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Consolidation, Wider Reflection, and Policy: Response to 'Super-recognisers: From the Lab to the World and Back Again'

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Abstract:	Here, David Robertson and Markus Bindemann respond to a recent BJP Target Article on 'super-recognisers' (SRs). They outline the need to consider human factors that could influence SR performance after selection, and the need for a co-ordinated effort to ensure best practice in the implementation of SRs in applied contexts.
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Consolidation, Wider Reflection, and Policy: Response to ‘Super-recognisers: From the Lab to the World and Back Again’

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests

Abstract

Here, David Robertson and Markus Bindemann respond to a recent BJP Target Article on ‘super-recognisers’ (SRs). They outline the need to consider human factors that could influence SR performance after selection, and the need for a co-ordinated effort to ensure best practice in the implementation of SRs in applied contexts.

1 **Response**

2 Ramon, Bobak and White's (2019) target article 'Super-recognisers: From the lab to the
3 world and back again' is a welcome addition to the literature at a time when consolidation,
4 reflection, and forward planning within this field is required. Here we agree that co-ordinated
5 efforts are needed to develop ecologically-valid SR tests, we add that occupational and
6 cognitive factors should not be overlooked when considering SR performance in the
7 workplace, and we support the call for a meeting of researchers, practitioners, and the
8 judiciary to create a comprehensive policy framework and action plan for the use of SRs in
9 society.

10 There has now been a decade of research on super-recognition since the concept was
11 first introduced. This has established that SRs excel at tests of learned face memory, as well
12 as unfamiliar face matching (Bobak, Dowsett, & Bate, 2016; Davis, Lander, Evans, &
13 Jansari, 2016; Robertson, Noyes, Dowsett, Jenkins, & Burton, 2016). The latter provide
14 simplified laboratory analogues to person verification processes in policing (i.e. matching the
15 faces of perpetrators caught on CCTV to suspects in custody) and border control (i.e.
16 matching travellers' faces to their passport photos). However, researchers have also sounded
17 a note of caution to those agencies, by demonstrating that high individual performance in one
18 test (e.g., memory) does not always generalise to another (e.g., matching) (Bobak et al., 2016;
19 Davis et al., 2016). Indeed, seemingly similar tasks, differentiated only by the face stimuli in
20 use, can reveal very different performances in the same individuals (Fysh & Bindemann,
21 2018).

22 For reasons such as this, we argued recently that "selection of individuals for
23 professional roles by their face-matching ability cannot be achieved with a "quick" test, but
24 must likely involve thorough testing over a prolonged period" (p. 8; Lander, Bruce, &
25 Bindemann, 2018). This resonates with Ramon, Bobak and White's (2019) argument that

26 occupational selection should be based on a comprehensive battery of assessments. This must
27 mirror critical aspects of real world processes to ensure best practice in occupational selection
28 of SRs for specific roles.

29 We made these comments with broader reference to policing and border security, as the
30 majority of professionals responsible for person identification have not undergone SR testing.
31 The key issues outlined by Ramon, Bobak and White (2019) also reflect professional practice
32 more generally, beyond deployment of SRs. For example, there still exists limited
33 standardization across countries in facial image comparison training, and short training
34 courses do not lead to improvements in identification accuracy, suggesting limiting scientific
35 testing during their development (Towler, Kemp, Burton, Dunn, & Wayne, 2019). Similarly,
36 the extent to which personnel selection for security roles such as passport officers is based on
37 scientifically-validated tests of face identification is typically opaque.

38 In Psychology, work has already started on the development of more ecologically valid
39 tests (see Bate et al., 2018). In line with Ramon, Bobak and White (2019), we agree that these
40 developments must take account of the face stimuli (e.g., CCTV stills, passport photos) and
41 identification methods (e.g., passport renewal displays) that individuals are likely to
42 encounter on the job, to provide effective selection measures. We suggest creation of a
43 battery of tests, for SRs and *others* working in similar settings, which incorporate real-world
44 processes and workplace environments as closely as possible. Of course, a joint venture
45 between the various agencies and researchers is the best way to achieve this.

46 This battery must take account of factors apparent in applied settings, such as time
47 pressure, task repetition, and shift patterns (see Fysh & Bindemann, 2017). Use-inspired basic
48 research from the laboratory has begun to investigate these, but replication with increased
49 ecological validity must be targeted next. Laboratory research also points to factors less
50 obvious in occupational settings, such as influences of personality and cognitive processing

51 styles (see Lander, Bruce, & Bindemann, 2018). Broader discussion with representatives
52 from policing, passport renewal, and border control is still required to raise awareness of this
53 research, to consider its implications, and to design field tests and interventions.

54 We support Ramon, Bobak and White's (2019) view that we are at a critical juncture
55 for ensuring that SR research will translate into meaningful gains in society in the long-term.
56 In order to do that, we now need to engage with the relevant agencies and policy makers to
57 end the patchwork of awareness and implementation of SRs. We therefore agree that a
58 working group, with representatives from research, Policing, Border Control, the Home
59 Office, Passport Office and Ministry of Justice, should be convened as soon as possible to
60 effect change in the UK.

61 This working group must create an action plan for the use of SRs in society. In addition
62 to the points above, we believe that the following six items should be considered. First, to
63 provide non-specialist research summaries highlighting the evidence base for selection of
64 SRs in policing, passport renewal and border control (work has already started to that end,
65 see Robertson, 2018; Robertson, Middleton, & Burton, 2015). Second, to evaluate current use
66 of SRs across forces and agencies, and to generate case studies where possible. Third, to
67 provide an action plan for co-ordinated development of ecologically-valid selection tests for
68 SRs, as well as other professionals performing similar identification tasks. Fourth, to evaluate
69 administration of 'specialist' testimony in the criminal justice system, working towards
70 official judicial guidelines for the use of SR evidence in court. Fifth, to collate this
71 information and disseminate it to researchers and practitioners for feedback. Sixth, to
72 incorporate that feedback and work with the field to achieve the action points.

73 As we enter the second decade of SR research, researchers and practitioners need to
74 work in co-ordination to ensure that psychological research on facial identification has
75 positive, lasting effects on society. If we, as scientists and practitioners, do not act to control

76 this narrative and process then, as stated in the target article, it is possible that private
77 industry may fill the vacuum, and an opportunity for psychological science to make a
78 significant impact on policing and national security may be missed.

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