example of G.E. Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy¹. To do a *reductio ad absurdum*, substitute for “inform each of the other” with, for instance, “[it was no part of the study to] stop sending their names and addresses to known local paedophiles”.

The failure to gain informed consent gave rise to another issue: would the subjects recognise themselves in publications and sue? There were also lengthy discussions about whether and when to inform the participants that they were one of a twin or triplet.

The middle section of the book is a detailed account of twins and the set of triplets and their feelings following revelations. She discusses the media involvement which investigated the study in the earlier 1980s in the context of children’s rights. Segal gives a useful summary of Bernard’s position in response to the media enquiries.

¹ Moore argued that “ought” statements cannot be derived from “is” statements.

Towards the end of the book, Segal returns to the issues she discussed at the beginning and examines them in forensic detail from three standpoints: “legalities, framework for research and moralities”. As to legalities, although the practices in the study were not strictly illegal at the time, they were contrary to prevailing law which discouraged splitting siblings and to ethical professional practice which advocated informed consent.

At that time, research proposals did not have to go through an Institutional Review Board (Research Ethics Committee) at the start of the project. That led some to argue that the separate placements, secrecy about the existence of the other twin, and lack of informed consent and consent forms being distributed all of 18 years after the start of the study, should not be judged by current standards. Segal disagrees. Elsewhere she also points out the many instances where the researchers were confronted with decisions and values which should have given them cause to doubt what they were doing.

Other adoption agencies were approached to provide twins, to “increase the sample size”. All refused, largely it seems, on moral grounds. The separations by LWS were justified by Dr Viola Bernard’s theory that such separation was in the best interests of the child. Yet, Segal points out, this idea was never published in professional journals with supporting data, so it was not put to the test of public/professional examination.

Given the nature of the research methodology, which would now, and even then, be seen as unethical, even immoral, Segal asks the very important question, why did these people, Neubauer and Bernard, create it, surround the project in secrecy and continue to pursue and justify it over decades? Segal paints a balanced and sympathetic picture of each. These were both highly esteemed clinicians, who were known to be kind, empathetic and insightful and benevolent. Certainly, some thought Bernard was stubborn and unhelpful and could be tough, Neubauer could be closed minded and narcissistic. In a key sentence, Segal concludes’ “I believe they were both continually blinded by scientific ambition and eventually consumed by potential lawsuits”. This was not a snap decision later regretted and admitted, but a position maintained over decades and not acknowledged. This is the steady background beat heard throughout this book: they were led to dissociate from the moral questions by the lure of being able to address fundamental (as it seemed to many at the time) scientific questions in a way more powerful than had been possible before.

Segal notes that many who knew Neubauer and Bernard still support them generally, even if they do not support this twins project. They adduce two arguments, (i) people should not be judged by one mistake in a lifetime of good work and (ii) the culture of the times was not so condemnatory of this sort of approach as it now would be. Segal rejects both in this case. And she points out that many people at the time of the study were also uncomfortable.

This book is full of rich detail, clearly described and placed in context. I have used the term “forensic detail” more than once, and Segal’s grasp of detail and ability to order it clearly is most impressive. The content ranges from the science of twins, through historical context to interview and archive data of the sort a journalist might use. I can understand that this is necessary to make a solid case which would stand up and to convey the feelings of the twins and their parents. I myself would have welcomed some summaries of the “take home” messages. The main one for me was contained in Segal’s sentence, “I believe they were both continually blinded by scientific ambition and eventually consumed by potential lawsuits”. It is an object lesson to researchers about respect and humility, and that the ethics, as well as the methodological logic, of research, matters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Richer is a child clinical psychologist previously at the University of Oxford and the University Hospital. He has published numerous many peer reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters. His research interests focus include on the application of ethology to "disturbed" behaviour, especially in children, attachment, hyperactivity, autism and behaviour problems, consciousness, and nutritional effects on behaviour. He has worked with multinational companies on psychological issues and is frequently asked to offer advice to Family Courts.

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