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BOOK REVIEW

Do I Know You?: From Face Blindness to Super Recognition

By S. Pearl, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. 232pp. £29.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1421447537

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What would life be like if you could not recognise faces—or if you remembered every face you ever saw? In her book, *Do I Know You*, Sharrona Pearl explores the remarkable world of face blindness (prosopagnosia) and its counterpart, super recognition. Blending history, psychology and human stories, Pearl delves into how these extremes of facial recognition influence lives, while offering insights into the science behind our ability to recognise one another.

The book begins with the phenomenon of face blindness, a condition where individuals struggle to identify even familiar faces. Pearl traces its historical roots, describing fascinating yet incomplete accounts of early cases. Although these stories are intriguing, they raise questions about why disorders in face recognition are not more common. Pearl argues that people are often reluctant to admit struggles with recognising faces, compared to conditions like colour blindness—a perceptual deficit that often co-occurs with prosopagnosia. This cultural reticence, she suggests, might explain why face recognition went largely undiscussed in historical records, despite its centrality to human interaction.

A recurring question posed in the book is whether difficulties with face recognition have always existed. Intuitively, the answer seems to be yes—like many behavioural disorders, our understanding of such conditions has evolved alongside advances in science and medicine. However, given the author's historical expertise, this question feels underexplored. For instance, life in previous centuries was dramatically different from today's urban environments, where we navigate complex social networks and encounter an abundance of facial imagery, often recognising people we may never meet in person (Jenkins et al. 2018). Did historical societies place the same demands on face recognition?

One of the book's strengths is its exploration of Oliver Sacks, the celebrated neuropsychologist, who brought neurological conditions to public attention through his writings. Sacks famously described a case of prosopagnosia in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, only to later reveal his own lifelong difficulty with face recognition. Pearl uses Sacks' story to introduce a critical distinction: acquired prosopagnosia, caused by brain damage, versus developmental prosopagnosia, where face recognition abilities fail to develop normally. Although these concepts are central to understanding face blindness, Pearl could have clarified the distinction further, as the nuances may elude readers unfamiliar with the field (Corrow et al. 2016).

The narrative highlights a key concept in psychology: the spectrum of ability. Pearl describes how scientists use online tests to measure face recognition across populations, revealing that some individuals fall at the very bottom of this spectrum—roughly 2% of the population. This distribution-based perspective raises a compelling question: do individuals with developmental prosopagnosia represent a distinct pathology, or are they simply at the low end of a natural variation in ability? This remains an open debate, one that captures the evolving nature of scientific inquiry (Barton and Corrow 2016).

Shifting focus, Pearl introduces super recognizers—individuals with an extraordinary ability to recall faces. They represent the top of the distribution and their lived experiences reveal both the allure and burden of such abilities. Many super rec-

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ognizers downplay their skills, aware that others might find their facial recall unsettling. Pearl's exploration of how popular media portrays these individuals—as possessing almost superhuman powers—adds a cultural dimension to the narrative.

Although the book is largely engaging, some sections stray from its central focus on human experiences of face blindness and super recognition. For example, the exploration of forensic applications of face perception, though intriguing, feels somewhat peripheral to the book's main narrative. Similarly, the chapter on face recognition technology and advancements in deep learning is compelling but seems disconnected from the lived realities of those with prosopagnosia or exceptional facial memory. Paradoxically, these technological advances, which draw inspiration from the brain's organization (O'Toole and Castillo 2021), now surpass even the capabilities of super recognizers (Phillips et al. 2018), undercutting the chapter's theme. This detour, although informative, feels at odds with the book's otherwise human-centred approach.

The book occasionally misses opportunities to deepen its analysis. For example, it raises intriguing questions about why face recognition is inherently difficult but does not fully explore them. Pearl misses the opportunity to explore deeper questions, such as why face recognition is inherently challenging for humans (Young and Bruce 2024) or differences in the recognition of familiar faces compared to unfamiliar ones (Young and Burton 2017). Moreover, although Pearl highlights the dominance of men in this field, the book overlooks key contributions from women, such as Nancy Kanwisher, whose pioneering research identified brain regions specialised for face processing (Kanwisher 2017).

Despite these shortcomings, *Do I Know You* offers a refreshing perspective on face recognition, combining accessible science with compelling human stories. Pearl's interdisciplinary approach brings a unique voice to the subject, making the book an enriching read for both experts and curious newcomers. This book offers a compelling and thought-provoking exploration that will captivate not only those working in the field of face perception but also readers with a broader interest in how we navigate the complexities of typical and atypical human behaviour.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

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