

Face Blindness

I don't have a face. For me, no one does. I can look at someone, you for example, and see your nose, your eyes, your lips and ears. But I can't put them together into a face. Into someone's face. I can tell that you've got a human face, a male or female face, a happy, sad, mildly disappointed or rageful face. But I can't tell that it's your face. For me, it is simply a head decorated with the usual features. You are just one among a whole species with heads just like yours. When I occasionally glance in a mirror, it is the same, another head among all the others, nothing more.

I can compensate, for sure. I'll memorise the colour of your hair, the smell of your skin, the timbre and pitch of your voice. Your mannerisms. These are my identifiers, crucial if I am to maintain at least a passable level of sociability. It usually saves me from embarrassment, when I run into people I should know out of context (relatives, coworkers, old friends). Usually. When it doesn't, I try to explain that I simply can't remember faces, but it always comes off the same way that the oh-I'm-just-terrible-with-names excuse does. A matter of absent-mindedness, flakiness or, worse, self-centredness.

And there is something wholly unsatisfying in recognising people this way. It's not personal, it's not like recognising someone familiar, someone you love or hate, someone with whom you have shared history. It's like picking out your suitcase on the airport baggage belt by spotting the pink piece of yarn you tied to it for just that purpose. Or identifying your annoyingly popular silver 1998 Chevy Cavalier from among all the others because of the pine shaped air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror.

I can see how disconcerting my condition is for others if I fail to recognise my wife or children when I meet them out of our regular context and do not immediately know who they are. They are understanding and tolerant, for sure (they thoughtfully greet me in these situations with "Hi Honey" or "Hi Dad" to help me out), but, in that brief moment when I look at them blankly—as I would any other stranger on the street—I can see an unsettled look pass over their still unfamiliar face.

That moment, that ambiguous, liminal space between strangeness and recognition is like that almost indiscernible instance of amnesia that occurs when waking from a dream. As your history and memories and knowledge float back through the hazy boundaries of your still partly unconscious mind, you realise the utter fluidity of identity, never firmly tied to anything, not essential to human nature (which is why, incidentally, I have never understood debates about the difference between humans and animals; I have always thought of us as simply one species, albeit a highly intelligent one, among others.)

Anyway, I am missing something. Missing something which speaks to the reassuring uniqueness and singularity that you have with human individuals, and not with, say, individual golden retrievers. Or individual goldfish. I'm missing something that even babies, from birth, seem to recognise as important. I want to see faces, not heads.

Angela Beck

Curator