

Podcast: 'Adoption, Twins and the Genetics of Personality' — Childhood adoption study informs nature vs nurture debate

Social scientists have long sought to better understand how and why different behavioral traits develop in different individuals. The question of “nature vs. nurture,” often cited in society’s popular lexicon, reflects a collective interest in sorting out which aspects of people’s personalities can be attributed to genetic makeup, as opposed to physical, familial and cultural experiences.

For one researcher, a career spent studying sets of siblings that were separated in infancy and raised in different families has yielded some fascinating insights into this arena.

Jenae Neiderhiser is distinguished professor of psychology and human development and family studies at Penn State. In the latest episode of the [Tracking Traits](#) podcast, she shares details gleaned from her decades of unique research, as well as some elements of her own family history that have shaped her passion for this work.

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“I think that we’re all naturally fascinated with the roles that genes play in our development, as well as environmental factors,” said Nina Jablonski, co-director of Penn State’s Center for Human Evolution and Diversity (CHED). “And the way that Jenae has designed these studies is really ingenious.”

“Jenae researches the way that genes and the environment work together to shape human development across the lifespan,” added Mark Shriver, the other co-director of CHED, which sponsors the Tracking Traits podcast. “This episode focuses on some really unique longitudinal studies that she has done on hundreds of sets of twins and adopted siblings over the course of many years.”

Neiderhiser’s experiences as an adopted person herself factored into her interest in studying genetics and families. While being interviewed for the podcast, she shared anecdotes about her own personal journey, including how meeting her birth mother and learning details about her blood relatives helped her to better understand elements of her own personality that contrasted with those of her adopted family.

“I was always told in high school and that I was not like the other Neiderhiser kids in our town,” she explained. “So I became curious about understanding how that was. And I thought about it as probably being something genetic.”

For Neiderhiser’s Tracking Traits podcast episode, titled “[Adoption, Twins and the Genetics of Personality](#),” she was interviewed by Penn State undergraduate anthropology student Alexis Capel. Their conversation spanned many topics, including reflections on the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, the challenges of working with families over an extended period of time, and the need for the field of genetic research to become more inclusive, so that the conclusions drawn can be more

valuable to a wider variety of people.

Having the opportunity to speak one-on-one with Neiderhiser about her research was “an honor and a pleasure,” said Capel.

The Tracking Traits podcast is a production of the [Center for Human Evolution and Diversity](#), and features Penn State undergrads interviewing researchers about their work and personal passions. New episodes are released monthly, and are available on most podcast streaming services.

The Center for Human Evolution and Diversity is housed within the Department of Anthropology in Penn State’s College of Liberal Arts, with support from the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences.

<https://geneticliteracyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/15dx2ve9jfobt3imi76b9heint8l.mp3>

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