

Why do we not notice the blind spot in our vision?

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QUE · Article 034 · Simple Questions, Deep Answers · Version 0.1 EN

Each eye has a region of the retina where the optic nerve leaves and where photoreceptors do not sample the image. Yet ordinary vision does not contain a permanently visible black patch corresponding to that location. The absence of local sampling and the experience of a dark surface are different things. A dark patch would itself be a visual interpretation, not a neutral display of missing data.

Using both eyes reduces the practical gap because the blind spots do not occupy the same part of the combined visual field. But that is not the complete answer. Perceptual continuity can remain when one eye is covered. To explain the experience, we must distinguish binocular coverage, the missing retinal signal and processing based on the surrounding image.

1. A missing detector is not a detector of black

In a uniformly illuminated field, photoreceptors outside the blind spot respond to the surrounding surface. The blind spot supplies no corresponding local photoreceptor sample. Nevertheless, the surrounding color and brightness can be perceived across it. Experimental work on perceptual filling-in begins from this distinction between local input and perceived surface. [1]

Imagine two otherwise identical patterns that differ only within an eye's blind spot during perfectly maintained fixation. The missing local receptors cannot distinguish those differences. Whatever continuity is perceived must therefore depend on information available elsewhere, not on successful recovery of a hidden pattern that the eye never sampled.

This limit matters. Filling-in is not a super-resolution instrument that reconstructs arbitrary unseen detail. It can support a coherent appearance while leaving genuine information unavailable. A continuous-looking surface is not evidence that every part of it was independently measured.

2. The surroundings constrain the experience

Filling-in can involve perceived surface attributes such as color, brightness and texture. Komatsu's review discusses evidence for active processing and examines neural activity associated with these perceptual effects. [2] The term names a phenomenon and a family of explanatory questions; it does not require imagining a tiny painter completing an internal picture.

Changing the surrounding stimulus provides a way to test the explanation. If perceived continuity depends on the surrounding field, altering its borders or attributes should alter the result. A theory that simply says "the brain ignores the hole" needs to account for those stimulus-dependent outcomes as well as for the absence of an obvious gap.

The distinction between a perceptual description and a neural mechanism is crucial. "The surface looks continuous" is a report about experience. "A particular circuit generates that continuity" is a causal proposal. The first can guide experiments on the second without already proving it.

3. Neural responses supply a narrower, measurable claim

Komatsu, Kinoshita and Murakami recorded from the primary visual cortex of awake macaques. They identified cortical locations corresponding to the blind spot and examined responses to stimuli covering it. Some neurons in that representation responded to large surfaces and had receptive fields extending beyond the blind spot. [1]

This is evidence that the cortical representation is not simply silent whenever the corresponding eye lacks local retinal input. It also identifies a route by which surrounding information can matter. It does not show that a single recorded neuron is the complete cause of the animal's percept, or that every kind of filling-in uses one identical circuit.

The study combines several levels of observation: the stimulus, the animal's controlled fixation, the mapped visual-field location and the neural response. Confusing those levels would make the conclusion stronger than the experiment. Activity consistent with a proposed mechanism is valuable evidence, but causal necessity and sufficiency require additional tests.

4. A geometric consequence of a fixed direction

The blind spot is located in visual-field coordinates relative to gaze, rather than at a fixed physical mark on a page. A simple geometric example shows why distance matters when mapping a retinal gap onto a flat surface.

For illustration only, choose a direction 15 degrees from fixation and a page 30 centimeters from the eye, perpendicular to the line of sight. The horizontal displacement on the page is $30 \tan(15^\circ)$, approximately 8.0 centimeters. At 60 centimeters, it is about 16.1 centimeters. These numbers describe the chosen geometry, not a measured blind-spot location for every person.

Changing viewing distance changes which physical point projects to that direction. Looking directly at a previously missing target also changes its retinal location. Such changes do not make the anatomical blind spot disappear; they move the image relative to it. That distinction prevents a moving target or a change of gaze from being mistaken for recovery of receptors.

5. The eyes and the brain solve different parts of the problem

With two eyes open, a location poorly sampled by one eye can be sampled by the other. With eye movements, information can be acquired from different retinal positions over time. Neither observation alone explains why a uniform surface can look continuous during controlled monocular viewing with fixation maintained.

That controlled case is important because it rules out a shortcut. If continuity survives when the second eye's contribution is excluded and gaze is constrained, the explanation must include processing of the available surrounding information. The neural and perceptual studies address this restricted problem rather than assuming that ordinary binocular viewing tells the whole story. [1,2]

The broader visual system uses many processes, but a finding about the normal blind spot should not be transferred automatically to every retinal lesion or perceptual illusion. Different time courses, anatomical changes and stimuli can require different explanations. Similar-looking experiences do not guarantee identical mechanisms.

6. What the blind spot does not prove

The blind spot demonstrates that perceived continuity is not a pixel-for-pixel readout of retinal sampling. It does not demonstrate that the external world is fictitious, that all perception is hallucination, or that any confident belief is equally reliable. The experience remains constrained by actual surrounding input and by the conditions under which it is tested.

It also does not follow that every unobserved feature is represented in rich detail. A theory may explain the absence of a visible gap without assigning a fully specified internal value to every point. The strength of a neural account lies in the observations and perturbations it predicts, not in how vividly it resembles a screen inside the head.

We ordinarily fail to notice the blind spot because visual experience is organized from available information rather than displaying an anatomical inventory of missing receptors. Binocular coverage helps in everyday viewing; stimulus-dependent completion also matters in the monocular case. [1,2] The answer preserves both the remarkable coherence of perception and its demonstrable limits.

Related reading

Article 033, “Why do we need sleep?”, likewise separates an observed state from competing accounts of its neural function. The link is optional and reciprocal.

References

- [1] H. Komatsu, M. Kinoshita and I. Murakami. Neural Responses in the Retinotopic Representation of the Blind Spot in the Macaque V1 to Stimuli for Perceptual Filling-In. *Journal of Neuroscience* 20, 9310-9319 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.20-24-09310.2000>
- [2] H. Komatsu. The neural mechanisms of perceptual filling-in. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 7, 220-231 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn1869>