

Mental Simulations of Social Thought and Action

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We live in a world with people from diverse cultures, different societies and varied communities. Unfortunately, all those differences can sometimes result in segregation and discrimination. Reducing prejudice and creating more open minded societies has been the focal point of recent research and now, a new study in this field suggests that mental simulation is a key component of behavioral change strategies. Though this approach is controversial, authors Richard J. Crisp, Michèle D. Birtel, and Rose Meleady at the University of Kent, believe that this will assist in reducing prejudice and discrimination.

According to the article, which will be published in the August edition of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, there have been many examples of successful mental simulation. Athletes have been shown to improve performance after imagining themselves running faster or working harder. Students have done better in school after imagining themselves scheduling their time to study.

The authors refer to a theory developed by Gordon W. Allport in the 1950's called the contact hypothesis, or intergroup contact theory.

According to author Crisp, "The contact hypothesis says if you bring people together under positive conditions, it will reduce prejudice and better the attitudes people have towards one another."

Crisp goes on to say, "We've seen the contact hypothesis work hundreds of times, but it only works if there is the *opportunity* for contact among different groups of people. Where there is no opportunity for contact, mental simulation may provide a solution."

Mental simulation and the use of imagery plays a key role in many areas of psychological science. The authors stress that imagery has been shown to be a natural part of the way we think and is helpful in changing behavior. Crisp suggests, "Imagery should not replace face to face contact, but what it might do is prepare people to engage in interactions in a more successful way."