

People looking for prestige prefer 'big ponds' over small ones

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When looking at new opportunity, do you choose an average place where you are among the top performers or do you choose a prestigious place where you might be average and not particularly remarkable? In other words, do you want to be the big frog in a small pond or a little frog in a big pond? According to recent research from the University of Michigan, your cultural upbringing ultimately affects your choice.

"Frog-Pond decisions represent important crossroads we all face: which university to go to, which internship to choose, which company to work for," says lead author Kaidi Wu. "What we end up choosing has downstream consequences and may significantly alter the paths of our lives. These consequences are not only individual, but cultural."

Past research in sociology and in educational psychology has focused on what happens to people after they've made the [decision](#) for what "[pond](#)" to join. The authors wanted to better understand how people choose which "pond" to join.

After testing the pond preferences between Asian and American students, the researchers recruited Chinese and U.S. adults and gave them the option between choosing to attend a top 10 ranked college while having below-average grades or attending a top 100 ranked college while having above-average grades. Chinese were more likely (58%) than European Americans (29%) to choose the first option, being below average at a top 10 ranked school.

They replicated the research in a third study, this time adding questions about people's reasoning behind their decisions. That's when they discovered that "Chinese didn't choose the 'big pond' because they are harmonious collectivists uninterested in standing out in a small pond." says Wu, "The real reason Chinese go for the big pond is that they are more concerned about prestige" than European Americans.

"The lesson here," says Wu, "is that as researchers draw cultural delineations, it is easy to end up with a reductionist way of construing opposing schemas: West—individualism, independence, analytic thinking; East—collectivism, interdependence, holistic thinking. But cultures are complex, porous, dynamic, ever-changing."

"The choices we make are the products of our culture," summarize Wu, "The next time you are faced with a frog-pond dilemma, take heart that there is not one right way of choosing; nor is there a universal standard of a single rational decision to be made."

The study, "Frogs, Ponds, and Culture: Variations in Entry Decisions" is published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

More information: Wu, Kaidi; Garcia, Stephen; Kopelman, Shirli
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