

## Frogs in Little Ponds Feel Big

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that high performing students who attend small schools rate their performance higher than do average students in big schools, which has been called the “Frog Pond Effect.” Now three researchers from Ohio University (a very big school) offer an explanation of this effect.

One hundred students were divided into 10 groups of 10 students each and were told they were participating in an experiment about lie detecting. Each group of 10 was then divided into two groups of 5 students each with the explanation that people perform better in small groups than when working alone (which is true). Each small group was given some time to converse and get to know each other before the experiment began. The “experiment” asked each participant to look at a series of video clips and decide which persons on the videos were telling the truth and which were lying. After all participants had viewed all the video clips, each was given the following feedback: “You got 9 out of 15 correct.” Each was then told that he or she ranked either 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> out of the 10 people in their Big Group. Some of the participants who ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the Big Group were also told that they ranked first in their small group and some of the participants who ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the Big Group were told that they ranked last in their small group. The diagram below shows the standings of each person in the Big Group and in the small groups.

Big Group	Small Group 1	Small Group 2
1	1	
2	2	
3	3	
4	4	
5 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup> = worst in group	
6 <sup>th</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup> = best in group
7		2
8		3
9		4
10		5

After receiving feedback about their performance and their standings, each participant then rated their own ability at lie detecting on a 7 point scale (Very Bad to Very Good). Can you guess who rated themselves the highest and who rated themselves the worst?

Let’s start with the participants who were only told their standings in the Big Group. Those who were told they placed 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> place rated themselves about the same, that is, Average on the scale from Very Bad to Very Good. But those who were in 6<sup>th</sup> place out of 10 but were told they were first in their small group rated themselves much higher than those who were told they were last place in their small group, even though they also knew they were in 5<sup>th</sup> place overall. Looking at the table above, the worst in the first small group rated themselves much lower than the best in the second small group, even though they were ranked above them in the Big Group!

So what this does experiment say about self evaluations of performance? The authors note that people tend to base their self esteem on their group standing. Their findings suggest that local group comparisons are more meaningful to us than comparing ourselves to larger groups, which they call the *local dominance effect*. Thus for example even though your SAT score may rank you somewhere in the middle nationally, its ranking among your high school class is likely to be the index you hang your self esteem hat on. The same would go for your annual salary, golf handicap, or house appraisal. Of course national rankings are sometimes more important for self evaluations, especially if you score at the top, but even those in the top 1% may still be subject to the local dominance effect and worry about where they stand in that select group.

Our self evaluations also depend on what other people think of us, and here again the local dominance effect comes into play. How your small group ranks you will likely outweigh your standing in the large group. Being ranked high by your small group boosts self-esteem and self-confidence, both of which contribute as much to success in life as IQ or skill level. This may be one reason why students at the top of their class in small schools go on to become successful even after they move on to larger, more competitive schools. Their rankings in the bigger crowd may be only average but their self-evaluations remain high, formed earlier by being the big frog in the little pond.

But what about people who rank low in their small group and thus rate themselves negatively? If you've tried your hardest and still can't move up in the group you're in, the local dominance effect suggests another way to feel better about yourself – move to a new group.

Alicke, M.D.; Zell, E.; & Bloom, D.L. 2010. Mere categorization and the Frog-Pond Effect. *Psychological Science*. Vol. 21 (2) Pages 174 – 177.