
'It's Good to be Different': Parent and Child Negotiations of 'Twin' Identity

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Research on twins has tended to focus around the question of heredity/environment. As part of this, attention has been paid to how twins' family environments impact upon them. By examining twinship as a social identity, this article considers the social experience of twinship as it is framed by parent-child relations and also actively shaped by twins themselves. Sameness constitutes one central defining component of 'twin' identity within Western societies. In preparing their twins' bodies for public presentation, parents play a key role in communicating twin identity on their children's behalf. However, children also construct and convey their own identities through presenting their bodies in certain ways. Drawing on findings from a small-scale qualitative study of twinship, this article examines how twin identity is created, modified and reproduced by parents and child twins. It highlights the active role that twins take in constructing their own identities and in shaping the 'twin situation'.

Ever since the 'twin method' was established, scientific research has employed identical and nonidentical twins as methodological tools for ascertaining the relative influences of nature and nurture. As part of this, research has examined how twins are affected by the social environments they grow up in. Parents have been identified as playing a key role in this respect. Twins may have to share the attention of their parents (Pulkkinen et al., 2003), be encouraged to act the same (Koch, 1966) or be referred to as a pair (Kozlak, 1978). All these things make the social situation of being a twin 'unique' and may influence twins' behaviour. For example, Koch suggested that identical twins may develop close relationships with each other because they are expected to be close and may be given more areas of common experience. Similarly, Kozlak (1978, p. 115) noted that since twins are 'dressed alike and possess physical similarities, [they] learn to behave as twins and identify with each other'.

Accounts of twin socialization are important in helping us to understand how twins' social experiences may be structured by parents; however, they only provide one part of the picture. We also need to take account of the contributions that child twins make to shaping their own and each other's lives and,

more specifically, their identities. This requires that we listen to twins' own perspectives on what it is like to be a twin. Ethnographic accounts of children's social worlds have shown children to be active in creating and shaping their own social experiences and identities (e.g., James, 1993; Mayall, 1994; Punch, 2004). Indeed, key thinkers writing within the field of 'childhood studies' have criticized traditional models of socialization for failing to take account of children as competent social actors (James & Prout, 1996; Prout & James, 1997).

In order to provide a broader understanding of twins' social worlds, we need to take account of how these worlds are structured *by* and *for* twins. This article begins this task by examining how parents and child twins negotiate 'twin' identity through dress. Importantly, twin identity is here conceptualized as a *social* identity (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins conceptualizes social identity as a relational process: all identities are the result of an ongoing *synthesis* of (internal) self-definition and (external) definitions of oneself offered by others:

Identity is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). The outcome of agreement and disagreement, at least in principle always negotiable, identity is not fixed (Jenkins, 2004, p. 5).

Identity therefore emerges as we define ourselves alongside and against others and have these definitions validated or rejected by others. Capturing a sense of *process*, this 'internal-external dialectic' (Jenkins, 2004) helps to situate both parents and child twins as social actors who each have a contribution to make in constructing, performing, resisting and reforming twin identity. It is against this backdrop that this article builds towards providing a more 'active perspective' (Stewart, 2000b, p. 723) on twinship — that is, one which embraces the performative work done by twins themselves.

Received 28 July, 2005; accepted 19 September, 2005.

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Dress — here discussed in terms of clothes — constitutes one important ‘resource’ used by parents and twins to construct identity. As a cultural tool, it contributes to bringing meaning to the body (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998). For instance, the body may be given the finishing touches through dress and aspects of the physical body may be disguised, hidden or accentuated. Importantly, dress helps to signify how we are similar and different to others and therefore also constitutes one medium through which we can display our sense of belonging and distinction (Barnes & Eicher, 1992). Within the ‘internal–external dialectic’ (Jenkins, 2004) dress may be used to present an outward presentation of self whilst also injecting social meanings into our internal sense of who we are. Hence dress is both an embodied practice and part of our embodied experience of who we are and are not (Hansen, 2004).

Methodology and Methods

Epistemological Standpoint

This article reports data from a small-scale qualitative study. A ‘constructivist’ (Schwandt, 1998) epistemological standpoint was adopted to facilitate an examination of the meanings and experiences of social actors, the ways in which they construct their own lived realities (Berger & Luckman, 1967) and, in particular, their identities.

Participants

The study utilized a ‘purposive sampling’ technique (Arber, 1993) in order to maximize theoretical relevance. Since the main aim of the study was to explore how twins negotiated their identities as they moved through the life course, child twins (aged under 18) and adult twins (aged over 18) were invited to participate. Twins were accessed through friends, local adverts and a local twins club affiliated to the Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA). However, difficulties locating twins meant that all child or adult twins who indicated that they were willing to participate were invited into the study. The end sample of twins was mainly composed of older children and young adults, this included 10 (individual) older-child twins (aged 13 to 17), 2 young-child twins (aged 8), 7 young adults (aged 20 to 24) and 2 adults aged over 30 (see Table 1).

Overall, only two twins were sure that they were identical. Five twins (including four children) were unsure of their zygosity, but thought that they were more likely to be identical¹ and 14 twins (two thirds of the sample) were nonidentical. Most of these non-identical twins were same-sexed twins with only five individual twins (two dyads and one other) being different-sexed twins.² In total, the sample of twins contained 9 males and 12 females. Being based on a small sample of (mainly nonidentical) twins, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the broader population of twins in Britain or elsewhere.

Table 1
Summary of the Twin Participants and Their Parents

Twins	Age	Zygosity	Parent/s
Ash	8	Nonidentical	Clare
Harry	8		Anthony
Ian	13	Unsure	
Peter	13		
Emma	13	Unsure	Sue
Ruth	13		Stewart
Hannah	15	Nonidentical	Caroline (also an adult lone twin)
Charlotte	15		
Adam	16	Nonidentical	Janet
Olivia	16		David
Liam	17	Nonidentical	Allison
Dan	17		Mike
Sally	20	Nonidentical	
Rachel	20		
Justin	22	Nonidentical	
Rebecca	23	Identical	Pam
Andrea	23		Malcolm
Anne	24	Nonidentical	Cheryl
Brian	24		Jonathan
Caroline	32	Unsure	
Jennifer	36	Nonidentical	
—	—	—	Lindsey (adopting nonidentical twins aged 4)*
—	—	—	Jenny (mother of nonidentical twins aged 3)*

Note: Dashes indicate that the twins did not take part in the study.

In order to gain some insight into how twin identity is constructed between social actors, other family members were also invited to participate. Amongst other things, this could help to explore how much voice twins have in constructing and asserting their own identities and, related to this, how everyday parenting practices might structure twins’ childhoods. Hence, alongside the twins, 15 (individual) parents also took part (see Table 1). Whilst most of these were parents to twins who were participating in the study, two parents took part without their twins. In addition, five siblings of twins also took part (all of whom were siblings to twins taking part in the study).

This article primarily examines the accounts given by the child twins and parents, citing adult twins’ recollections of their own childhoods to indicate areas of common experience. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to preserve the anonymity of the participants whilst potentially giving them access to their own accounts.

Obtaining Informed Consent

Information leaflets were distributed to parents and children. Introductory meetings were also offered to all participants and held with most of the children and

their parents. During these meetings we discussed any problems and enquiries they had. Although initial consent was gained at this stage, this was repeatedly checked throughout the research.

Methods

As the intention was to learn from the participants, topics were identified (e.g., bedroom space, classes at school and hobbies and interests) but left open for discussion. Hence, semistructured interviews were utilized to allow respondents to explain their opinions in their own words and provide an opportunity for the research to take new directions. However, asking similar sorts of questions (e.g., do you have your own room or do you share a room? Are you in the same or different classes as your twin?) aided comparisons between the different accounts. Importantly, this method of data collection allowed for some negotiation of intergenerational power differences (Mayall, 2002; O'Kane, 2000). For instance, through our conversations, the twins and the author were able to establish various aspects of commonality (such as us all being twins and having knowledge of the local area) which helped to build rapport.

Twins were interviewed together and apart, to allow them the opportunity to talk about more sensitive issues in private whilst still being able to examine how they interacted with each other.³ Interviewing them together helped to put them at ease. As Mayall (2000) and Hood et al. (1996) have pointed out, interviewing children in pairs, or groups, can help children to feel more confident in the presence of the researcher.

A series of participatory techniques — including drawings, vignettes and a self-return task — were also utilized to maintain the children's interest (Hill et al., 1996; Mauthner, 1997) and encourage them to draw on the talents they possessed to relay their experiences. With their permission, conversations were tape recorded and activity work built into the analysis.

Data were analyzed inductively, generating descriptive and analytical (abstract) codes. Comparisons were made within and among code groups in order to explore the nature of different analytical themes and the links between them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Results

Parents' Decisions About Dress

Parents of twins talked of their strategies for bringing up their twins, and thus identified themselves as key socializing agents. Importantly, mothers in particular took a lead role in deciding how to dress their children and were often in charge of choosing, purchasing or making their children's clothes. Hence, as Mayall (2002, p. 41) notes, parent-child relations are also gendered relations.

Young children were commonly dressed in identical or similar-looking outfits. For instance, Allison, Clare and Caroline (mothers of twins) explained that they began to dress their same-sexed nonidentical twins in identical clothes when they were babies; Clare

and Caroline continued to dress their children in identical clothes as they grew older. In slight contrast, parents of identical twins incorporated elements of 'difference' within these expressions of 'sameness'. Thus, Sue and Pam both explained how they had dressed their children in different coloured (albeit the same type) outfits. Similarly, Jenny, mother to different-sexed twins also explained how she had chosen to 'have one in pink and one in blue' — thereby signaling the sex differences that may not be directly obvious. However, this practice was not *always* undertaken by the parents of different-sexed twins. For instance, Jonathan (father to different-sexed twins) explained that he and his wife did dress their twins 'alike up to about the age of 2½ years'.

When these different-sexed children become toddlers, gender difference has to be acknowledged. Thus Janet said, 'you can't dress them the same anyway because they are a boy and a girl' and, similarly, Jenny explained 'obviously you can't put them in the same outfits'. Hence Jenny said she bought 'boy and girl versions of the same thing' (e.g., orange cord dungarees and an orange cord pinafore dress) thus modifying the dominant stereotype of identical twinning by incorporating expressions of gender difference.

Growing up: Choice and Difference

The various presentations and modifications of 'twinship' did not last indefinitely. On the contrary, parents foresaw a time when their children would dress differently:

Clare: I just like to see 'em in [the], same clothes. I suppose as they get older they will change.

For most parents, this transition from sameness to difference only came/would come if and when children actively objected to being dressed the same — as Clare said, 'until they say, "oh I'm not wearing what he's wearing", I'll continue to do it'. Implicit in this statement is the assumption that, at present, her children (aged 8) are too young to have opinions — an assumption that is given more explicit voicing by Jenny (mother of 3-year-old twins):

Jenny: When they're older, they'll be able to make more choices about what they want to wear. I would never ever say, 'oh you're wearing this' or try to dress them the same if they weren't interested.

However, in choosing to dress their children the same, Jenny and Clare both assume that their children would 'be interested' or would have agreed with their choice. Children may only opt out of this 'agreement' and, from the parents' perspective, this active objection can only take place when their children are old enough to make their own choices and act as autonomous individuals.

Twins' Bodily Presentations of Their Own and Each Other's Identities

Although the youngest twins (aged 8) had little power over determining what to wear, they still took an active role in constructing their own identities.

Arriving to interview nonidentical twins Ash and Harry (aged 8), the author noticed that they were dressed in identical outfits. Within the interview context, Ash and Harry both drew the author's attention to this dimension of their sameness:

Ash: Yeah. You can hardly tell our clothes, that they're different. [*They line themselves up against each other — side by side.*]

Hence, although their mother may have played a large part in presenting their bodies as 'identical' through dressing them in identical clothes, by positioning their bodies side-by-side in physical space, and using their bodies to encourage the author to view their sameness, Ash and Harry furthered this representation of twinness.

In contrast to these young twins, the accounts provided by the older children in the study point to the negative value attributed to such expressions of sameness in late childhood:

Charlotte: I didn't mind [being dressed the same] when I was little, but I wouldn't like to be dressed the same now I'm older.

Ian: I don't like looking the same as another person as well though.

Peter: No it's good to be different.

In Peter's words, 'it's good to be different'. Indeed, some of these twins resisted dominant discourses of twin sameness by drawing a distinction between how they presented their own bodies and other people's expectations of them as twins:

Kate: Do you think that people have ideas about what a twin is?

Emma: People think we dress the same, you act the same, but we don't!

Ruth: No!

Emma: People think we dress the same, you act the same, but we don't!

Having already been given the right by parents to choose how to dress, these older child twins commonly chose to dress differently.

However, since some of these older child twins had clothes that were the same, this display of difference had to be carefully managed. Hence, Ian explained how he and his brother wore these identical items of clothing at different times and Charlotte told how she would 'force her [sister] to change' if she wore the same clothes as her. In shaping their own and each other's bodily appearance, twins try to give a particular impression of themselves to others. For example, Ian explained how he thought that he and his twin brother would be treated as a 'unit' if they dressed the 'same':

Kate: Why do you choose not to wear the same clothes at the same time?

Pete: Because I think people treat you more like one person.

Andrea (aged 23) recollected how she tried to avoid being ridiculed by her peers:

Andrea: I wouldn't want to wear [the same clothes] at the same time [as Rebecca] 'cos people [would say] like, 'oh look at them two, idiots!'

Instigators and Followers

Some twins, however, took a more active role in instigating this transition towards difference.

Peter: I used to say, let's dress the same 'cos I always wanted to, I don't know, to fool somebody, or something. I quite liked it. But then Ian used to say no, and then I thought, 'no' [...]

Similarly, Sally (aged 20) remembered:

Sally: We got dressed [the same] until we were about ... ooo god ... we started kind of rebelling against that. Rachel specifically again ... she's kind of the one who rebelled against it a bit more than I did.

Thus although these twins may dress differently, they may have chosen to retain more expressions of similarity had their twin allowed it.

Dressing the Same as Older Children and Adults

Although these accounts suggest that twins tend to dress differently as they get older, some older children and adults explained how they sometimes did wear similar clothes:

Ruth: We wear the same stuff but [in a] different colour.

Kate: What now?

Emma: Yeah different colour.

Andrea: Sometimes I'll go out in a top and trousers that are similar like same colours but different. And we'd laugh because it's like we're just nipping to pub or something.

This suggests that the transition from 'similarity' to 'difference' may not be a linear movement. Twins do not simply move from dressing the same/similar to dressing differently as they get older and become adults. On the contrary, twins may move back and forth between these points to try to variously take up and exit their identities as twins.

The Significance of Bodily Corporeality

Although twins tried to manage their identities though dress, however, the corporeality of the body also placed limitations on this creativity. Some twins found it more difficult than others to be recognized as twins by their peers. Dan explained that 'it's because we're not [identical] they don't associate us with being twins'. Hannah said they were not known as twins but 'just known as sisters because we look totally different from each other'. Different-sexed twins may find it even more difficult to be 'spotted' as twins. As Adam told me,

Adam: [...] [people] usually think of twins as a boy and a boy or a girl and a girl. [...]

Hence, in order to communicate their status as twins, Adam and Olivia and Charlotte and Hannah told people at school that they were twins. Conversely, those twins who looked very alike may find it more difficult to escape being publicly known as twins. Thus, even though Emma and Ruth said that they did not introduce themselves to others at school as twins, Ruth explained that:

Ruth: [...] When [people at school are] talking about us both they call us 'twins' instead of Ruth and Emma.

Hence, these twins' bodies may communicate twin identity on their behalf causing other people to refer to them as twins.

Discussion

Parents' Decision Making Power

Parent-child relations provide one social context within which twins' identities are worked out. The findings from this study suggest that whilst adults take control over their children's bodies (through deciding how to dress them) when they are babies and children, this is later relaxed in line with a conceptualization of the child's *growing* autonomy: their ability to make self-determined choices and to take action to shape their own lives. This perspective shares much with traditional theorizing within development psychology which has conceptualized the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of the child's progression through a series of fixed stages, the end point of which is 'mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence' (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p. 13). The overlap between these accounts suggests that the traditional view from developmental psychology informs our common-sense understandings of how children 'grow up' in the family (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998). Having reached this end point in development, adults have power and control over these (child) future becomings. This 'intergenerational contract' (Mayall, 1994) therefore positions children and adults as unequal partners. As Alanen notes, parents are 'normally in command of more material, social and other resources than children, and thus in a more powerful position to shape the everyday conditions of child-life' (1998, p. 3). However, within these ideologies of family life, it is the mother in particular who is more intensely identified as having direct responsibility for the care, growth and behaviour of their offspring (Alanen, 1998; Valentine, 1997).

The Enabling and Constraining Context of Parental Power

All the parents in this study initially chose to fashion their children's bodies in ways that would help to signify twinship. However, they did utilize and reproduce discourses of twinship to different extents revealing the importance of gender identity and expressions of individuality. Same-sex nonidentical twins may remain dressed in identical outfits in childhood because there is no sex difference to signal through gendered clothing.

No compromise has to be made; these twins can be dressed as twins. Hence Ash and Harry, aged 8, still appear in identical outfits. In contrast, this period of identicalness may be cut short for different-sex twins whose emergent gendered identities are seen to demand acknowledgment past babyhood. However, the ideal of twin sameness may be modified rather than abandoned. Being most at risk of conveying a lack of potential for individuality — a cultural ideal which children should *grow* towards — identical twins are dressed in different coloured outfits to create some expression of uniqueness amidst sameness.

Although parents saw a time when their children would be given the right to choose how to dress, assumptions about the child's ability to make autonomous decisions may help to set limits on how far younger twins can negotiate their identities through dress and avoid being 'seen' by others as twins. By contrast, older children may have a greater degree of agency in presenting their own bodies and also in renegotiating the identities that have already been initially drawn out by their parents.

Children Socializing and Training Others

As other ethnographic studies have also shown (James, 1993; Valentine, 2000), the findings from this study demonstrate that children take an active role in trying to shape other people's perceptions of them. This included the author as a researcher, people with whom they interacted on a day-to-day basis, and each other. If twins want to be seen as twins they demand the co-operation of their fellow twin. Similarly, if twins are to receive external validation for their status as individuals, they must work together to fashion their bodies as different. Indeed, it is vital that twins monitor their own and each other's bodies since they cannot be different if they choose to be different in the same ways! This means working out and teaching each other where these distinctions lie and how they should be expressed through dress, ensuring that there is no overlap in appearance. Yet although twins must work together, this does not necessarily mean that each twin will have an equal say in fashioning their own and their fellow twin's body. Instigators may push for change and direct the performance of individuality. This is important because it shows that power relations exist between the twins themselves as well as between twins and their parents. A second constraint is the physical body itself: twins cannot necessarily instantly become anything or anyone they choose to be; rather the very fleshiness of their bodies may limit the extent to which they can 'pass' as twins or nontwins. This study therefore provides some empirical evidence for Stewart's (2000a, p. 157) suggestion that twins who look identical may find it easier to present a convincing performance of twinship.

Life Course Position and the Stigma of Sameness

Whilst Stewart's sociological account of twinship (Stewart, 2000a, 2000b) provides a useful backdrop for thinking about twinship as a social phenomenon,

without the empirical accounts of twins' social lives, we get less sense of how the performance of twinship is lived and managed. Having established that children take a central role in constructing and performing their own identities, this final part of the discussion examines the backdrop against which some of these decisions are made. Of central importance here is the potential for twinship to act as a social stigma (Goffman, 1963). Stewart certainly suggests that social stigma may cause some twins to play down their status as twins. The findings from my study suggest that an analysis of twinship as a social stigma needs to examine dominant constructions of twinship alongside the normative definitions of 'childhood' and 'adulthood' — the generational backdrop against which child twins live out their lives. In line with the predominance of developmental notions of child growth, children are commonly deemed to develop as independent and unique individuals. Babies and young children may therefore attract positive public (adult) attention for looking the same because they are firmly positioned within the social institution of childhood. However, expected to be moving towards adulthood, older children may be stigmatized for looking the same. One parenting guide for parents of twins summarizes this change in perspective:

Identically dressed babies are delightful, five-year-old look alike[s] cute, but adolescents who dress the same are slightly disturbing. Adults are suspected of doing it only for fun, and the elderly couple who still dress alike are regarded as slightly sad (Rosambeau, 1987, p. 164).

A similar story emerges through studies of children's peer groups. James (1993) found that whilst for young children, sameness may be a means of establishing a sense of belonging, expressions of individuality take on increasing importance as children learn the rules of being a successful older child.

However, whilst we may not want these older twins to look the same because they contravene our cultural valuing of individuality and normative definitions of adult personhood, we may still want them to be close. Through their closeness twins remind us of our human capacity to develop close emotional ties — to understand others and to be understood. As Farmer puts it, 'the unease, the fascination, the longing is common to us all' (Farmer, 1996, p. 331). Indeed, some twins may find the extraordinariness of twin identity difficult to leave behind. Hence they may tell others they are twins, or dress alike (e.g., matching clothes in different colours). The latter may be an attempt to balance expressions of individuality alongside twinship; an effort to show others they are twins (and hopefully claim some status for being 'special') whilst also retaining status as individuals. However, despite employing this strategy, identical-looking twins Emma and Ruth (aged 13) may now look so alike that they are at risk of being stigmatized as 'children' or, in Andrea's words, 'idiots'.

Parents and child twins both have a role to play in constructing twin identity and in shaping the social context that surrounds twins. Whilst parents may 'set the stage' for twins' presentations of self, twins actively engage in the business of 'identity work' and utilize each other to try to manage other people's perceptions of them, to avoid social stigma and to bring off a convincing performance of who they are.

Although there now seems to be a growing interest in twins' social worlds, more research needs to focus on twinship as a social phenomenon, taking account of the important role that twins themselves take in shaping their own life trajectories and the 'twin situation' itself.

Endnotes

- 1 Because this article is concerned with examining the appearance of the body and these four child twins looked very alike, they will be referred to as 'identical-looking twins'. This captures a sense of their physical similarity as well as their lack of certainty about their zygosity status.
- 2 The term 'different-sexed' is preferred over 'opposite-sex' and 'boy-girl twins'. Whilst the notion of 'opposite-sex twins' seems to reinforce assumptions of gender duality, the notion of 'boy-girl twins' implies that each of these twins embody both sexes (thereby reinforcing notions that twins constitute one person or one unit).
- 3 This decision also potentially allows for an examination of whether or not their responses differed when being apart. This was, however, rarely the case and possibly points to the ways in which the accounts given in the absence of their twin sibling were influenced by the accounts they initially constructed together. Indeed, this is a difficulty that emerges in relation to deciding to interview twins together before interviewing each of them alone.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the participants of this study for devoting your time and sharing your stories. Thanks to TAMBA for helping the author access some of these twins. This study was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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