



The Two Beliefs of Successful People, by David Brooks

All day long, you are affected by large forces. Genes influence your intelligence and willingness to take risks. Social dynamics unconsciously shape your choices. Instantaneous perceptions set off neural reactions in your head without you even being aware of them. Over the past few years, scientists have made a series of exciting discoveries about how these deep patterns influence daily life.

[...]

[And yet, there is a] point at which the influence of social forces ends and the influence of the self-initiating individual begins.

Most successful people begin with two beliefs: the future can be better than the present, and I have the power to make it so. They were often showered by good fortune, but relied at crucial moments upon achievements of individual will.

Most successful people also have a phenomenal ability to consciously focus their attention. We know from experiments with subjects as diverse as obsessive-compulsive disorder sufferers and Buddhist monks that people who can self-consciously focus attention have the power to rewire their brains.

Control of attention is the ultimate individual power. People who can do that are not prisoners of the stimuli around them. They can choose from the patterns in the world and lengthen their time horizons. This individual power leads to others. It leads to self-control, the ability to formulate strategies in order to resist impulses. If forced to choose, we would all rather our children be poor with self-control than rich without it.

It leads to resilience, the ability to persevere with an idea even when all the influences in the world say it can't be done. A common story among entrepreneurs is that people told them they were too stupid to do something, and they set out to prove the jerks wrong.

It leads to creativity. Individuals who can focus attention have the ability to hold a subject or problem in their mind long enough to see it anew.

[In summary,] social determinism is a useful corrective to the Homo economicus view of human nature. It's also pleasantly egalitarian. The less successful are not less worthy, they're just less lucky. But it slights the centrality of individual character and individual creativity. And it doesn't fully explain the genuine greatness of humanity's outliers.

--David Brooks, From "Lost in the Crowd" [1]

Links:

[1] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/12/16/opinion/edbrooms.php>

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