
Are You Who You Think You Are?

*An Interview with
Dr. Nancy Segal,
the Author of
Someone Else's Twin*

By Christina Baglivi Tinglof



As the director of the Twin Studies Center as well as a professor of psychology at California State University, Fullerton, no one's more passionate about the study of twins than Dr. Nancy Segal. In her latest book, *Someone Else's Twin: The True Story of Babies Switched at Birth*, Dr. Segal, a fraternal twin herself, investigates the unusual cases of identical twins switched at birth. In particular, Segal tells us the story of identical twins, Delia and Begoña, born in 1973 in Spain's Canary Islands. Due to hospital error, an unrelated baby, Beatriz, was accidentally switched with Delia in the nursery. Suddenly, Begoña became a fraternal twin and Beatriz her virtual twin. The two grew up together in Begoña's biological family never realizing that they were unrelated. The other identical twin, Delia, then grew up in a non biological family as a singleton. The families never learned the truth until 28 years later when the two twins met by chance. Once DNA tests confirmed that Delia and Begoña were indeed identical twins, everyone's lives were suddenly turned upside down.

Dr. Segal's riveting account not only explains the legal fallout once all parties learned the agonizing truth but she also examines deeper emotional questions such as, how does a mother truly know if a baby is hers? How is our identity formed? And, when it comes to raising children, which plays a greater role, nature or nurture?

I had a chance to talk with Dr. Segal recently about her new book. Below are highlights of our conversation.

Question: You write in the book's introduction that "Every once in a while a researcher discovers a problem, event, or situation that is irresistible, something so compelling that she drops everything to study it." Can you explain what your fascination was with this story? Why did you drop everything to fly to the Canary Islands to interview, Delia and Begoña, the two identical twins switched at birth, and Begoña's virtual twin, Beatriz?

Answer: There were four issues that jumped out at me once I learned about this case. First, what was the emotional response of these people to suddenly find out that everything about their lives was not the way they thought it should be? Second, what does this tell us about the science of how mothers know who their babies are? After all, mothers are in hospitals and they're given a baby to take home. How do they know that that baby is theirs? It's a very important question and one that's been overlooked for many reasons that I go into in the book. The fourth issue was a legal consideration. How do lawyers hope to compensate people for the loss of a life? The fact that they [*Beatriz, Begoña, and Delia*] lived lives that were unintended, ones that shouldn't have been theirs. And it became possible only because of someone's careless mistake. And finally, there was the whole nature-nurture question. Are we more like people with whom we've been raised and are not related to or are we more like people with whom we share genes and been raised apart? So the whole package just had so much in it, questions of universal significance that went beyond this case.

Question: As a mother, I kept wondering while I was reading this book how the moms of the switched-at-birth babies didn't suspect something was wrong. After all, most were told at the time

of the birth that their babies were identical yet when they got them home, the babies were obviously very different looking.

Answer: Keep in mind that the mother in Spain, the mother of Beatriz and Begoña, was told the girls were identical but she was still living under the legacy of the Franco era where people did not question authority. And what mother really questions whether or not a baby is hers? As I write in the book, all throughout human history, women have delivered babies at home so there was never a question whose baby it was but once women started delivering babies in hospitals, beginning in the 1900s but certainly with a big rise in the 1960s, this whole question could have come up but never did because it's not part of the human female repertoire to question if the baby is hers. You are given this baby. Why would you question that it's not yours?

Question: Yet it also tells me something about the mother-child bonding process. We think it's all biological, that we'll instantly know our own children. But bonding doesn't necessarily take that form, does it?

Answer: No, it doesn't. In the [*switched-at-birth*] case in Switzerland where the boys were switched back to their biological families at age seven, and you'd think this is the mother's other identical son, he looks like the boy she has been raising, she should fall in love with him instantly. And she didn't. She had bonded with the other [*non biological*] child. The bonding that forms between mothers and children is really a function of the time and caring that's invested in these children, and the attachments that develop.

Question: You write that there are now seven known cases of identical twins switched at birth. These stories came to light because the twins were mistaken for their co twins. Therefore, does it make you think that there are probably dozens of other non-identical or fraternal twins accidentally switched at birth?

Answer: That's a great question. They estimate 20,000 accidental baby switches occur each year nationwide but virtually all are corrected before the babies leave the hospital. And that's probably the case. But you have to imagine that some are not. So for every incorrect placement of the baby, it means two families go home with the wrong child. It could well be with fraternal twins that they would never discover this because people know that fraternal twins can look completely different. It's possible that this goes on and would never be detected. But I don't want to put fear in parents' hearts. My intention is to alert people to the possibility that this probably occurs in some rare cases. And if you're in a hospital and you suspect you've been given the wrong baby, you have to speak up.

Question: Let's talk specifically about the major focus of your book, mainly about Beatriz, Begoña, Delia. Each suffered greatly

after the truth came out but each felt a loss in a very different way. Can you explain?

Answer: Delia [an identical twin raised as a singleton] suffered because she was raised in a family where everyone was very different from her. What she thought were the usual adolescent tensions that most kids have turned out to be a clash in personalities and abilities. Delia also developed leukemia when she was sixteen and was unable find a suitable bone marrow donor among her family. She had to have a more risky procedure instead. Plus, her biological father died when she was six. She will never have the opportunity to meet him. She was also denied growing up with her identical twin sister and denied being raised by the family that gave birth to her.

Begoña [identical twin raised in biological family as a fraternal twin with her virtual twin, Beatriz] suffered from not knowing her identical twin. She was very worried about her unrelated sister [virtual twin Beatriz] who suffered a great deal. So Begoña was torn between her loyalty to her unrelated sister and this desire to get to know her new sister. Also, the shock of discovering that her life, too, was not what it was intended to be. She was supposed to be an identical twin but she was not.

Beatriz [born a singleton but raised as a fraternal twin in a non biological family] suddenly found herself in a family where she was connected to nobody. She had felt this way from the time since she was 12. She felt different from her sisters. She feared rejection from her family once the mistake had been discovered. She feared she would lose their love. She feared she would lose her twin sister. She also felt caught between the two families. She felt she wasn't up to the standards of her rearing family but she felt she was above her biological family in the terms of sophistication and culture.

Question: I couldn't help but try to "rank" or "quantify" how much each twin has suffered after learning the truth but you write that you believe it's nearly impossible to do that. How so?

Answer: I think you can't. As an outsider we can look objectively and make a list of whom suffered what but how you suffer is not just a function of the objective events, it's the function of your personality and how you deal with things. Therefore, I cannot even come close to rank ordering who I think suffered the most and I wouldn't even try. I think everyone suffered and each in her own way. And everyone's suffering is completely legitimate.

Question: You worked for many years on the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart (MISTRA). In general, how do their stories differ from the switched-at-birth stories you write about in *Someone Else's Twin*?

Answer: Every pair of twins that I studied with MISTRA with the exception of one was not a switched-at-birth twin. All the others were separated due

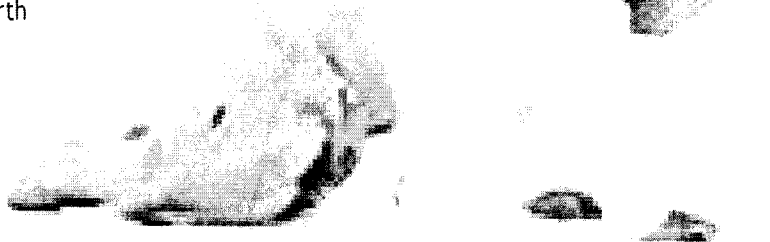
to mothers dying, illegitimate birth, parents who couldn't afford to keep them, and so they were adopted into separate families. And that's more or less how events played out. But when you have a switch, it becomes a whole different scenario because this was a situation that was not intended to happen and [biological] parents did want these children. This was a human mistake causing these twins to be raised apart. So when there's a reunion, it's not a wonderful celebration as it is for most of the [MISTRA] twins we've studied, instead it's a shattering of identities.

Question: In the second half of the book, you write about the problems hospitals face with outdated mother-infant identification. What would you like to see change?

Answer: I really like Dr. Garrido-Lestache's procedure of fingerprinting but as he makes it very clear—and as I hope I made it clear in the book—it has to be done carefully. Fingerprinting is a simple, easy, cheap procedure but it requires training. In Spain they have a biometric sensor which does fingerprints by scanning them and that's a lot easier than using ink pads. Also, some have tried to patent a DNA procedure which is technically feasible but not economically effective at this point. I think we need to develop those further. Those procedures in place would assure good mother-infant identification. We also need to limit the number of patients that are assigned to each nurse. When nurseries get too crowded that's when mistakes can happen.

Question: What do you think we can learn from this tragedy?

Answer: First, if you suspect a medical mistake of any kind, you've got to speak up. You don't want to live your life with these what-if questions. I also think we need to understand what it means to lose a sense of identity. People can have their lives shattered for many reasons when things are suddenly not what they seem to be. For example, supposed you learn you are adopted. That will revise the way you think of yourself, your family, everything about you. And we're so careful with children, to place them in stable, adopted homes because we



want them to have a sense of connection and continuity. But if this should happen to an adult, we think, 'Oh, they're old enough, they have their identities, there's no problem.' But I think the judge on this case misstated things when she said that the damage dated from the time of the discovery onward not retrospectively. Everyone suffered because their lives were completely revised. So I think we have to pay greater attention to events that can happen that can alter one's sense of identity and how people can cope with those.

Question: What are you working on now these days?

Answer: I have a new book coming out in May 2012. It's called, *Born Together—Reared Apart: The Landmark Minnesota Twins Studies*. It's a complete comprehensive overview of the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart. The methods, the findings, the implications, the controversy. It includes pictures, anecdotes, and the science. You name it; it's all in there. ♥



Christina Baglivi Tinglof lives in Southern California and is the mother of three sons, including 15-year-old fraternal twin boys and a 13-year-old singleton. She's also the author of *Parenting School-Age Twins and Multiples*, and *Double Duty*. She blogs at christinabaglivinglof.com and runs the website talk-about-twins.com.

About Nancy L. Segal the author of *Someone Else's Twin*:

Nancy L. Segal, Ph.D. (CA), is a professor in the Department of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton, and the director of the Twin Studies Center, which she founded in 1991. She herself is a twin and an expert on twin research. She is the author of *Indivisible by Two: Lives of Extraordinary Twins* and *Entwined Lives: Twins and What They Tell Us about Human Behavior*, and the senior editor of *Uniting Psychology and Biology: Integrative Perspectives on Human Development*. She is



also an associate editor of *Twin Research and Human Genetics*, the official journal of the International Society for Twin Studies. Dr. Segal's media appearances include *Today*, *Good Morning America*, *20/20*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, the *Martha Stewart Show*, *Discovery Health*, and the *Diane Rehm Show* on NPR. Dr. Segal has been a contributor to TWINS Magazine for many years.

*Nancy L. Segal
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SOMEONE ELSE'S TWIN



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