

3rd Annual Prosopagnosia Symposium - 2014

Birkbeck College, London

On Friday 20th June 2014, Birkbeck College in London hosted the third annual prosopagnosia open day. The day was organised to promote awareness of the condition and to provide a forum for discussion for those with face blindness, their family members and friends, the symposium provided a unique opportunity for people to come together and find out about current research into face blindness.

Over fifty people attended the symposium, and as in previous years they travelled from locations across the UK - a fact that highlights the need for such an event! The day was a resounding success, with an eclectic mix of speakers and presentations that included talks on both current research and the experience of living with face blindness given by those that have the condition. This year for the first time, feedback taken at the end of the day will mean that the views and suggestions of attendees will go to shape future 'face blindness' events.



Professor Martin Eimer opened proceedings, introducing the speakers and giving an overview of the planned schedule of events. The first presentation was an interesting talk given by Dr John Towler on the subject of 'face recognition processing in the brain'.

This was followed by a talk by Monica Zenonos. Monica is organiser of the London Faceblind Group which is a bi-monthly support group for people who are face blind. Monica spoke about some of the strategies people with face blindness use in everyday life to overcome problems, and spoke from the perspective of being both face blind and a psychotherapist. A talk followed by Hazel Plastow that focused on some of her personal experiences of being face blind and the isolation that this can mean for some. She also brought the audience up-to-date with the work that is currently being done to set up a national organisation - Face Blind UK and the website www.faceblind.org.uk. Jo Livingston followed on with an entertaining talk that focused on the work she does raising public awareness of the condition. Jo is a public speaker with vast experience of presenting to both lay and professional audiences around the UK - Jo's talk gave us a brief look in her inimitable style of how

she works to raise public awareness within education, health and community settings.

Coffee and tea breaks were held at regular intervals throughout the day and were actually an excellent opportunity for people to chat, make contact and swap stories. The morning session of talks ended with a lively discussion between attendees and the speakers and was taken into the lunch break.

The afternoon was headed off with a presentation given by Dr Rachel Bennetts from the Centre for Face Processing Disorders at Bournemouth University. Dr Bennetts spoke about some of her research involving training and intervention programs designed to improve people's ability in recognising familiar faces. The final academic talk of the day was given by Professor Martin Eimer, this focussed on some of the fascinating work being carried out by researchers at Birkbeck and actually presented results from experiments that many of the attendees had taken part in. As always, Professor Eimer's talk provided an interesting and informative overview of the current research on face blindness being carried out at Birkbeck College.

There were displays to complement the presentations, including works of art, books, articles and leaflets, which proved popular. There was a real buzz throughout the day, with people taking advantage of this unique networking opportunity, and swapping email addresses and phone numbers.

From the evaluation forms collected at the end of the day we pleased to see that 88% felt that they had increased their understanding of face blindness, 93% had found the panel discussions valuable and 100% felt that the day was enjoyable and worthwhile. Attendees had particularly valued the opportunity that the Symposium gave for researchers and prosopagnosics to come together, with comments from researchers including – "Great to hear about DP [Developmental Prosopagnosia] from a subjective, non-scientific perspective" and from someone with face blindness "I found the whole day enormously interesting, stimulating and valuable. I have DP and today helped me learn a great deal more about my condition."

With thanks to –

There were lots of people working behind the scenes to make the day run smoothly. Not the least, Joanna Parketny for organising, Sue Nicholas for technical assistance and printing and Katie Fisher for technical support on the day- I'm sure that I echo the thoughts of both speakers and attendees when I thank Professor Eimer's research group for all their hard work and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for their generous funding that made the day such an enjoyable one. The face blindness symposium has become an annual institution in London and an important forum for people with face blindness in the UK.