

FACE TO FACE

Prosopagnosia Research & Community

Welcome to our seventh edition of Face to Face! In these issues, we present information on both new and classic face perception research, as well as a continued look at the experiences of people with prosopagnosia. As always, we look forward to hearing your feedback and questions, and hope that you will enjoy this issue's stories and science!

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Prosopagnosics Share Their Stories

We asked people with Prosopagnosia to send us their stories and experiences. Here's what they said (names have been changed):

Mark:

"I am 87 now! In all these years, my state has rather deteriorated in that I find it more and more difficult to recognize people I know. By the way, I am happy to say that my memory for events and past conversations has not diminished much, and I am still engaged in academic work. But going shopping with my wife in a large store, I find it difficult to find her again in the crowd after leaving her for a minute or two; I rely more on spotting the color of her coat and scarf in the distance, or her diminutive size, rather than her face (we have been married 59 years now). Yesterday, it took me several minutes to bring back to memory the face of my doctor calling on us when he knocked at our door and we let him in."

Synesthesia and Prosopagnosia

Synesthesia is a fascinating condition that, like prosopagnosia, was believed to be rare but is now recognized to occur in a substantial number of people.

People with synesthesia associate sets of sensory stimuli or concepts with unrelated sensory experiences like color or taste, a condition that is commonly referred to as "sensory blending" (e.g., "seeing sounds," "tasting shapes" etc.). In many cases, however, the inducers are cultural artifacts like numbers or people's names, or even abstract entities such as weekdays or personalities (perceiving the number "4" as green, the personality of certain individual as red, and so forth).

(Continues on page 2)

Darla:

"After watching 60 Minutes, I took the facial recognition test and realized for the first time that I can't do something that everyone else can. I was flabbergasted. Over the next several months, memories came flooding back and now they all made sense, all the times I was confused. When I couldn't find my daughter who was standing literally right beside me. Embarrassing moments in the office when I'm sure I looked like an idiot... all made complete sense.

I realized lots of little tricks that I use to recognize people, just subconscious things I do. For example, when out and about, as I pass people, I look every single person in the eye. I've found if you know someone, their face changes - like they brighten up and smile or something. If you don't know them, they just walk on by. Sometimes it's tricky, though. They smile just cause they're friendly and then you get into a conversation with someone, racking your brain trying to figure out who they are, and turns out you don't.

So now I make the issue fairly public. And many friends have started saying their name when we get together, which is awesome. But it's a little annoying when I try to explain it to someone new. 95 percent of the time, they respond by telling me they're name-blind. Oh, haha, yeah, that's funny. When I tell them I don't recognize my own children, they don't laugh as much. But more and more people have heard of it."

**Synesthesia and Prosopagnosia**

No direct links between synesthesia and prosopagnosia have been found to date, but we're curious if there is a relationship between these two conditions.

If you are prosopagnosic and believe you also have synesthesia of ANY kind (e.g., numbers, names, personalities, emotions, sounds, human voices, tastes and so forth), Roy Porat would love to hear from you (roy_porat@g.harvard.edu).

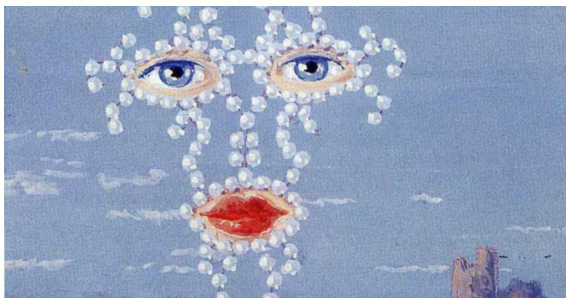
Roy is a research fellow at Harvard, and this is the first step in his examination of whether these two conditions are related.



Julia:

"If you asked me to describe even people I know well (like close family members), I would have difficulty describing their facial features. However, I would say that I am also not observant in general. If I were to witness a crime or accident, I would not feel comfortable counting on my recollection of events. I can read emotion when I am concentrating (unlike recognizing faces which I can't do even when concentrating) but can miss it if I'm in a hurry or not paying close attention. I struggle recognizing dog breeds, car make/models, etc.

My wish is that more people knew about face blindness. It feels very acceptable as a culture to not recognize names, but recognizing faces is an expectation."

**Walter:**

"One day, as I was walking down the stairs in my neighborhood, I saw my brother-in-law from a distance talking with what I thought a little girl. When I got closer, I realized it was my own wife, seriously. Now that is when I realized there was something wrong with me and started checking if there was any online information available. When I found out I suffered from prosopagnosia, it changed my life for the worst because I actually realized that I was greeting people that I thought I recognized and stopped greeting people and avoiding places where I could run into people. I prefer to stay home, instead of going out. I suffer from dyslexia as well, but I have improved a lot in that area and as a child, I went to a special school for slow learners. I don't have any problem recognizing faces of celebrities and am very good at understanding movie plots. I am really good at remembering locations and always remember how to return from point A to B. I have an excellent short-term memory, yet a bad long-term memory. So in the end, I am really looking forward to exchanging similar stories and finding a possible solution to make my life easier."

Jessica:

“The first occurrence I recall of being unable to recognize someone was in 5th grade on Halloween. I saw this girl dressed as a bride. I couldn't remember ever seeing her in my class before, and was trying to figure out just who exactly this girl was. When she finally opened her mouth and talked I realized it was my good friend! I realized not knowing who she was was ridiculous, but chalked it up to a random moment of confusion.

I didn't start putting two and two together until college. I found myself reintroducing myself to people I had met before, misidentifying friends for other friends depending on whose clothes they were wearing, and talking to total strangers pretending like I knew them only to find out we had never met before.

I began to realize that I place higher value on other aspects about people in order to recognize them. I pay attention to how they move, talk, or the clothes they wear. Now that I'm aware that I have prosopagnosia, I try harder to recognize specific features of someone's face to remember for later. It doesn't always work.

For my job, I go to about 14 different school buildings each week. I run into many instances of not knowing who people are when they are not in the rooms I expect them to be in, or do something like cut their hair. I do my best to explain it away by saying, ‘Sorry, I don't recognize faces.’ Though I think people assume I'm just making a general statement because they normally reply back with, ‘I'm not very good with names.’ [...] Hopefully, one day people will understand a little more when I say I don't recognize faces and start greeting me with their name. Until then, I spend my time solving mini puzzles every day about identity.”

Josephine:

“I still have great difficulty putting a name to a face I meet. I even find my own children fall into that category.

Watching television is quite difficult as I cannot tell who is who.

Between the prosopagnosia and the double vision, which is also the result of my accident, I am managing to have a normal life.”

Jakob:

“I know that I can describe beauty better than my friends. ‘Oh, eyes far apart, thick lips, high cheekbones — a joy to behold’. My non-prosopagnosic male friends reach the same conclusion, without being able to explain why. Perhaps I better perceive the merits of the separate parts than do they. I will try to be aware of the possibility that they better perceive the whole.”

