

# The Importance of Social Diversity for Creativity, and Critical Thinking

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## SECTION ONE

### Crossing Divides: The friends who are good for your brain

By Julie Van de Vyver & Richard Crisp

Creative thinking is essential for everything from solving problems to personal fulfilment. So, how can we do more to nurture it?

Every day we are expected to make hundreds of decisions and judgements.

These range from small ones, like what to have for breakfast, to big ones like whether to take a new job.



The trouble is that our mental resources are limited - the human mind can only cope with so many things.

Given this huge challenge, we adopt mental shortcuts to function

effectively. It is an approach which gets us through life, but which can also limit our growth as people.

Something as simple as thinking about the people we have around us can do a lot to change that and can even help us become more creative.

#### 101 uses for a spoon

It may seem like an odd question, but what is a spoon for?

Your automatic assumption might well be that it is for stirring a cup of tea, or for eating cereal.



We do not tend to think about the many other uses a spoon could have. What about using it to dig a hole, wedge a door open, or catapult peas across the table?

The idea we reach first is a mental shortcut: it requires no thought and comes to mind without effort. It is a stereotype of the reasons for which we use a spoon.

This is an example of heuristic thinking, or what many people would refer to as a gut feeling.

Nevertheless, [research suggests that there are some surprising ways](#) in which we can think more creatively - breaking away from the many such automatic thoughts we have.

One is by opening ourselves up to greater social diversity - in other words, doing things like mixing with, or listening to, people who are not "just like us".

There are many ways in which we differ from each other: age, race, education, home town and so on.

Being asked to interact with someone from a different culture or background requires us to take a leap outside our comfort zones. Even just imagining doing this can have an effect.

Put differently, diversity gives the brain a powerful workout. And, just like a physical workout, it can be incredibly good for us.

## **Beyond the obvious**

However, we know that "birds of a feather flock together". [People tend to make friends with those who are similar to them](#) - in terms of values, preferences, and personality traits.

Breaking with these habits helps us challenge the heuristic-based thinking that shapes our automatic thoughts.

When people are exposed to a more diverse group of people, their brains are forced to process complex and unexpected information.

The more people do this, the better they become at producing complex and unexpected information themselves.

This trains us to look more readily look beyond the obvious - precisely the hallmark of creative thinking.

## The candle problem

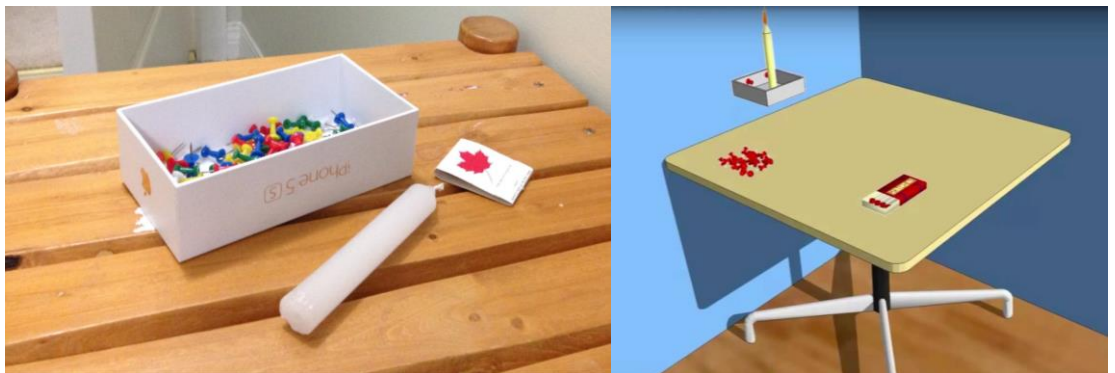
In a [study on the benefits of social diversity](#), one group of participants was asked to think of someone who conformed to stereotypes - such as a female midwife.

The other group was asked to think of someone who did not - for example, a male childminder.

We then measured the effect on creativity by asking participants to produce original names for a new brand of pasta. They were given existing pasta names as examples.

Results showed that the group asked to picture people who did not conform to stereotypes were more creative.

They relied less on the heuristic-based knowledge available in the task - the example of brand names - and came up with better new ones. Anyone for a bowl of "fontegalli" or "squigllioni"?



Other research has explored [whether an experience of living abroad enhances creativity](#).

The researchers used a puzzle called the Duncker candle problem.

Participants were shown a picture containing a candle, a box of matches, and a box of pins.

The task was to figure out, using only the objects on the table, how to attach the candle to the wall so that the candle burns properly and does not drip wax on the floor.

The correct solution involved using the box of pins as a candleholder.

This task requires participants to ignore their pre-existing associations and see objects as performing different functions from what is typical.

The results showed that an experience of living abroad enhanced performance on this creativity task.

## A new perspective

Of course, most of us will not be improving our creativity by thinking about spoons, pasta names, or attaching candles to a wall.

But there are many other things that can help us.

Engaging with diversity could include anything from watching foreign films to reading books about someone from a different background.

It could mean making new friends through volunteering with a group that includes people of all ages, or joining a sports club that involves people from other cultures.

Researchers have also found that creating and [enjoying the arts can help us](#) see things from a new perspective, by putting ourselves in a character's shoes.

They can also create [a feeling of connectedness](#) and [general kindness](#).

Opening ourselves to new experiences can seem hard to do, but it can help us cross divides and nurture new and inclusive friendships.

In these challenging times for social cohesion, there may be real benefits of embracing the new and the unexpected.

In doing so, we may not only be helping our own personal growth, but putting ourselves in the best possible position to help solve society's enduring problems.

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#### About this piece

This analysis piece was [commissioned by the BBC from experts working for an outside organisation](#).

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## SECTION TWO

# Crossing Divides: The benefits of having friends who aren't 'just like us'

By Prof Miles Hewstone

Having a strong network of friends has many advantages, from offering support when we are down, to a group we can share our thoughts with. But could we be missing out if we only mix with people "just like us"?

For most of us, the people we see on a regular basis - our social network - are a defining part of our lives.

Friends help us understand our place in the world and research shows that [strong friendships are associated with reduced anxiety](#).

But there is a growing body of evidence that suggests people tend to make friends with people who are similar to them.

It may well be that we could all benefit from widening the circles we move in. For example, mixing with [a diverse set of people can stimulate creativity](#) and benefits both the individual and society.

The impact that our social networks have on the strength of our opinions is an area that researchers are investigating.

The attitudes we hold most strongly guide the way we see the world and are more resistant to being changed by the persuasion of others.

Often, we seek out, process and retain information that confirms our views, while discarding information that disagrees with our opinions.

An example of this "[confirmation bias](#)" might be the way we listen to others' views on Brexit and whether we believe it is good, or bad, for the UK.

Most people are in social networks made up of like-minded people, whereas a small minority mix with people with a wider range of views.

As groups become more diverse, evidence suggests their members are more open to persuasion and their [attitudes towards a particular issue become less entrenched](#).





In the case of Brexit, many of us may have had that "aha" moment, when we realised that just about everyone we knew held the same view as we did.

This is why, if you are a Remainer, you may have been amazed to learn the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU.

If you were a Leaver, however, the result would have seemed much more obvious - after all, many of the people you know held that view.

It is a compelling example of a current dispute where people hold starkly different views.

Consequences can follow when people have such polarised positions.

The tendency of "birds of a feather to flock together" - a behaviour sociologists call homophily - often strengthens stereotypes about both our own group and those of others.

It can happen in many ways, for example [children in school cafeterias grouping themselves](#) by everything from ethnicity to less intuitively obvious characteristics like hairstyle and whether they wear glasses.

Soon, we can find our social world divided along lines of age, social class, political views, religion and race.

Additional psychological biases may then take over.

For example, [we may see our own group as "better"](#) - for example, more interesting, entertaining, or informed - and other groups as less favourable.

In the worst cases, we can move from a slight preference for our own group to active dislike of others.

As groups move further apart, they can end up living in different neighbourhoods, attending different schools and believing different "facts".

Ignorance of others' habits, thoughts and feelings can shape our views of the world, as [we tend to use stereotypes to make sense of people](#) we rarely encounter.

Despite this, research suggests that having friends who belong to other groups can be good for us.



It can reduce anxiety about mixing with people who aren't "just like us" and dispel negative expectations of interactions with them.

This, in turn, can lead to more positive attitudes towards other groups in general.

It enables and encourages us to take the perspective of their members and to feel more empathy towards them.

A surprising effect is that contact with one group of "others", for example gay people, can change our attitudes towards other groups, for example people with more or less money than us.

Contact appears to reduce prejudice, polarization and segregation - the effects of contact trickle down from one group to others.

The way contact with other groups changes our attitudes has been shown in many studies all over the world.

Most of this early work was done in the US, where studies of white American and African American students following the desegregation of schools found that increased contact reduced prejudice.

Other examples of successful contact, from [my own research group at Oxford University](#), include Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; Malay, Chinese and Indian people in Malaysia and Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot people in Cyprus.

Most recently, we found that the merger of previously separate schools, catering for White-British and Asian-British students in Oldham, led to more positive attitudes towards one another and more mixed groups of friends.

Of course, in many places, groups still live segregated lives.

But indirect contact between them can still lead to changing attitudes.

For example, knowing of other groups through mutual friends has been shown to reduce prejudice almost as effectively as direct contact.

People have also been shown to change their attitudes towards other groups after watching films, or television, that portray members of these groups.

For example, research about the comedy Will and Grace, which centres around a friendship between a heterosexual woman and gay men, suggests that attitudes about gay people are more positive among those who watch more episodes.

Image copyright Alamy Image caption Are viewers of TV's Will And Grace more positive in attitudes towards gay people?



This result is not simply due to who wants to watch such programmes. Experiments that randomly assigned people to watch [programmes including Queer Eye for the Straight Guy](#) found they were more likely to display reduced levels of prejudice compared with those who watched other shows.

*Contact is not, however, a panacea for prejudice.*

Its effectiveness is limited by continued segregation, or where a sense of threat is felt when groups mix - confirming prejudices in the worst cases.

Over 60 years of research - from North America to Europe, Asia, Africa and Australasia - suggests that contact between groups is a powerful means of improving relations.

In many cases it can see us live together more positively and peaceably in an increasingly diverse world.

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#### **About this piece**

This analysis piece was [commissioned by the BBC from an expert working for an outside organisation](#).

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