What Is It About Friendships That Is So Powerful?

DAVID BROOKS

In the late 1980s, a few years before the internet was a household name, a group of researchers at Harvard and three others found that poor children who grew up in contact with rich children were more likely to rise out of poverty than those who did not. The effect was intriguing, but no one knew how powerful it was.

A new study, led by Raj Chetty of Stanford University, published last month, has the power to overturn the idea that individual effort is the key to success. The study, and its conclusions, are based on an examination of more than 100 million tax records from 1980 to 2012. If you have two groups of children growing up in the same neighborhood one of which has rich friends and one of which does not, children who have rich friends are 20 percent more likely to have college-educated parents 10 years later. The effect is astonishing.

The size of the effect is astounding. Cross-class friendships are a powerful predictor of whether you rise out of poverty. It is the usual suspects: early childhood education, improved schools, stable families, neighborhood jobs. Friendships would not have been a part of the usual suspects.

The transformation is transformative. The philosopher Alexander Nehamas argues that when we enter into a friendship with someone different from yourself can be life-transforming. Nehamas writes: "If in the early days of a relationship we knew all the ways that a particular friendship would change us, how it might expand economic opportunity in America, I would have trotted out a little bit reluctant to jump in." Nehamas continues: "If you want to help people change, help them change inside you. If you want to help people change their world, help them change their minds about the way the world is accessible."

What is it exactly about these friendships that is so powerful? When I spoke with Chetty last week about the study, I asked him: "What is it exactly about these friendships that is so powerful? Could you connect it to society, or is it completely individual?"

"It's both," he said. "It's the fact that your friends are not just by your side; they get inside you. It's the fact that your friends are there to help you. They're there to help you change your world."

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Friendships are especially powerful, according to a recent study led by Raj Chetty of Stanford University, when they involve rich and poor children. The study, published last month, examined more than 100 million tax records from 1980 to 2012. If you have two groups of children growing up in the same neighborhood, one of which has rich friends and one of which does not, children who have rich friends are 20 percent more likely to have college-educated parents 10 years later. The effect is astonishing.

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