

## RESEARCH ETHICS

# Life in triplicate

A tale of triplets separated at birth raises red flags and questions about the role of nature and nurture

By Gabrielle Kardon

**H**ow much are we shaped by our genetic makeup, and how much does the environment in which we are raised contribute to our physical appearance, our personalities, and our preferences? The relative importance of nature versus nurture is a fundamental question in biology and is notably difficult to study in humans, due to ethical concerns.

Analyzing identical twins is one way to examine this question, but most twins are raised in a single household, where the effects of nature and nurture are inextricably intertwined. The story of not two, but three, identical brothers separated at birth is the subject of an insightful and disturbing new documentary, *Three Identical Strangers*, that premiered this January at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival.

In 1980, Robert Shafran arrived at Sullivan County Community College in upstate New York as a new freshman and was greeted by unexpected backslaps from fellow students welcoming him back to school. He realized he was being mistaken for a former student, with whom he quickly arranged a meeting.

Indeed, he and Eddy Galland looked exactly the same, but what's more, they shared a birthday and were both adopted, leading the two to conclude that they must be twins. Newspaper headlines and photos of the pair attracted the attention of yet another curly-haired 19-year-old, David Kellman, and the three discovered that they were triplets separated at birth.

A media frenzy ensued—complete with television interviews with Tom Brokaw and Phil Donahue—and a giddy period of discovery began. Not only were the trio identical physically, they shared many specific behaviors: All were wrestlers, had a preference for dating older women, and (apropos of the time) smoked the same brand of cigarettes. The long-lost brothers bonded, joyfully exploring the 1980s New York City party scene together, and even

started a business together—a restaurant aptly named Triplets.

But why were the triplets separated at birth? Their adoption, we learn, was arranged by the preeminent (now defunct) New York-based Louise Wise Adoption Agency, founded in the early 20th century to match Jewish orphans with adoptive families.

In the 1960s, some psychologists believed that separating orphaned twins or triplets afforded a better opportunity for each to forge an independent identity. The triplets, however, were deliberately assigned to particular families as part of a secret study designed to examine the effects of nature versus nurture.

The study, led by child psychoanalyst Peter Neubauer, placed multiple sets of twins and the triplets with families whose

the study and its effects on the triplets' lives are revealed.

Five years in the making, *Three Identical Strangers* deftly interweaves interviews with the triplets, their family members, and the few surviving researchers associated with the research. The film tackles both the questionable underpinnings of the study and the fundamental questions it attempted to address.

Current rules of informed consent would now preclude the existence of such a study, and Wardle implies that the moral and ethical issues of the study were likely of concern to Neubauer, who died in 2008, as well as to the Louise Wise Agency. The irony of a Jewish researcher and a Jewish adoption agency conducting a twin study after the atrocities waged against Jewish people in Nazi Germany is clear and perhaps the reason that Neubauer never published the study and sealed his data in a Yale archive until 2066.

Although the study was clearly unpardonable, its questions are enduring. How much are we the product of genetic inheritance? How does the environment shape who we become? To what extent do we have free will?

## Three Identical Strangers

Tim Wardle,  
director  
RAW, 2018.  
96 minutes.



Eddy Galland (left), David Kellman, and Robert Shafran (right) were placed in separate households as infants.

socioeconomic status, and even family structure, were carefully controlled. The families were aware of neither the other identical siblings nor their participation in the study.

Yearly comprehensive questionnaires and film documentation of the siblings' milestones were couched as standard follow-up studies of adopted children. As the film unfolds, even more sinister details of

The striking divergence of Shafran, Galland, and Kellman in physical appearance after 1980 confirms that genetics control just part of our makeup, but many questions remain unanswered. Winner of a special Sundance jury award for storytelling, *Three Identical Strangers* will stimulate viewers to think about these important issues. ■

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