

Three Identical Strangers: Was the twin separation study ethical?

The documentary (spoiler warning) raises questions about adoption policies and research practices in the 1960s. Much has changed, but there are parallels with how companies use our data today

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Triplets Eddy Galland, David Kellman, and Robert Shafran found each other in 1980 after being raised by separate families

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In *Three Identical Strangers*, the documentary directed by Tim Wardle, 19-year-old Bobby Shafran finds out that he has an identical twin, Eddy, who was raised separately after they were adopted by different families. Shortly afterwards, the pair learn they were triplets, and come together with a third brother, David.

The joyful story of a family reunited later turns sour when they discover that they were unwitting guinea pigs in a study on child development, and the age-old question of [nature versus nurture](#). The film portrays the brothers' anger at Peter Neubauer, a now deceased child psychiatrist who orchestrated the study under a shroud of secrecy and kept the subjects in the dark about their genetic kin.

Was Neubauer's study as unethical as the film suggested? According to psychiatrist Leon Hoffman and linguist Lois Oppenheim, it isn't so clear cut.

Writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Hoffman and Oppenheim say the triplets were not separated for the purposes of the study. Rather, it was the policy of the adoption agency, Louise Wise Services. They were advised by

a prominent child psychiatrist, Viola Bernard, who was not connected to Neubauer or the study.

Bernard believed adopted twins and triplets would have a better chance of thriving if raised independently, without having to compete for their parents' emotional resources. This was typical of the thinking among child development specialists of the time.

Paradoxically, this highlights the need for more research into what is really best for children in these situations, says philosopher Julian Savulescu at the University of Oxford, UK. "People can invent plausible-sounding policies or interventions for human beings, but until you rigorously test them, you don't know if they're doing more harm than good."

Now, US law stipulates that reasonable efforts should be made to place siblings for adoption in the same home, unless a joint placement "would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings". If they are separated, frequent visits or interaction should be made possible.

Hoffman and Oppenheim also say Neubauer should not be blamed for the secretive nature of the study. It was illegal at the time to provide information about biological families to adoptive parents. Although open adoptions are now legal, it is still normal for records of adoptions to be sealed, affording some privacy to parents who give children up.

Neubauer was committed to the children's confidentiality, the article says, and this is why the study forms were sealed for nearly 100 years. The two surviving triplets and another set of twins in the study have successfully appealed the sealed terms, and gained access to some of the study materials.

"The study was ethically defensible by the standards of its time," Hoffman and Oppenheim write, though they acknowledge that such a defence will not be satisfactory to the families who live with the study's legacy.

By today's standards, it's clearly wrong not to tell people if they are part of a research study, says Savulescu. And yet it still happens on a huge scale when companies like Google and Facebook use our data to maximise profit. "There is sham consent but that kind of research is going on today without adequate transparency about what's going on or an appropriate level of control," says Savulescu.

In medical research, ethical oversight now is much more rigorous – so much so that it hampers research and obstructs the development of treatments that will make people's lives better, Savulescu says. "My own view is that we should look at new procedures like blockchain that enable greater use of data while maintaining transparency, accountability and control."