

The super-recogniser

I have always known that I have the 'never-forgetting-a-face thing', but never for a second, thought it had a name, or that when I took one of the recognition tests, I would score the highest ever recorded. It was then that



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I thought, I really want, if possible, to do something with this thing that I had sometimes thought of as an affliction.

I probably every week see or meet, and instantly and effortlessly identify, people I know I have met a long time ago in a situation of which they have no recollection. I also then often freak them out with this. I've had to learn to keep my recognitions to myself at times or risk coming across as odd.

I will usually remember instantly where I have seen people. Sometimes, it may take a little longer, but I will always get there.

I worked in retail for many years and knew throughout that my ability to remember faces could certainly benefit me in my work. Customers greatly appreciated being recognised and I built up a rapport with many customers who would be served only by me. I not only knew the face of each person, but would recall what they had purchased and many other details about them.

In one place of work, a robbery had taken place and the detectives involved in the case showed me a book of maybe 200 photos of possible suspects. I recognised the two people concerned immediately and they were arrested.

I am now a couple counsellor and so far, in my client work, have not come across anyone whom I have met previously. I am sure at some point this will happen. Having said that, I was recently introduced to a colleague's partner, whom I instantly recognised: I had served him around 2002. I recounted this to him and what he had been looking at in the shop I was then working in, and this did astound him. Does super-recognition help me in my current field? I am not sure. Maybe I just haven't recognised it yet...

If anyone reading this has any thoughts on how, or where I might apply this skill, please do let me know. Now I know I have a very specific talent, I am eager to put it to good use.

Dr Ashok Jansari, Reader in Psychology at the University of East London, comments (see also p.726): 'I have been fascinated by face recognition ever since hearing of prosopagnosia or face blindness as an undergrad, and I was intrigued when I heard that research had begun on people at the other end of the spectrum. I set up an MSc project to look for super-recognisers in 2010 and have been exploring the phenomenon ever since. I ran a large study at London's Science Museum to look at the British public's face recognition and last year, I helped in a Channel 4 programme called *Hidden Talents*. Through these events, I have recruited super-recognisers including Moira; I am conducting research to see what makes their face recognition so good. The findings will inform theoretical models of face recognition, help refine software and maybe even one day be used to help those with prosopagnosia. If you know anyone who thinks they are a super-recogniser or a prosopagnosic, I would like to hear from them: see www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/research/face-recognition.'



The super ager

Ms Custis Wright, Austin, Texas

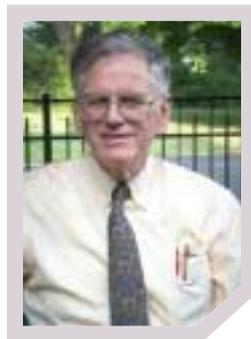
I am 88 years old, and lucky to be able to test and qualify as a 'SuperAger'.

My life has been a very fortunate one, in comfortable circumstances; my health has been good and any difficulties have been taken care of. I graduated from Vassar and leaving Baltimore where I grew up, I moved with my first husband to Minneapolis. In the 1950s I married again and moved to Texas, ending up with a blended family. After running around after five children (though with help), at age 50 I decided to be more physically active. I had walked during golf, before carts, but nothing else. Thus, I decided to take up jogging for two miles, very slowly. I continued for 25 years, after which I was forced by hip tendonitis to slow to a fast walk. Meanwhile, remaining an active golfer, I also worked on a Nordic Track, and then an elliptical trainer. These exercises have continued to this day.

I felt I was fairly intelligent but always had to contend with my husband's 180 IQ. I do find that I read more, and more widely, than most people. It was fun to take the tests at Northwestern Medical School, but I am still considering going to a memory clinic. Both of my siblings died young, but I am confident that my mother, who died at 88, would have been considered a SuperAger. Unfortunately, I was not around her sister or my father at the end (both died at 83 years old), but it is possible that they might have qualified as well.

Maintaining my good health has always been important and all my adult life I have strictly limited intake of fats and sugars, with occasional indulgences; I love red wine. I have celiac disease, so grains are difficult, but gluten-free options can be found. My life includes a number of small, unorganised groups, some members of which have views directly opposed to mine; in most of these I am definitely the oldest person. So with my family (including two daughters living nearby) and friends, I have wonderful social contacts.

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The bitter reality of 'supertasting'

Professor Charles Spence, University of Oxford

Roughly a quarter of the population are more sensitive than the rest to tastes, especially to the bitter taste in foods such as Brussels sprouts, endive salad, and coffee. Not everyone who you might imagine being a 'supertaster', is. Jeffrey Steingarten, the famous North American food critic, turned out to be a non-taster when I gave him a tasting strip.

Some supertasters may have as many as 16 times more papillae on their tongues than some other non-tasters. All those extra taste buds also give the supertaster an enhanced ability to experience the oral-somatosensory texture of foods as well. What is more, work from the Crossmodal Research Laboratory here in Oxford, together with Unilever Research, has demonstrated that supertasters are less likely than non-tasters to be misled when a food is coloured inappropriately. These findings make sense, but the latest observation that has got the

scientists really scratching their heads is why supertasters also appear to have enhanced olfactory abilities (this work from Gary Pickering and his group in Canada).

While supertasters may have an enhanced ability to detect certain food-related stimuli it's not so obvious that we would really all *want* to be a supertaster. In my family it turns out that my father, who would force the rest of the family to finish the vegetables on the plate – including those Brussels sprouts – lives in a different taste world than the rest of us, who all hated the taste of this most bitter vegetable. When I gave my family the tasting strips recently, it turned out that my father was a non-taster while the rest of the family were tasters. Interestingly, because taster status tends to run in families, researchers back in the 1930s even considered using a person's response to one of the tasting strips as a cheap paternity test.

On being 'super humane'

Professor Sam McFarland, Western Kentucky University

Gandhi once said, 'All humanity is one undivided and indivisible family.' Studies of those who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust found they shared Gandhi's deep sense of the 'oneness with all humanity'. That oneness transcended their sense of oneness with members of one's nationality, race or religion.

For reasons my self-examination does not reveal, I have agreed with Gandhi's sentiment, both intellectually and emotionally, since late childhood. Reared in luxury, I am certainly not a Gandhi, and can only guess whether I would have had the courage of the rescuers.

Still, I think my life has shown this 'oneness with all humanity'. At age 14, my parents sent me to a military school, where I quickly declared myself a conscientious objector. I somehow knew it morally wrong to let your nation decide for you if and when it is right to kill fellow human beings. I was hazed for that unpopular view, but also gained the respect of more thoughtful faculty and students. Although living in the South, I was a firm supporter of desegregation in the 50s and a frequent civil rights marcher and anti-war activist in the 60s. In all of these, my sense of our common humanity anchored my decisions and actions.

Today my causes are humanitarian and human rights. I have long supported Amnesty International, and give lots of money to Oxfam, Human Rights Watch and similar organisations. These organisations are the main recipients in my will. Also, I now co-chair the Education Committee for Human Rights Coalition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

As a professor, I developed a course on human rights, which I still teach in retirement, and am now writing a textbook on human rights. My research has focused on understanding racism and war, and their opposite, 'identification with all humanity', which I wrote a questionnaire to measure. Two questions read, 'How often do you use the word "we" to refer to people all over the world?', and 'When they are in need, how much do you want to help people all over the world?' If asked these questions, my answers would be 'very often' to the first and 'very much' to the second, the highest response options.

I Sam McFarland is Professor Emeritus at Western Kentucky University, where he still teaches and writes on human rights. He has served as president of the International Society of Political Psychology.

McFarland, S., Webb, M. & Brown, D. (2012). All humanity is my ingroup: A measure and studies of identification with all humanity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103, 830-853.



This month, the Society's **Research Digest blog** hosts 'super week'. Editor Dr Christian Jarrett meets people with 'super' abilities, or those who have conducted research with them. We present a selection here. For more, see www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog



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