



intricate details of faces, fingerprints and even firearms only by sight has taken a new, exciting twist.

While TV programs like CSI show computer algorithms performing forensic science tasks—like fingerprint-matching—they are actually performed by forensic scientists who train for many years. However, new research led by Dr. Bethany Grows, a cognitive psychologist from the University of Exeter, suggests there may be [ordinary people](#) with a natural talent in this [task](#).

In a pioneering new study, Dr. Grows and colleagues investigated how well some [people](#) can compare complex visual images like fingerprints and faces.

The researchers asked a group of people to carry out four visual identity matching tasks containing faces, fingerprints, firearms, and artificial prints. Participants were asked to compare two images side-by-side and decide if they came from the same source or different sources.

They found that some participants were highly accurate across all four tasks—a feat achieved without any forensic science background or training.

The research suggests there are likely to be rare individuals in the [general population](#) who could be as accurate as expert forensic scientists, but who naturally possess this ability without any training.

Dr. Grows suggests that these "super-matchers" may not even realize they have this skill. She said: "This is not a task people do often as part of their daily lives, so they may never realize they have this gift. We think this ability may be related to a broader pattern-recognition skill—for example, some people are 'super-recognizers' of faces and they tend to do really well on our tests as well. But this is something that

still needs to be investigated."

To help with this investigation, Dr. Grows and her team have created a new online [test—which you can attempt here](#)—to help find these "super-matchers" and understand what makes them better than the average person.

This finding challenges long-held beliefs that forensic scientists' abilities are solely the result of years of experience and training. However, with this new research, Dr. Grows suggests, "Knowing there are people who are naturally gifted in visual comparison means we can design tests to identify and recruit them in forensic science laboratories around the world."

Much more research is needed to identify individuals who excel at this task and what makes them so different to the average person. Currently, we know very little about how or why they might outperform so many people. The long-term research goal of Dr. Grows' team is planning to explore the underlying psychological processes that might make these people so good. But first, we have to find them.

The study, entitled Match me if you can: Evidence for a domain-general visual comparison ability, is now published in *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*.

**More information:** Bethany Grows et al, Match me if you can: Evidence for a domain-general visual comparison ability, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.3758/s13423-021-02044-2](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-021-02044-2)

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