

Double Trouble: An Autoethnography on the Complexities of Being a Twin

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As I sit down for lunch in my high school cafeteria, worn down book bag on my left and palpable emptiness unbeknownst to me on my right, one of my friends plops down across the table, just in time to ask the dreaded question that follows me around relentlessly, like a predator stalking its prey, waiting for complete solitude before the inevitable kill.

“Hey! ... Where’s Gwyneth?”

The question lingers for a second as I try to think where she might be, but I quickly come to the conclusion that I do not know nor do I particularly care. However, apathy is not the first, second, or even tenth emotion at play here. The feeling this question evokes stems from the implications and assumptions buried underneath this essentially innocuous question, finding their way to the back of my mind as I fall asleep, wondering if anyone really sees me as just that--myself. When I am unlinked from my twin sister, am I enough? Even next to her the question still remains, emboldens even; am I enough and, more importantly, am I better? When we meet new people and they get to know the both of us, who comes out on top of whatever silent comparisons are being tossed our way? These thoughts build themselves like parallel train tracks in both of your minds, seemingly undetachable from the strong foundation formed off of a lifetime comparisons and unspoken competition. Year after year, the question re-shapes, finding new ways of presenting itself, but it never alters in meaning. The underlying assumptions lurk and build and attach themselves to my person, reminding me that I am not one, but rather half of a whole, or at least that is how I am viewed in the eyes of my peers. My twin sister and I, for all our possible rifts and tensions, have a constant to which we are both eternally grateful and frustrated. In more ways than it is broken, the bond between my sister and I is strengthened through the shared

experience that comes with existing directly beside someone and the ways in which this affects the world's interactions with us. For better or for worse, being a twin is one of my defining characteristics and I would not wish to live in a world without my twin. However, there is a certain outside fascination around twins that is almost always coupled with a level of ignorance. It is through this ignorance and inability to comprehend just how different being a twin is, that many twins are left feeling frustrated, spiteful, inadequate, and misjudged. Research and studies into the development, personality, comparisons, and bonds between twins show a strong correlation between the harmful nature of twin groupings, comparisons, and judgements. Through an increased knowledge and awareness, the more harmful side effects that accompany twins can be greatly diminished and allows for healthier bonds between these special types of siblings.

### **Childhood Development as a Twin and Being Grouped Together**

Twins, or any multiples for that matter, experience life and develop through childhood in a way that is unique to their singleton counterparts. While many aspects of childhood and personality development often remain similar across the board, twins are different in that there is always someone experiencing everything along side of them and this changes everything in both development and dynamic. This dynamic not only alters the twin and co-twin, but also parents of twins and the different type of role they need to take on as opposed to the one they would with a non-twin child. There is a valid argument to be made on whether the childhood development of twins has a higher complexity than singletons, however, there has been no solid research or evidence on this topic yet (Klein, 2003, 2012). Being that twins are children of the same age who

will likely be raised in the same environment and become products of such, research has proven that parent/twin relationships need to take special account into differentiation and individuality in order for healthy relationships among all family members to occur. Duemer states that while this recognition of individuality is important from outsiders, it is equally important for twin development for the twins to be able to discern noticeable differences from the other at a young age. Otherwise, this indistinguishability, whether genuine or perceived, can lead to limited personality development and artificial differences prompted by the need to separate oneself as an individual (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole).

Growing up, my sister and I were very lucky to have parents who, for the most part, prioritized individuality and personal development outside of one another. The color coded matching outfits and shared activities between my sister and I throughout our childhood proved to stem more out of convenience rather than harmful “unit” parenting. In my parents' eyes, Gwyneth and I are, and always have been, individuals, which can not be said for every set of twins. However, the acceptance and acknowledgment of our own individuality that our parents granted us was nowhere to be found as we entered school. There was no me and her, just us. A unit. This unit followed us from kindergarten to our senior year of high school, where our friends gave us the nickname, “The Howertwins”. Admittedly, it had a certain charm to it, but it soon wore off and at its core, the nickname only highlighted the fact that no one around us really looked at one without also seeing the other. Classmates I had known for years would mix us up, even though we have a 6 inch height difference and our only identical feature is our noses. Every year, without fail, my sister and I were branded as a matching set to everyone we came in contact with and our individual personalities and quirks were pushed aside so we could continue on

being seen as the twins. Throughout the gathered research, it is made abundantly clear that an emphasis on individuality and personal development is vital to parent/twin relationships to ensure adequate growth, but something else that needs to be further explored and acted upon is the ways in which singletons view twins and how this can affect them. It is through this viewpoint that the in and out groups regarding multiples and singletons is made obvious. There is a lack of understanding because one group has lived their life with an equal right beside them, while the other has not and no real way to contextualize that kind of dynamic.

### **Comparisons between Twins**

Something non-twins overlook is the way in which twins, identical and fraternal alike, have been continuously stacked against one another by others, consciously and subconsciously, for their entire life. These comparisons usually have no mal-intent, however, research and personal experience have proved that these comparisons are harmful and can have negative and long-lasting effects for both twins involved (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole). While school aged twins are exposed to comparisons more often than twins who are younger and older, the cycle of compare and contrast is a birthright and it begins its reign immediately. Whether this be through doctors and charts or being labeled as the smaller twin or louder twin by parents is up to the environment (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole). At a young age, while twins may not fully comprehend what is going on, chances are that comparisons between one another will stick with them, with instances of comparison from early childhood proving capable of cementing long lasting effects over twins personal self, as well as the relationship with their co-twin (Daniel, Stef). These comparisons

become an inescapable aspect of life, given the way in which outsiders often view twins a single unit (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole). These comparisons come from peers, parents, and, after enough time and experience, the twins themselves. Ironically, twins are both expected to be exactly the same as each other while also somehow embodying completely oppositional traits with no room for overlap. While it has been noted that these comparisons can cause strain between the bond between twins, it is equally likely to have no noticeable effect on the bond itself, but greatly affect the ways in which twins view themselves and the people around them (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole). This is something that should be researched as it is something that every twin deals with, but there is very little documented research.

### **Personality differences**

Personality and whether or not it is based on any genetic factors is heavily researched among twins. Unlike some twin studies that focus mainly on monozygotic twins, personality twin studies usually involve both monozygotic and dizygotic pairs. However, in a study on whether or not twins experience different types of friendship and peer relationships, monozygotic twins were the subjects. Peers help shape an individual's world in a number of different ways and through studying differing twin relationships with their peers we are able to understand more about discordance in behavior and personality. In a study using both monozygotic and dizygotic twins, the pairs answered questions centered around their peers, how they viewed them, and what they would identify these peers as. Through testing and research, six personality types among the twins stood out. The next thing taken into consideration was

rejection among peers and researchers found a level of discordance of rejection and social victimization from one twin to the other. (Asbury, Kathryn; Moran, Nicola; Plomin, Robert) In a different study using only MZ twins, both Cloninger and Eysenck scales were used to measure personality traits among the sets of twins. (Loehlin, John C., Martin, Nicholas G.)

### **Twin Bond**

The bond between twins differs greatly from other familial relationships. This is due to the fact that both twins have had another person their same age going through every life event together at the same exact time (Ainslie, 1997). The resulting dynamic is no better and no worse than others in the family, but it is inarguably different. In Allport's essay on "The Formation of In-Groups" he discussed the ways in which familial bonds and in-group ties are formed and strengthened through a provided a sense of belonging and self-worth. Allport also mentioned that in-group solidarity is cultivated in children on the basis of being brought into existence by parents (1954). This statement holds true, however, for twins, it is not being provided with existence that creates the strongest in-group bond, but rather the "shared" existence between a twin and their co-twin that creates the rather unique in-group bond. Twins are not only constants in each others life, but contemporaries as well, "The most constant and steady presence in the life of any twin is its co-twin." (Piontelli, 2002, p. 90). In addition to what is formed at birth, the bond between twins relies heavily on other outside factors such as parental relationships between the individuals and outside perceptions and interactions (Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole). It is worth noting that common strains on twin bonds include outside comparisons, competition, and being treated as a single unit while research shows that being

treated as individuals lessens these stressors and allows for a strengthened and healthier bond (Haidranit, 2016).

It is impossible for me to imagine life without the bond I share with my twin sister, however, I am able to gauge the differences that shape our relationship in opposition to those of my non-twin peers. The foundation of our bond is built on unrivaled closeness, only matched with an unspoken agreement working on the assumption that even through blinding anger and discontent with one another, we'll always be each other's go-to in the end. This connection is strengthened through years of shared life experience, however, with life experience, this bond, once clean of any ill-will, becomes tainted with individual limits, societal expectations, unbridled competitiveness, and worst of all, an ever-growing seed of resentment. Less for your twin herself, but rather the people and environments that molded you into someone who could embed these toxins so far down into your psyche; to be someone who could so deeply feel things so directly oppositional to the person closest to you. The outside comparisons, grouping, and unnoticed individuality leave both twins changed in ways impossible for outsiders to understand. Suddenly, the invisible yet empowering tether between both of you becomes a set of handcuffs, holding you both hostage to the shallow and unforgiving ways in which your peers see and analyze you. Though, as I've grown older I have come to find that these cuffs, this outside push to exist both in mirror and opposition of one another, was never truly there to begin with. Life and experience and hurt allowed both of us to twist this unmatched connection into something that threatened to tear both of us down in the process. Something that not all twins are able to overcome. What my twin and I experienced is something far too common among twins and while there is research being done on comparisons between twins, it is highly important that



researchers also look into the long term effects that follow sets of multiples from being unconsciously and consciously treated and viewed differently by others.

### **Conclusion**

For all the pent up frustration, resentment and feelings of inadequacy that lived in both me and my sister over the years, I wouldn't trade being a twin for anything in the world. In more ways than I can count, being and having a twin has made me who I am today. There is something both depressing and empowering, about two souls, stuck in an ongoing back and forth between mirroring and contrasting one another, experiencing the same world and the same time. While I wish I could erase some of the ways in which growing up as a pair affected my sister and I, I would not be near as resilient as I am today without them. Through the mental competition and suffocating unity that was born out of the skewed lenses from which our peers, and eventually ourselves, saw us through, I have greatly strengthened as a person. My sister and I still have room to improve in completely ridding our relationship of self-inflicted comparisons and competition, but I am no longer held captive by the ideas imprinted upon me during my youth, exploiting anything I could find to further an imaginary competition that would never be won. To try and convey the exactitude of life as a twin would be an impossible task, but words and language have a certain power that allows for meaningful glimpses into worlds we know not and the glimpse into my experience as a twin can be summed up as existing as two sides of the same coin. We our own people, with different personalities and interests and feelings, yet we are intrinsically connected in a way that outsiders often only understand as individuality lacking unity, or rather complete opposites, unable to overlap for fear of disrupting the clean cut unit

made up of the smart one and the dumb one, the short one and the tall one, and the rest of the neverending list of boxes. These viewpoints and assumptions are not bred out of malicious intent or bias, but rather an inability to understand the complexities of being a twin. The ways in which we both mirror and contradict not only each other, but the outside perceptions placed up twins in general. In the end, the only other person who gets the complicated emotions and baggage from this is the one on the other side of that coin and it is that fact alone, that keeps the sometimes suffocating bond from ever breaking.

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## References

Allport, Gordon (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice: The Formation of In-Groups*. Cambridge 29-47

Gordon Allport, American psychologist, in his essay *The Formation of In-Groups (1954)*, argues the possibility of humanity as an in-group and the coexistence of in-groups and prejudice. He supports this claim by first introducing the nature of in-groups, then giving examples of the way in-groups connect to family, then bringing race and sex into the conversation, and finally discussing the co-existence of in-groups and reference groups and the need for belonging. Allport's purpose is to shed light on the nature of in-groups and pose the question of humanity as an in-group in order to inform the general public on his findings and beliefs. This article, while dated, ties in perfectly to Project IV and introduced the class to the topic of in-groups.

Asbury, Kathryn; Moran, Nicola; Plomin, Robert (2017) *Do MZ twins have discordant experiences of friendship? A qualitative hypothesis-generating MZ twin differences study*. PLoS One, 12 (7). DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0180521

Kathryn Asbury, Nicola Moran, and Robert Plomin, authors at PLoS One, in their essay *Do MZ twins have discordant experiences of friendship? A qualitative hypothesis-generating MZ twin differences study (2017)*, present the possibility of discordant experiences in peer-relationships between monozygotic twins. They support this claim by first introducing behavioral studies and the role of socialization, then introducing their research methods and participants, then analyzing the discordance found, and finally discussing peer-rejection and the contrast between types of friendships among twins. Asbury's purpose is to introduce the possibility of differing experiences with peers and relationships between friends in order to shed light on the topic and see the different ways in which twins interact with their surroundings. This article offers great insight into personality differences between twins and the different ways in which they experience the world.

Loehlin, John C., Martin, Nicholas G. (2018). *Personality types: A twin study*. Personality and Individual Differences, 122 (1), 93-103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.10.012>

John C. Loehlin and Nicholas G. Martin, authors of Personality and Individual Differences, in their chapter *Personality types: A twin study (2018)*, argue the differing personality types between twins and whether or not genetics plays a role in personality type. They support this claim by first introducing their research process and introducing the role of personality types and its history, then introducing the method of testing their hypothesis on sets of twins, then analyzing their results, and finally discussing the different clusters of personality found and the possibility of genetic influence on personality. Loehlin's purpose is to pose the question of genetic roles in personality type in order to gain greater insight into defined personality types and the role they play in society. This article fits in very well with my research for Project IV because twin personality types is something I am going to be discussing greatly in my paper.

Duemer, Lee; Bradley, Loretta; Parr, Gerald; Noble, Nicole (2017) *Fostering Twins' Identity Development: A Family Issue*. *The Family Journal*, 25 (4)  
<https://doi-org.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/10.1177/1066480717731239>

Lee Duemer, Loretta Bradley, Gerald Parr, and Nicole Noble, authors of *The Family Journal*, in their essay *Fostering Twins' Identity Development: A Family Issue (2017)*, argue the importance of parental influence and identity separation in the development of twins. They support this claim by first introducing the challenging nature of raising twins and the difficulties that often arise in doing so, then discussing child development and how this development is different in twins, then speaking on the parental influence in this development, and finally the drastic downsides to unit-based parenting and the harmful impact constant comparisons have on developing twins. Duemer's purpose is to discuss the importance of parental influence in twin development in order to diminish the amount of lumping together and constant comparisons that twins experience in order to better their development and relationship with one another. This article is vitally important to my research seeing as it covers the main angle of which I am taking in Project IV.

Senzamici, Ariella (2016). *10 Things You Should Never Say to a Twin*. *College Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.collegemagazine.com/10-things-never-say-twin/>

Ariella Senzamici, senior editing, writing, and media major at Florida State University, in her article *10 Things You Should Never Say to a Twin (2016)*, argues the worst things that you can say to twins and how the common occurrence of these mentioned sayings is of great annoyance and discomfort to twins. She supports this claim by beginning the article discussing the "double trouble" aspect of twins and the way in which twins grow up side-by-side, then she begins to list some of the annoying and oftentimes obnoxious things non-twins ask you when they find out you are a twin, then she explains why these questions are irksome and offensive, and finally she explains that despite the identity-lump that comes with being a twin, she wouldn't trade it for anything. Senzamici's purpose is to shed light on the annoying things that people constantly ask twins in order to decrease their occurrence and help people understand better that twins are not the same person and should not be constantly compared. This article is one of my popular sources and shows a passionate view on the topic of twin comparisons which is an angle I am going to cover in Project IV.

Daniel, Stef (2012) *Dare to Compare: Raising Twins to Be Themselves*. Retrieved from: <https://www.everydayfamily.com/raising-twins-to-be-themselves/>

Stef Daniel, author at EverydayFamily, in her article *Dare to Compare: Raising Twins to Be Themselves (2012)*, argues the necessity of raising twins as individuals. She supports this claim by first introducing the comparisons laid on twins since conception, then giving examples of what these comparisons look like, then discussing the effect that it can have on the twins as individuals as they grow up, and finally speaking to the responsibility a parent has in raising twins as separate people rather than a unit. Daniel's purpose is to discuss the harmful repercussions of twin comparisons in order to diminish their occurrence and hopefully show parents and outsiders the harmful effect grouping together and comparing hurts twins. This

article is relevant to my Project IV paper in that it provides a popular source on my main angle of the paper.

Belle, Andrew (2013) *Sister*. "Black Bear".

Andrew Belle, American singer-songwriter, in his song "Sister" (2013), sings about a difficult sibling relationship and the feeling. He begins by introducing the relationship, then the problems that are obvious in the relationship, and impulsive nature of the siblings. This song doesn't completely fit with what I will be talking about in Project IV but I really love the song and it reminds me of my sister and I although I'm not really sure why, there aren't many similarities between us and those in the song, but I just do and I love the song a lot.

Haidrani, Layla (2016) Why Are People So Obsessed With The "Prettier" Twin? Retrieved from: [https://uk.style.yahoo.com/why-people-obsessed-prettier-twin-111400416.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAIkfxscuBUx9TGxF7\\_IOnozAS7wu7kDjWAdnRcQA4HYxxj-QyQcKhgE\\_3gr9WztKFDcCNhQsyW1UqQ56UL4mr3vV2Dhha8zH5EXr4Cf1aNhR8X0eIBmGGHeTgeG3vxRTmmiDXBEVYCeP-\\_q-9haPy6OwWbalzrnlQi30QXL26jKW](https://uk.style.yahoo.com/why-people-obsessed-prettier-twin-111400416.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAIkfxscuBUx9TGxF7_IOnozAS7wu7kDjWAdnRcQA4HYxxj-QyQcKhgE_3gr9WztKFDcCNhQsyW1UqQ56UL4mr3vV2Dhha8zH5EXr4Cf1aNhR8X0eIBmGGHeTgeG3vxRTmmiDXBEVYCeP-_q-9haPy6OwWbalzrnlQi30QXL26jKW)