

Larger field dulls the drive to compete, University of Michigan researcher Stephen Garcia finds

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A little competition can be a good thing. But a lot of competition? Not so much.



Stephen Garcia

It turns out, having a lot of competitors in a work or school setting can actually cut down on competition among the bunch - something about getting lost in the crowd vs. sticking out.

Stephen Garcia, a University of Michigan assistant psychology and organizational studies professor and assistant law professor at the University of Haifa Avishalom Tor, looked at some of the most common individual performance measures - such as the SAT test - and the job interview.

According to the research, the fewer people a worker or student has to compete against, the better they try to perform.

"When you're in a crowd of 100 people, who cares?" Garcia said.

"When we're in a group of a few people, we're concerned about how we stack up."

The News recently spoke with Garcia about his findings.

Q: So why did you find this phenomenon?

A: The motivation to compete is driven by how we compare ourselves to other people. ... If I see you outperforming me, I'm going to perform better to prevent you from outperforming me.

Q: Why does this finding matter?

A: It has something interesting to say about the class-size debate. There is already this issue about students in large classes not doing as well because teachers can't devote as many resources, but we're suggesting the class size alone would have an impact on student performance.

Q: What about the workplace? A lot of workplaces are shrinking right now.

A: You'll probably be more concerned about where you socially compare among nine other co-workers rather than how you compare relative to 99 other co-workers. In a smaller branch, you're really going to try to do well. ... In the current job market, there's this shrinking resource or scarcity which creates competition. If the element of uncertainty is added, this feeling of "who's going to be next?" - it amplifies competitive tension.

Q: Is competition a good thing or a bad thing?

A: To the extent that people are motivated to compete and they are working on individual tasks, competition is probably a good thing. But if people are relying on each other, competition can sometimes stifle the flow of information.

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