

# **New research has revealed we are actually better at remembering names than faces**

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

With the Christmas party season fast approaching, there will be plenty of

opportunity to re-live the familiar, and excruciatingly-awkward, social situation of not being able to remember an acquaintance's name.

This cringe-worthy experience leads many of us to believe we are terrible at remembering [names](#).

However, new research has revealed this intuition is misleading; we are actually better at remembering names than faces.

The authors of the study, from the University of York, suggest that when we castigate ourselves for forgetting someone's name we are placing unfair demands on our brains.

Remembering a person's face in this situation relies on recognition, but remembering their name is a matter of recall, and it is already well-established that human beings are much better at the former than the latter.

The researchers also point out that we only become aware that we have forgotten a name when we have already recognised the face.

We rarely have to confront the problem of knowing a name, but not a face—remaining blissfully unaware of the countless faces we should recognise, but walk straight past on the street.

For the study, the researchers designed a "fair test", pitting names against faces on a level playing field.

They set up an experiment to place equal demands on the ability of participants to remember faces and names by testing both in a game of recognition.

The results showed participants scored consistently higher at

remembering names than faces—recognising as little as 64% of faces and up to 83% of names in the tests.

Dr. Rob Jenkins, from the Department of Psychology at the University of York, said: "Our study suggests that, while many people may be bad at remembering names, they are likely to be even worse at remembering faces. This will surprise many people as it contradicts our intuitive understanding.

"Our life experiences with names and faces have misled us about how our minds work, but if we eliminate the double standards we are placing on memory, we start to see a different picture."

For the study, participants were given an allotted period of time to memorise unknown faces and names and then tested on which ones they thought they had seen before.

The researchers then repeated the test, but this time they complicated the experiment by showing participants different images of the same faces and the names in different typefaces. This was to make the test as realistic as possible, as real faces appear slightly differently, due to factors such as lighting and hairstyle, each time you see them.

On average, participants recognised 73% of faces when shown the same photo and 64% when shown a different photo. On the other hand, they recognised 85% of names presented in the same format and 83% in different fonts and sizes.

When the researchers presented faces and names of famous people, participants achieved a much more balanced score—recognising a more or less the same number of faces as they did names.

The results show that we are particularly bad at recognising unknown

faces, but even with faces and names we have encountered before, we still don't perform better at recognising faces than names at any point. Dr. Jenkins added: "Knowing someone's face, but not remembering their name is an everyday phenomenon.

Our knee-jerk reaction to it is to say that names must be harder to memorise than [faces](#), but researchers have never been able to come up with a convincing explanation as to why that might be. This study suggests a resolution to that problem by showing that it is actually a red herring in the first place."

I recognise your name, but I can't remember your face: an advantage for names in recognition memory is published in the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

**More information:** Mike Burton et al, I recognise your name but I can't remember your face: an advantage for names in recognition memory, *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1747021818813081](#)

Provided by University of York

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