

Prosopagnosia– a short summary

The medical term prosopagnosia describes a probably quite common, though not very well known, disorder of the visual cognition system. Prosopagnosia is defined as the inability to remember faces. It is composed of the Greek words “Prosopon” (“the face”) and “agnosia” (“not recognizing”). The term “face blindness” is also used for this disorder. It is more concise, but somewhat misleading. Faceblind people see faces like everyone else does, but they can’t remember them.

How does this disorder influence affected persons in their daily lives? Nearly everyone has at some time met somebody whose face seems vaguely familiar, but whose name, and other related details, he couldn’t remember. This is always an embarrassing situation, because in human society the face is the most important individual feature we recognize people by. A person who suffers from prosopagnosia, though, does not recognize other people by their faces, because he can’t associate a face with a person. The brain structures responsible for these associations are deficient, or they work differently in these people.

What forms can a prosopagnosia take? Two have been identified so far:

1. The acquired form of prosopagnosia. Acquired prosopagnosia can result from brain damage, such as that caused by a stroke, a skull/brain injury or hypoxia. The human brain (and the brains of other primates, as a matter of fact) reserves certain areas exclusively for facial information processing. If these areas are damaged in a patient, he won’t see or feel any deficits, with one notable exception: All faces will look unknown to him and seem to belong to strangers. The patient won’t even recognize the faces of his closest relatives. To him, faces will have lost their meaning as a hallmark of individuality. This is a shocking experience for most patients!
2. The congenital form of prosopagnosia. Persons affected by this form (prosopagnosics) have never been able to remember faces from the time of their birth. Or, strictly speaking, they have never been able to associate a face with a person. Even in their infancy they did not recognize their parents by their faces, and they preferred to use other features like voice, hair, gait, smell, or clothing. To them, a face is no more important than any other object. Parents or teachers of prosopagnosic children might notice that they don’t look into other people’s faces, not even when they talk to them. This does not show a lack of interest in other people but just in faces, as faces don’t contain important information for these children.

Quite possibly, you know a prosopagnosic yourself, a neighbor or colleague who doesn’t seem to recognize you when you meet him unexpectedly. Does he seem to be embarrassed when you say hello to him, just as if you woke him up from deep thought? Or do you know the problem yourself only too well: Suddenly somebody says hello to you, and only then do you realize that you know him? Are you forever trying to memorize the faces of colleagues and neighbors, but you always find this to be a futile exercise?

Then, indeed, you might be faceblind – one of several million people who are. Learning you are faceblind most probably won’t change your life a lot; you’ll just know now why you don’t recognize other people on the street: It not because you are distracted or you don’t try hard enough, no, your brain just processes faces in a different and less effective way. On the other hand, you will realize you probably notice more characteristics of your fellow men than other people do – their voice, their gait, their clothing, their habits.

For more information please turn to:

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