Workplace, community engagement key to interracial friendship

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People who are involved in community organizations and activities and who socialize with their co-workers are much more likely to have friends of another race than those who do not, according to a landmark study of interracial friendship in America.

The study, conducted by Xavier de Souza Briggs, associate professor of sociology and urban planning at MIT, highlights both the importance of social class and the waning influence of neighborhoods in fostering interracial ties in America.

Regardless of their race, people of higher incomes and those with more education were more likely to have more friends overall and to be civic "joiners"-people who get involved in community organizations and activities. These two factors, in turn, made it more likely that their social circles include people of other racial backgrounds, the study found.

"Choices to connect, shaped by the workplace and by associations that structure most of our opportunity to form relationships with people who are not like us, are a much bigger deal than interacting with one's neighbors," Briggs says. "Despite our romance with the idea of neighborhoods as being cohesive communities, Americans' friendships and other personal ties have become less centered on their neighborhoods over the past few decades, thanks to changes in communication technology, transportation, and other factors."

Briggs' study, which appears in the December issue of *City &*

Community, the urban research journal of the American Sociological Association, comes as researchers and advocates alike see widening racial, ethnic and economic fault lines in American society.

Against this backdrop, researchers emphasize, ties across racial lines provide essential ladders to economic opportunity, give people a broader perspective on public issues and expand their sense of self and community. These ties, in turn, help contain conflicts among different racial groups, promote wider access to information and influence, and enhance the ability to work with others to get things done in diverse communities and organizations.

“These friendship ties can act as precious social bridges,” says Briggs. “Understanding where, how, and for whom they form turns out to have big implications for how our society functions or dysfunctions. The clear message from this study is that we could be building more of these bridges by engaging people more effectively through the workplace and community organizations.”

Briggs' study, the largest-ever study of interracial friendship, analyzed data from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, which was designed and led by Harvard political science professor Robert Putnam, author of the best-selling Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Community in America.

The survey, completed in 2000, questioned some 30,000 people on their patterns of civic engagement, including participation in faith-based and secular organizations, political attitudes and activism, trust in others, and even informal socializing, such as getting together with co-workers. The communities covered by the survey range from small and relatively homogeneous cities, such as Lewiston, Maine, to big cities, such as Los Angeles, that are among the most ethnically diverse places in the world.

New York University law professor Cynthia Estlund, the author of Working Together: How Workplace Bonds Strengthen a Diverse Democracy, underlines the importance of Briggs' findings about the workplace as a connector, as well as the potential to do more through constructive public policy and employer initiatives. “The strong link that Briggs finds between socializing with co-workers and cross-racial friendships is especially encouraging,” says Estlund.

Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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