

Look, lads – girls are best at spotting faces

Lois Rogers

MEN really are worse than women at recognising people, researchers have found. The reason, scientists believe, lies in the genes.

The findings come from a study of 120 people who were tested on their ability to recognise unfamiliar faces. They were initially shown close-up pictures of 10 to 20 anonymous faces for 20 seconds and asked to memorise them.

The photographs had been digitally altered to remove ears, hair and any obvious blemishes. The intention was to force the subjects to identify people based only on their main facial features.

The subjects were then asked to identify the same photographs interspersed among 30 to 50 other faces. According to researchers at York University in Toronto, women were 5% more successful than men at identifying the faces.

They also noted that gay men and left-handed men

scored better than other men.

Jennifer Steeves, a psychologist who led the study and runs the perceptual neuroscience laboratory at the university, said her team was surprised by the results. "There is a small but significant difference in how reliably and how quickly men and women can recognise faces," she said. "Women just seem to be more efficient at it than men.

"It may be that they are programmed to study faces better because of the need to recognise the needs of their offspring."

Not all women are better than men at recognising people at parties, as Meryl Streep's magazine boss character illustrated in the film *The Devil Wears Prada*; she needed her assistant to brief her on people she was about to encounter.

But the Toronto researchers suggest there may be a significant difference in the way men and women analyse faces. They suspect women and gay men use both hemispheres

of their brains, while straight men use just one side.

Psychologists believe that women and gay men are more interested in reading emotion and personality traits from the faces of others, an instinct linked to an urge to empathise and nurture, and devote more brain power to the task. However, researchers have yet to prove that theory by scanning subjects' brains as they are in the process of identifying faces.

Saffron Ellidge, a "face reader" based in north London, who is used by a range of employers to help vet job candidates, believes the Toronto study chimes with her observations. "The results of this study don't surprise me," she said. "Women do take in more from people's faces because they are more interested than men.

"In my work I have observed that the people with the worst facial recognition skills are what you would call alpha males. They tend to be most absorbed in their own

emotions, whereas those who want to gain rapport with others are better at it."

Other British experts maintain that the gender difference in ability to recognise faces is marginal. Tim Valentine, professor of psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London, warned: "This study was made particularly hard because they took away any context."

Valentine believes that in recognition tests the differences in performance of individuals of the same sex is greater than the difference between genders.

The secrets of facial recognition are so far defeating technology. A computerised method called face-mapping seeks to identify people by measuring the distances between features without having to worry about changes to clothing and hairstyle.

However, recent research by Josh Davis, senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Greenwich and an adviser to the police on identity parades, found it unreliable.



20TH CENTURY FOX

Meryl Streep's character in *The Devil Wears Prada* had to be reminded of the names of people she was about to meet