

# WHAT SCIENCE TELLS US

## DELIBERATELY DIVIDED: INSIDE THE CONTROVERSIAL STUDY OF TWINS AND TRIPLETS ADOPTED APART BY NANCY L. SEGAL, PH.D.

A Book Review by Ruth O. Selig, twin to Rollie

Twinless Twins know all too well the heartbreak and trauma of losing one's twin. Imagine being born a twin, but not knowing it because you had been deliberately separated from your twin before you were adopted and your adoptive parents were never told they were getting a twin. Perhaps even more troubling would be the revelation that your new parents had to participate in a child development study as a condition of your adoption, allowing researchers to observe you regularly for 12 years, administer IQ and other psychological tests, and take films and photographs.

This is the real-life context for the riveting new book, *Deliberately Divided*, detailing the controversial twin study brought to public attention by *ABC News's 20/20*, the 2017 documentary film, *The Twinning Reaction*, and the 2018 documentary film, *Three Identical Strangers*, which continue to shock audiences worldwide. The book's author, psychologist and twin researcher Dr. Nancy Segal (Keynote Speaker, 2009 TTSI Annual Conference) takes the reader behind the scenes to witness the story unfolding over six decades.

Several of the separated twins and triplets in the films ask, "How could such an outrage occur?" In the early 1960s, two psychiatrists, the head of the New York City Child Development Center affiliated with the Jewish Board of Guardians (now the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services) Dr. Peter Neubauer, and Columbia University's Dr. Viola Bernard together designed a study to track the development of identical twins and triplets adopted into different families. Dr. Bernard was the psychiatric consultant to the highly respected adoption agency, Louise Wise Services (LWS), which was implementing a policy of separating twins at adoption. The researchers wanted the twin separations to

be kept secret from the parents to ensure that the study could evaluate the influence of "nature" (genetics) and "nurture" (the environment) as well as the impact of different parenting styles. They believed that learning about a related twin adopted into a different family would influence both families. In fact, when one female twin pair discovered one another at approximately age seven, both twins were dropped from the study.

Psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis gained tremendous prestige in the 1950s and 1960s, during the same era when adoptions were shrouded in secrecy. As with all records of physical and mental health, confidentiality and privacy were considered paramount, courts sealed adoption records, and, unlike today, it was believed to be in the best interests of birth and adoptive parents and children to keep information surrounding adoptions hidden forever.

Ironically, today, when adoptions are conducted with more transparency, the records from this early study remain tightly sealed in the Yale University archives, restricted until 2065, when all participants will no longer be alive. Not surprisingly, some twins and triplets involved are determined to gain access to their records. Although some documents have been released, legal efforts are ongoing.

Segal, a prodigious investigator, conducted extensive research for this book, interviewing colleagues, friends and family members of the late Viola Bernard and the study's lead researcher, the late Peter Neubauer, as well as administrators, research assistants who conducted the observations, journalists, ethicists, and attorneys. Most importantly, she interviewed almost all the twins involved

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and their still living relatives, the unwitting participants in this controversial study. Segal further examined the researchers' efforts to avoid media exposure, their worries over informed consent issues, and the steps taken to avoid lawsuits.

Impressively, Segal never shies away from controversy and proves herself a gutsy and determined investigator. She is upfront and unblinking in her condemnation of the twin adoption study, explaining although not agreeing with those who defend that study and the theories on which its researchers believed it was based. Segal also says her own views were influenced, in part, by her personal story as a fraternal twin and twin researcher specializing in studying twins reared apart.

As in her earlier book *Accidental Brothers*, also reviewed in the *Twinless Times* ([https://www.twinlesstwins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/tt\\_2018\\_03\\_fall\\_proof2.pdf](https://www.twinlesstwins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/tt_2018_03_fall_proof2.pdf)), Segal's ability to dramatically describe stories of twin separation, loss and reunion offers the reader an unforgettable experience of coming to know the twins and triplets involved in the study, as well as some fraternal twins adopted apart who did not become part of the study. Because there were, in the end, only 11 individual twin subjects who completed part or all of the 12-year study (eight identical twins, including three identical female pairs, one identical male pair, plus three identical male triplets), Segal is able to devote a chapter to each pair, bringing the reader inside the drama of separation and reunion.

While reading this absorbing book, I discovered it intersected with my own life story in ways neither Nancy Segal nor I expected, when I told her a year ago, I wanted to review *Deliberately Divided*. I had seen *Three Identical Strangers* and was troubled but also intrigued by the story.

For me, Segal's book brought back a flood of memories. I was born in 1942 in New

Haven, Connecticut, where my parents were delighted to bring their identical toddlers to the Yale Child Study Center for observation. Internationally known for the study of children, the Center's widely read books, including *The First Five Years of Life* and *The Child from Five to Ten*, described normal milestones and stages of child development. Along with his colleagues, Louise Bates Ames and our neighbor, Francis Ilg, Arnold Gesell, the Center's first Director, was the person probably most responsible for informing parents that children go through a series of stages, such as the "terrible two's." All this was long before pediatricians Benjamin Spock and Berry Brazelton became famous. During the 1950s, my parents often spoke positively about the growing inter-related fields of child development, psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

After observing and testing us, the Yale Child Study Center psychologists told my parents that it was important for them to help us develop strong separate identities, particularly because we had been inseparable as small children who shared a room, always dressed alike, had our own language as babies, and later began to stutter. Specifically, the specialists advised my parents to send us to a school with two separate classrooms at each grade level. For five years, we drove 20 minutes away to Hamden Hall rather than walk



Ruth and Rollie Osterweis at approximately age three

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two blocks to the smaller school my two older sisters had attended, because their school only had one classroom per grade. At the age of eight, we were tested again and the Yale doctors declared us sufficiently separated and “individuated” to transfer into the single fourth grade classroom at our neighborhood school.

During these years, my mother also enrolled us in separate sessions of speech therapy to help our stuttering, but she was careful to spend the hour alone with each of us while the other went into speech therapy. This too was declared a success by the Yale psychologists, as much for the undivided parental focus on each twin as for the speech therapy. Fortunately, we stopped stuttering.

My parents, my identical twin sister Rollie, and I never questioned the Yale Child Study Center’s advice, and we consciously continued to pursue some separate paths, including different summer experiences. After college together we thought it was a positive step for Rollie to move to Chicago, while I remained in Massachusetts. Although I later came to understand that the individuation and separation theories for twins were no longer held in high regard, I never thought they particularly hurt us. Looking back, however, I wish we had spent more time together as adults, since I was to lose Rollie to cancer just before our 40th birthday. For a decade before that, we saw each other infrequently, each involved in a demanding museum job and raising young children.

As I read Segal’s book, I became aware that my experiences growing up affected my reactions to parts of her narrative, particularly when she questions the motives of those who used the theories of separation and individuation to justify the separation of twins for adoption. I wonder now how the esteemed Drs. Gesell, Ilg, and Ames viewed the twin adoption study in New York City, which they probably knew about since they undoubtedly knew Drs. Bernard and Neubauer.

Also influencing my reading was the recent experience of my partner of 20 years who was adopted through the Spence-Chapin Adoption agency in New York City, which took over the Louise Wise Adoption records when LWS closed. At my urging, Mark joined 23andMe and Ancestry.com, and through genetic testing and his own sleuthing (including a request to the New York City Department of Health’s Bureau of Records and Statistics for his original birth certificate), he happily learned the names and some history about both his birth parents.

Segal is uniquely qualified to write this book as a twin growing up in New York, but even more importantly, as a researcher who has conducted many scientific twin studies. She casts a very critical eye not only on the Bernard/Neubauer collaborative study, but also on the theoretical underpinnings they believed undergirded and justified twin separation at adoption, which Segal tells us had no basis in science. Segal considers all sides of the ethical debate, but she makes her position clear. In addition, she questions the “historical context” defense of the study (that the scientists were reflecting the science of the day), and she suggests the researchers kept so much secret because they knew their study was unacceptable to many and, as time went on and practices changed, probably also was unethical and even immoral.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The doctors involved in the Louise Wise Services-Child Development Center study may have sincerely believed in the importance of encouraging separate identity and individuation in twins and that these theories could help justify separate adoptions for twins and triplets. I do not question their motivations. I am less critical of the separation theory than Segal, but, at the same time, she is right to question their ethics and research practices since the twin study took the theory of separation and individuation to such a tragic extreme.

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The Bernard/Neubauer study lies at the intersection of fundamental human rights and evolving scientific theory. Adopted twins, I believe, do have a fundamental human right to grow up together. We can blame the study, we can view the theory of individuation as wrong, and we can deeply sympathize with the anger, hurt, and bewilderment the twins involved experienced and expressed so eloquently in recent films and TV programs. But we also should recognize, as Segal does, that the two distinguished doctors involved made some important contributions during their very long careers.

Regardless of the outcome of the debate over ethics and responsibility analyzed in the final two chapters, the book is impressively researched and meticulously told. Dr. Segal enjoys twins, she enjoys being a twin, and she relishes her professional life studying, talking about, and working with twins. She clearly states that she will always take twins' best interests into account in her research endeavors. Everything about this story is complex and multi-layered, and I congratulate her on pursuing an incredibly difficult journey with such relentless determination and unflinching courage.

### AUTHOR BIO:

Professor of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton and Director of the Twin Studies Center, Dr. Nancy L. Segal has authored over 250 scientific articles and now seven books on twins and twin development. Several of Segal's books focus on twins separated at birth, including: *Born Together-Reared Apart: The Landmark Minnesota Twin Study* (Harvard University Press, 2012); *Someone Else's Twin: The True Story of Babies Switched at Birth* (Prometheus Books, 2011), and *Accidental Brothers* (St. Martin's Press, 2018), which follows the life histories of identical Colombian twins who were inadvertently exchanged at birth. Her book, *Twin Mythconceptions: False Beliefs, Fables, and Facts About Twins* (Academic Press,

2017) describes and corrects various kinds of misinformation about twins. Read the 2021 interview with Dr. Segal in the Twinless Times spring edition [https://twinlesstwins.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/tt\\_2021\\_01\\_spring\\_web.pdf](https://twinlesstwins.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/tt_2021_01_spring_web.pdf).

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### POSTSCRIPT:

Twinless Twins often ask how they can participate in twin studies and particularly in studies of Twinless Twins. Segal's twin loss study is ongoing and can be accessed online at her website. To participate, find the Twin Loss Survey at <http://drnancysegaltwins.org> and scroll down to the red box on the lower left side. There you will see a list of current studies; click on the link to the study of twinless twins.

