



‘We are not as alike, as you think’ sense of individuality within the co-twin relationship along the life course



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ABSTRACT

We have explored how older twins experience and describe themselves in relation to their co-twin. The life stories of 20 older twins were analyzed with narrative analysis. Results showed that the twins described themselves from the point of differences in relation to the co-twin. This was based on experiences of how other people viewed them as alike, as well as on life events along the life course, which contributed to the perception of oneself as an individual in relation to the co-twin. The emphasis on unlikeness was therefore interpreted as a way of trying to establish a position as an individual within the co-twin relationship and to assert ones individuality to the rest of the social environment. To claim oneself as an individual was an ongoing identity work along the life course.

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Introduction

Although, the early years in a human's life are important for the identity development, we do not know that much about the process from a life course perspective. Older individuals can contribute to knowledge of how identity is experienced from childhood to old age, as well as how identity is experienced in connection to lifelong close relationships, such as family relationships, for example between spouses, parents and children or between siblings. One kind of a close sibling relationship is the twin relationship, which is the focus of this study. Twins because of their nature may be considered as too special, but social studies of the lives of older twins can contribute to knowledge about how identity within a lifelong close relationship is experienced and described.

Identity in old age

Identity in old age in general has been related to roll-changes (Gearing, 1999; Price, 2000) age stereotypes (Hurd, 1999) or health and disability (Shenk, Davis, Peacock, & Moore, 2002).

If identity in adulthood has been associated with work and career, the absence of a job when becoming a retired person can be experienced as loss of identity and lead to an impaired self-image (Gearing, 1999). Age stereotypes in the present society emphasizing beauty and youth may affect the self-image of the aged person when the body is changing and is no longer what it used to be (Hurd, 1999; Öberg & Tornstam, 2001, 2003). Physical and cognitive disabilities e.g. decreasing short-term memory; difficulty recollecting; difficulty in learning new things, can be experienced as failure and threaten the self-image and the identity in old age (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001; Shenk et al., 2002). Yet another aspect to identity and the way we perceive ourselves is connected to the impact of social relations. A study of older twin relationships, showed that these were experienced as either supportive or non-supportive (Pietilä, Björklund, & Bülow, 2012). In the non-supportive twin relationships the

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twins were dependent on each other, while in the supportive relationships the twins were more interdependent.

Twins

Twins are two individuals who are born from the same pregnancy and are of the same or unlike sex. They can be either identical or fraternal, where fraternal or non-identical twins usually will result when two eggs are fertilized by two different sperms. This results in two babies who share about 50% of the genes, which is the same as singleton siblings. Identical twins are formed when one fertilized egg splits into two, leading to the formation of two separate embryos. Genetically they are the same sex and share nearly 100% of their genes (Segal, 2000; Segal & Ream, 1998). However, this rather biological explanation of twins, results in social consequences for the two individuals. Based on the identical nature of twinship it may seem as though twins are two of a kind, but the extent to which twins, in fact are alike depends on who is making the comparison (Stewart, 2000a, 2000b). A society framed around singleton births may view twins as two copies of one another (Stewart, 2000a, 2000b; Watzlawik, 2009), a view that might be challenging to twins. However, less is known about how twins experience and describe themselves in relation to one another. The perspective of older twins can contribute with a life course perspective and thus deepen our understanding of how they perceive themselves in relation to one another and within the social context in which they live.

Twin identity

In this study a distinction is made between identity and individuality. 'Identity' here is defined as an ongoing and relational process in which the individual actively contributes to the construction of the personal identity or sense of self in relation to others (Goffman, 1959; Jenkins, 2004), while 'individuality' here means the unique part which is defining and marking off each individual in respect to another person in a relationship.

Identity within the twin relationship was in a study by Macdonald (2002), described in three different ways: 1) the two as 'one', i.e. one saw oneself as a social unit in the twin relationship; or that 2) one saw oneself as two separate individuals (either/or); or 3) as a false separation where one continues to experience a shared identity but where the identity is polarized into opposing characteristics. This in turn may have an impact on the twin relationship. A study on twin children up to 16 years of age showed that female identical twins having a dependent relationship with one another had more difficulties with their personal identities than fraternal twins (Alin-Åkervall & Suurvee, 2003). The same dependent relational pattern affecting identity was also seen in adult twins in a study by Schave and Ciriello (1983). The twins with a dependent relationship pattern defined themselves in relation to the co-twin at the expense of their individual identity. Inadequate parenting and failure to interact with and have emotional contact with the twin children was thought to cause dependency between the twins.

Family studies have shown that parents of twins, may emphasize the sameness of their twin children by dressing them in similar looking clothes (Bacon, 2005), or giving them

like-sounding names (Bryan, 1992; Pearlman, 1990) or expecting twins to act and behave in similar ways (Stewart, 2000a). Part of the family and identity formation also includes siblings (Cicirelli, 1995). Siblings often share their genes and parents, grow up and develop strong connections to one another. Similar to parents, siblings develop their relationships with one another early on and spend more time with each other than with the parents (Weaver, Coleman, & Ganong, 2003). By comparing, differentiating and learning from one another, siblings influence and are part of forming the identity of one another (Cicirelli, 1995). Likewise, is the twin relationship a close sibling relationship where the two individuals in a set of twins form their identity in relation to one another? What does it mean to grow up and be closely related to another person for a life time? Studies on identity related to twinship have basically been conducted on younger twins and we do not know much about the process described from the personal experiences of twins above the age of seventy. Therefore the aim of this study was to explore how older twins experience and describe themselves in relation to their co-twin.

Material and method

The complexity of life and the perspective of individuals in a social context are best understood with qualitative approaches; consequently, this study's design was based on data consisting of life stories of older twins and narrative method in the collection and interpretation of data. The role of language serves the purpose of gaining access to the inner world of human beings and stories in this study are seen as verbalized interpretations of personal experiences (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bülow & Hydén, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Riessman, 1993).

Participants

The 20 participants in this study were selected to represent a variety of personal experiences of twinship. The participants were also older twins between 78 and 90 years of age, as this study focuses on identity from an aging perspective and a lifelong experience with the co-twin. There were 7 intact twin pairs ($n = 14$) and 6 singles whose co-twins were deceased (Table 1). This group, in turn, was a subsample of two Swedish longitudinal twin studies, the Swedish Adoption Twin Study of Ageing (SATSA) consisting of same-sex, identical and fraternal twins (Lichtenstein et al., 2002; Pedersen et al., 1991) and the Gender-study (opposite-sex twins) (Hancock Gold, Malmberg, McClearn, Pedersen, & Berg, 2002). To determine whether the participants were identical or fraternal twins, they had been tested through blood samples prior to this study. In old age there is a risk of cognitive impairment and that might influence people's possibility to tell their life stories in an adequate way. The participants as being part of the SATSA and Gender study, had conducted the Mini-Mental-State-Examination (MMSE) (Folstein, Folstein, & McHugh, 1975) prior to this study. The MMSE is a screening test for dementia which has a cut-off point at 24 (of 30) meaning that a person scoring below 24 may have some kind of cognitive impairment. In the presented study, only participants scoring 25 or more on MMSE, were included.

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