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TITLE: WATCHING THE DOCUMENTARY FILM "THREE IDENTICAL STRANGERS"

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Abstract

"Three Identical Strangers" (2018) is a sensational documentary film telling a "bizarre" story of American triplets – Edward Galland, David Kellman and Robert Shafran – who were born on July 12, 1961 by an unmarried young mother who gave them up for adoption. All of them were adopted as six-month-old babies by separate families. All of them grew up unaware that they were born as a quadruplet, and that their fourth brother died at birth. The film tells us that neither the boys nor their adoptive parents were informed that all of them were the part of a secret twin study experiment conducted by a child psychiatrist Peter Bela Neubauer (1913-2008).

This paper attempts to cast light on interesting aspects of both research ethics and prenatal psychology.

Keywords

Film review, three identical strangers, Edward Galland, David Kellman, Robert Shafran, separation at birth, Peter Bela Neubauer, suicide, prenatal psychology, birth, triplets, celestial twins

Introduction

"Three Identical Strangers" (2018) is a sensational documentary film telling a "bizarre" story of American triplets – Edward Galland, David Kellman and Robert Shafran – who were born on July 12, 1961 by an unmarried young mother who gave them up for adoption. All of them were adopted as six-month-old babies by separate families. All of them grew up unaware that actually they were born as quadruplets, and that their fourth brother died at birth. The film tells us that neither the boys nor their adoptive parents were informed that all of them were the part of a secret twin study experiment conducted by a child psychiatrist Peter Bela Neubauer (1913-2008). Although they were intentionally separated at birth, their destinies brought them by series of "incredible chances" to meet each other and to reunite at the age of 19. Following this "improbable" meeting, the three of them for a moment became a kind of celebrities. Unfortunately, after a short period

of euphoria, the story of this trio had another tragic twist: in 1995 Eddy Galland committed suicide and the two remaining siblings decided to separate their lives. The film brings again the remaining twins together and asks serious questions about personal responsibilities of the psychological researchers as well as old questions about nature, nurture and the meaning of free choices.

The exact number of the cases analyzed in this Neubauer's long-term experiment is not known, but it is supposed that between 1960 and 1980, at least six sets of deliberately separated identical siblings were studied. Unfortunately, the full records and the results of this experiment remain concealed even today. The very sad and disturbing fact is that besides Edward Galland, eventually at least two of the other separated siblings, apparently committed suicide [1]. Much is written about the controversial ethical aspects of this experiment. Some of the authors blame Neubauer for his "cruel" experimentation, while others remind us that the past cannot be judged by the current moral standards. Neubauer's apologists add that in the sixties, when our understanding of the babies' true needs was still very limited, the secret separation of twins could be done "for their own good."

As to the experiment itself, paradoxically, whereas the similarities between the triplets are presented in the film as "striking" and "amazing," the results of the experiment are treated as "inconclusive."

I watched this film with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I am glad, because this documentary story confirms and illustrates the Effect of Celestial Twins (ECT), according to which "celestial twins in general " (i.e. people who share the same birth date) and identical or fraternal twins in particular tend to experience seemingly non-causal synchronic correlation between their life narratives throughout the entire span of their existence [2-5]. It means that what is seen by the film-makers as a "bizarre net of coincidences," in the light of the ECT is just a manifestation of a universal law.

On the other hand, I am very disappointed because the creators of this film have focused on "sensational" and "shocking" aspects, totally neglecting all the important discoveries in the twins studies reported during the last 120 years since the first publications of Sir Galton. It is almost unbelievable that they are still unaware of all the important developments discussed by many researchers from different countries [6-10]!

In *Celestial Twins* and in my essay written especially for Centenary Anthology *Prenatal Psychology 100 Years*, I have discussed many biographical cases illustrating the importance of the temporological factor of birth (i.e. the factor of birth date, the so-called "Theta-factor") in personality formation [2,3]. Here I shall briefly outline only the most important practical findings of this research. Yet first, it is most important for me to explain over and over again, why in my own studies of celestial twins, I have avoided any experimentation with living persons. Two main reasons for this are my belief in "free will" and my deep respect to the Hippocratic Oath "first, do no harm." Modern medicine began with the study of anatomy. Similarly, I came to the conclusion that the only way to learn the ECT properly is to start learning it at the dissecting table of the anatomy of destiny:

Comparing destinies of well-known deceased people, on one hand, eliminates the argument that these people did not want to develop their abilities (they had at least developed their ability to become well-known), and on the other hand, eliminates as much as possible the investigator's subjective judgment of their achievements. An additional, but not less important reason for working with the life stories of famous deceased celestial twins, is my belief that human life is too delicate and sacred a subject to be dealt with without prior scientific research and serious discussion. [2, p. 74]

Analyzing the film "Three Identical Strangers" in light of the ECT, we may at first wonder: "Do we live in a "chancy, chancy, chancy world?" The *Celestial Twins* study rejects the idea of such an

improbable universe and proposes instead a hypothesis that the Theta-factor plays an important role in shaping our personalities and life-paths.

The systematic studies of well-known deceased celestial twins, which began more than 25 years ago, demonstrated that though we perceive ourselves to be discrete and unique entities, there is (under certain conditions) an isomorphic matching between the biographical data of members in each and every group of celestial twins. For example, in 1913 two pioneer works concerning isotopes were reported simultaneously in different sections of *British Society*: one was written by Frederick Soddy, another by Francis Aston. Nobody seems to recognize what an incredible coincidence is that these Nobel Prize Winners in Chemistry and Atomic Age Pioneers were celestial twins. The list of such examples of isomorphism between the celestial twins may become the same size as the book *Celestial Twins* itself [2]. Moreover, it was found that the meetings of celestial twins reared apart were not rare, and such occasions led usually to release of extremely strong feelings. These feelings were of dual nature including love and care, envy and fear.

Methodologically, the ECT studies relate to an interdisciplinary field of science – the study of twins – founded by Sir Francis Galton [6]. Galton suggested that twins should not be considered just a source of wonder and fascination, as they had been since the beginning of recorded history, but rather a subject for scientific study. He considered twins "a kind of natural experiment" which permits us to distinguish between the influences of heredity (nature) and environment (nurture). His twin method led him to the conclusion that the similarities between identical twins can be explained by identical genes.

Although today there is no precise definition of "twinning bond," nobody denies its existence. This strong emotional or even telepathic bond is described in research of identical twins reared apart. The relationship between such twins is usually much more intense than that between unrelated people. "They may share a closeness that would be hard to match in most other relationships, or they may compete with each other in a struggle to be first" [2, p. 52].

However, genetics alone cannot explain the observed similarities between different-sex or fraternal twins (those twins who do not share identical genes) [8, 9]. Moreover, in 1981 S. Farber reported that in a series of different studies of identical twins reared apart, the scientists came to a paradoxical conclusion:

"The more separated the twins, the more similar they appear to be on personality tests. ... Twins with no contact were more frequently alike than twins with ample opportunity to 'identify' with each other." [6, p. 271]

Eventually one of the most surprising recent discoveries in this field is that the non-genetic factors that have the greatest impact on shaping our lives are **not related** to the way our parents raise us [7, 8].

Celestial Twins study suggests that just as biological twins reared apart are regarded as the natural experiment for the separation of genetic and educational factors, celestial twins may be seen as the natural experiment for differentiation between the genetic and Theta-factor (temporal) influences. As a result, the present approach suggests that both identical and fraternal twins represent a particular case of celestial twinship. If so, similarity between biological twins is caused not only by their genes, but also by their temporal Theta-factor.

From the theoretical point of view, the ECT belongs to a vast class of general laws of synchronicity, first described by W. Pauli and C. G. Jung [11]. Today the synchronicity remains one of the most intriguing scientific phenomena. Thus, S. Strogatz wrote:

"What is breathtaking about the phenomenon of synchronicity is that it occurs at every scale of nature, from the subatomic to the cosmic. It is one of the most pervasive phenomena in nature, but all the same time one of the most mysterious from a theoretical perspective" [12].

From the practical point of view, the ECT studies suggest that even though we cannot predict the details, we might discover the existence of the universal laws that govern the overall dynamics of complex highly organized systems, including personal lives [5]. To mention just one striking example, the celestially coupled Nancy Astor and her husband Waldorf Aster, who never had shared the same maternal womb, were nevertheless very close to the description of twins with unit identity [2, p. 115] It means that Theta-factor might be at least as mighty a factor in our life as a genetic blueprint.

Speaking particularly about abandoned babies, the joined stories of the most powerful and infamous celestial twins Herman Goering and Alfred Rosenberg might provide valuable insights into the laws of cooperation, as well as into the roots of violence. The life dramas of both these celestial twins began to unfold with an amazing resemblance when they were just six weeks old babies:

"Alfred's mother died when he was less than two months old; Hermann's mother left him when he was just six weeks old. Although the causes were different, the results were similar for the newborns: both looked about themselves at an empty, barren world." [2, p. 15]

Today it seems almost a banality that the traumatic experience of maternal deprivation as a baby may lead to the self-destructive or violent behavior [13]. A study of orphaned children, *Parental Loss and Achievement*, suggests that the reaction of rage as a result of loss of parents at a young age may be later transformed into either outstanding accomplishment or outstanding antisocial behaviour [14]. Perhaps, that is the reason that the Biblical Prophets taught us about the urgent need to take a special loving care of orphans.

Unfortunately, the triplets from the film were abandoned by both their parents and therefore belonged to the group of the highest risk of developing self-alienation. In addition, they were born in the Sign of Cancer, which is traditionally one of the most emotional and sensitive Signs. In *Celestial Twins* the archetypal story of Cancer is describing the dramatic lives of the writer Ernest Hemingway and the poet Hart Crane, both of whom suffered from self-destructive behaviour and eventually committed suicide. The joined story of these emotionally gifted celestial twins shows that a tough style of parenting is very dangerous to such individuals and may become a source of frustration in adulthood. Similarly, the film shows that the adoptive father of Edward Galland feels himself at least partly responsible for his son's suicide because of the differences in their personalities and his strict style of parenting. All these stories – as sad as they are – nevertheless give us a new hope that understanding of the special needs of emotionally gifted children may help to prevent future suicides.

In conclusion, is it so strange to meet three identical strangers? The answer is **NO**, even when they are not the identical triplets. One may see it, for example, in a collection of photos taken by Francois Brunelle – a Montreal photographer of people whose resemblance to each other is striking. Yet does it mean that such people are doomed or fated to follow exactly the same life-paths? The answer is also negative. The suggestion of the existence of general laws of Theta-factor does not imply that either our times or our genes and nurturing dictate our destiny without any possible choices. On the contrary, multiple examples from the lives of the celestial twins or trios demonstrate that instead of blaming anybody, each adult must acknowledge his/her own responsibility for his/her unique life, making right choices and trying to avoid wrong ones. Among the most important guiding rules for making our choices I would like to mention here just one: for their own good, people are encouraged to learn that the quality of their love-making will be prolonged in the lives of their children. Therefore, we are invited to learn how to conceive our children in love, and then to deliver and nurture them with love and respect to their specific times, timings, needs and potentials.

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