'Identical Strangers' Explore Nature Vs. Nurture

by JOE RICHMAN OF RADIO DIARIES

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What is it that makes us who we really are: our life experiences or our DNA? Paula Bernstein and Elyse Schein were both born in New York City. Both women were adopted as infants and raised by loving families. They met for the first time when they were 35 years old and found they were "identical strangers."

Unknowingly, Bernstein and Schein had been part of a secret research project in the 1960s and '70s that separated identical twins as infants and followed their development in a one-of-a-kind experiment to assess the influence of nature vs. nurture in child development.

Now, the twins, authors of a new memoir called Identical Strangers, are trying to uncover the truth about the study.

'I Have a Twin'
In 2004, Paula Bernstein received a phone call from an employee of Louise Wise Services, the agency where she had been adopted. The message: She had a twin who was looking for her.

The woman told Bernstein her twin's name.

"And I thought, I have a twin, and her name is Elyse Schein," Bernstein says.

Schein, who was living in Paris at the time, had been trying to find information about her birth mother when she learned from the adoption agency that she had a twin sister.

The two women met for the first time at a cafe in New York City — and stayed through lunch and dinner, talking.

"We had 35 years to catch up on. How do you start asking somebody, 'What have you been up to since we shared a womb together?' Where do you start?" Bernstein says.

Separated at Adoption
Soon after the sisters were reunited, Schein told Bernstein what she had found out about why they were separated: They were part of a study on nature vs. nurture. It was the only study of its kind on twins separated from infancy.
Neither parents nor children knew the real subject of the study — or that the children had been separated from their identical twin.

"When the families adopted these children, they were told that their child was already part of an ongoing child study. But of course, they neglected to tell them the key element of the study, which is that it was child development among twins raised in different homes," Bernstein says.

A 'Practically Perfect' Study
Peter Neubauer, a child psychiatrist, and Viola Bernard, a child psychologist and consultant to the Louise Wise agency, headed up the study.

Lawrence Perlman, a research assistant on the study from 1968 to 1969, says Bernard had a strong belief that twins should be raised separately.

"That twins were often dressed the same and treated exactly the same, she felt, interfered with their independent psychological development," Perlman says.

Lawrence Wright is the author of *Twins*, a book about twin studies. "Since the beginning of science, twins have offered a unique opportunity to study to what extent nature vs. nurture influences the way we develop, the people that we turn out to be," Wright says.

Wright notes that the Neubauer study differs from all other twin studies in that it followed the twins from infancy.

"From a scientific point of view, it's beautiful. It's practically the perfect study. But this study would never happen today," Wright says.

Finding the True Story
The study ended in 1980, and a year later, the state of New York began requiring adoption agencies to keep siblings together.

At that point, Bernstein says, Neubauer realized that public opinion would be so against the study that he decided not to publish it. The results of the study have been sealed until 2066 and given to an archive at Yale University.

"It's kind of disturbing to think that all this material about us is in some file cabinet somewhere. And really for ourselves, we had to figure out what the true story was," Bernstein says.

The sisters attempted to reach Neubauer, a distinguished and internationally renowned psychiatrist who serves on the board of the Freud Archives. Initially, he refused to speak to them.

No Remorse, No Apology
Eventually, he granted the women an unofficial interview — no taping or videotaping allowed.
Bernstein says she had hoped Neubauer would apologize for separating the twins. Instead, he showed no remorse and offered no apology.

Neubauer has rarely spoken about the study. But in the mid-1990s, he did talk about it with Wright, the author of *Twins.* 
"[Neubauer] insisted that at the time, it was a matter of scientific consensus that twins were better off separated at birth and raised separately," Wright says. "I never found anything in the literature to support that."

The author also says Neubauer was "unapologetic" about the study, even though he admits that the project raised ethical question about whether one has a right to or should separate identical twins.

"It is very difficult to answer. It is for these reasons that these studies don't take place," Neubauer told Wright.

Wright says that no such study will ever be done again — nor should it. But he acknowledges that it would be very interesting to learn what this study has to teach us.

'Different People with Different Life Histories'
As for Bernstein and Schein, getting to know each other has raised its own questions.

"Twins really do force us to question what is it that makes each of us who we are. Since meeting Elyse, it is undeniable that genetics play a huge role — probably more than 50 percent," Bernstein says.

"It's not just our taste in music or books; it goes beyond that. In her, I see the same basic personality. And yet, eventually we had to realize that we're different people with different life histories."

As much as she thinks the researchers did the wrong thing by separating the twins, Bernstein says she can't imagine a life growing up with her twin sister.

"That life never happened. And it is sad, that as close as we are now, there is no way we can ever compensate for those 35 years," Bernstein says.

"With me and Paula, it is hard to see where we are going to go. It's really uncharted territory," Schein says. "But I really love her and I can't imagine my life without her."

Neubauer declined to be interviewed for this story. Of the 13 children involved in his study, three sets of twins and one set of triplets have discovered one another. The other four subjects of the study still do not know they have identical twins.