lost in space, Sloane Crosley, visuo-spatial relationships

Sloane Crosley is a young writer who writes brilliant essays about her experiences in coping with the many dilemmas facing a young woman in the modern world. She is intelligent, funny, observant, and charming. In her second book, “How Did You Get This Number,” she writes about her being told as a child she had a “learning disability that means I have zero spatial relations.” She was literally “lost in space.”

This was discovered when her school administered the Iowa Test and she scored very low. One section of the test required matching a series of everyday objects with their proper names and filling in the bubbles on a Scantron sheet. She got nineteen out of thirty wrong, a really low score. She feels that the reason she scored so poorly was that the questions were multiple choice and presented vertically. As she puts it, “This, much like reading a map, playing cards, or telling time on an analog clock, was an impossibility for me.”

The schools made her take an IQ test that consisted of two parts, a verbal section and a math section. After getting gold stars on the first part of the test she spectacularly failed the math section. The psychologist informed her parents that she had rarely seen such a right-left brain discrepancy and diagnosed her with a severe temporal-spatial deficit. This made her feel like a “genius trapped forever in an idiot’s body”. Her chance of ever achieving a non-embarrassing level of math ability was considered remote.

By age twelve, she started wearing a bracelet on her left wrist that helped her know left from right. At age sixteen she discovered it would take her twice as long as her peers to drive anywhere, because of her spatial disorientation. Interestingly, her visual memory was excellent. “I could sketch the details of my locker in accurate detail—I just couldn’t find it.” Throughout high school she was permitted to circle answers directly on the test papers, thus forgoing the dreaded Scantron sheets. When she was allowed to take the SAT’s orally, she was able to be admitted to college.

It became a little better as an adult. She managed to learn right from left and up from down. Her math skills are still atrocious, however. “Even now, I do all public counting with one fist under the table, preferably in a jacket pocket. If there is no pocket to be had, I twitch my knuckles instead of fully extending my fingers. And I still can’t tell time on analog clocks. Or, rather, I can, but it takes me ten minutes, a time lapse that defeats the purpose of the exercise. My terrible sense of direction also remains. Living in New York City is to never be able to meet someone on the northeast corner. It is to never, ever make a smooth entrance, always getting caught looking lost on the... a genius trapped forever in an idiot’s body ...”
street. The only subway I can exit and begin striding with confidence is the one by my home, as there is a gigantic park on the right side. And I know I don’t live in the trees with the pigeons and the butterflies. She has never outgrown that feeling of disorientation. Her description of the indignity she feels on getting lost, and being unable to find her way out in a sprawling supermarket is heartrending. She once heard that you can find your way out of any maze by keeping your hand on the left side of the wall, but like Winnie the Pooh, she laments, “Great, but which side was left?” Spatial deficits affect her in many ways and he writes “It’s not a disability, it is life.”

On reading Ms Crosley’s tale of spatial and directionality woes, I, like most developmental optometrists thought, “Oh, if she was only my patient when she was a child, she would not have been ‘lost in space.’” I wonder, though, how many of the 5-7% of the population who suffer from visuospatial deficits and its symptoms are ever seen and treated by developmental optometrists.

References