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Culture's Constraints: International Differences in the Strength of Social Norms

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Abstract

Recent research has identified a critical contrast between societies that are *tight* (i.e., societies that have strong norms and a low tolerance for deviant behavior) and those that are *loose* (i.e., societies that have weak norms and a high tolerance for deviant behavior). I review differences between tight and loose cultures—from differences in ecological and historical conditions to the strength of everyday social situations and individual differences in psychological processes—and discuss the implications of this cultural contrast for research and practice in psychological science.

Keywords

culture, social norms, ecology, situational strength

In this world of increasing global interdependence, understanding cultural differences is critical for people in all walks of life, from diplomats and policymakers to global managers, immigrants, members of the military, and travelers. Although some research in culture and cross-cultural psychology has unearthed critical dimensions on which cultures vary, the vast majority of it has focused on differences in societal values, to the exclusion of other aspects of culture. Recently, I and my colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2011) expanded this traditional focus to include cultural differences in the strength of social norms. In particular, we advanced theory and research on the degree to which societies are *tight*—with strong norms and a low tolerance for deviant behavior—versus *loose*—with weak norms and a high tolerance for deviant behavior.

In this article, I review recent research on tightness-looseness, defined as the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviant behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011). I first discuss early anthropological research on tightness-looseness in traditional societies. I then discuss the nature of tightness-looseness in modern societies. I detail key ecological, historical, and institutional affordances of tightness-looseness, discuss ways in which social situations and individuals' psychological processes vary across tight and loose cultures, and advance new directions for research on tightness-looseness across the discipline of psychology.

Research on Tightness-Looseness in Traditional Societies

The idea that societies vary on tightness-looseness dates back to early anthropological work by Pertti J. Pelto. In his classic

paper, "The Difference Between 'Tight' and 'Loose' Societies," Pelto (1968) showed that traditional societies varied widely in their expression of and adherence to social norms. He described tight societies as those that were rigorously formal and disciplined, had clearly defined norms, and imposed severe sanctions on individuals who deviated from norms. By contrast, loose societies had a lack of formality and discipline, ill-defined norms, and a high tolerance for deviant behavior.

Pelto rated 21 traditional societies on such dimensions as their degree of political control, corporate ownership, theocracy, and legitimate use of force to produce a tightness score for each society. Of the societies rated, the Hutterites, Hano communities, the Lubara, and Israeli kibbutzim were ranked among the tightest societies, with strong norms and little tolerance for deviant behavior, whereas the societies of the !Kung bushmen, the Cubeo, and the Skolt Lapps were ranked among the loosest, with ambiguous norms and a high tolerance for deviant behavior. Lomax and Berkowitz (1972) later found that gardening societies were tight and were characterized by synchronized communication, orderliness, and cohesiveness, whereas hunting and fishing societies were loose and were characterized by less synchronized communication patterns. Barry, Child, and Bacon (1959) argued that in agricultural societies, the availability of future food supplies was predicated on the reliance on clear routines and adherence to rules. As a result, these societies were much more likely to have

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strict child-training practices that emphasized compliance with social norms than were hunting and gathering societies (see also Berry, 1966, 1967; Carpenter, 2000; Witkin & Berry, 1975).

Tightness-Looseness in Modern Societies

Despite this early work demonstrating the importance of tightness-looseness, it is only recently that there has been systematic research on this cultural contrast in modern nations. A key advance has been the development of reliable and valid measures of tightness-looseness and the differentiation of it from other constructs in the literature. In a study of approximately 7,000 individuals across 33 nations, individuals rated the degree to which they agreed with such statements as “There are many social norms that people are supposed to abide by in this country,” “In this country, if someone acts in an inappropriate way, others will strongly disapprove,” and “People in this country almost always comply with social norms.” I and my colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2011) found that tightness-looseness is a shared construct. That is, people generally agreed about the level of tightness-looseness in their nations. The measure of tightness-looseness also had convergent validity—it correlated with experts’ ratings, attitudes toward social deviance expressed by different samples of respondents to the World Values Survey and Pew Global Attitudes survey, and other unobtrusive measures of tightness-looseness (e.g., the accuracy of clocks in a given city, the percentage of left-handed writers in a given nation). The results showed that there was wide variation across nations in tightness-looseness. The tightest nations included Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea, and the loosest nations included the Ukraine, Estonia, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands, and Brazil (see Table 1 in Gelfand et al., 2011).

Tightness-looseness was also shown to be distinct from other constructs. Consistent with findings from research on traditional societies (Carpenter, 2000), results showed that tightness-looseness had only a moderate correlation with collectivism (i.e., the degree to which individuals feel strong ties to their in-groups; Triandis, 1989). Accordingly, there are cultures that are generally collectivistic and tight (e.g., Japan, Singapore), collectivistic and loose (e.g., Brazil), individualistic and loose (e.g., the United States, New Zealand), and individualistic and tight (e.g., Germany, Austria). Tightness and looseness also have different correlates. For example, collectivism is highly related to affluence, as indexed by a country’s gross national product (GNP), whereas tightness has no relationship with GNP. Collectivism is related to the activation of the collective self and concern with harmony with one’s ingroup (e.g., family), whereas tightness is related to the activation of the public self and compliance with generalized expectations in one’s society (Triandis, 1989). Tightness-looseness is also distinct from other cultural values, including power distance (i.e., the degree to which societies emphasize

hierarchy in social relations) and avoidance of uncertainty (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Historical, Ecological, and Institutional Affordances of Tightness-Looseness

A key question pertains to why cultural differences in tightness-looseness arise. Results from work by myself and my colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2011) showed that tightness-looseness is related to a broad array of ecological and human-made societal threats that nations have (or have not) encountered. Put simply, such threats increase the need for strong norms and the sanctioning of deviant behavior, which help humans coordinate their social action for survival. We (Gelfand et al., 2011) examined tightness-looseness in relation to numerous ecological and historical threats, including population density (in the year 1500 and the present day), resource scarcity (food supply, food deprivation, percentage of land devoted to farming, access to water resources, air quality), vulnerability to natural disasters (deaths from floods, tropical cyclones, and droughts), historical threats to territory (from 1900 to 2001), and prevalence of disease (historical prevalence of pathogens, average years of life lost due to communicable diseases, prevalence of tuberculosis). Across the board, and controlling for GNP, these indicators were related to tightness-looseness: Nations that had higher degrees of ecological and historical threat had greater tightness.

Tightness-looseness is also related to “narrow” versus “broad” socialization in institutions (Arnett, 1995). As compared to loose nations, tight nations have restricted range of behaviors that are permissible in the government, the media, and the criminal justice system. Tight nations are more likely to have autocratic governments, less openness in the media, fewer political rights and civil liberties, more police per capita, stricter punishments (e.g., the death penalty), and lower crime rates. There are also fewer challenges to societal institutions in tight nations: A lower percentage of people in tight nations reported that they had participated in collective actions, particularly public actions, such as signing a petition or attending demonstrations. When asked about how societal change occurs, people in tight societies were more likely to believe that the way their society was organized “must be radically changed by revolutionary actions” than “gradually improved by reforms.” Change in tight nations, accordingly, may be more catastrophic than linear.

Tightness-Looseness, Social Situations, and Psychological Processes

Beyond its macro affordances, a key question about tightness-looseness is how it is implicated in everyday social situations and psychological processes. Research has shown that tightness-looseness is related to the *strength of social situations* (Mischel, 1977). Strong situations create predictability by

limiting the number of behavioral patterns that are appropriate, whereas weak situations place few constraints on individuals. All cultures have both strong and weak situations, but tight and loose cultures vary in the degree to which everyday recurring situations are generally strong or weak.

Drawing on Price and Bouffard (1974), we (Gelfand et al., 2011) assessed how appropriate 12 behaviors were in each of 15 situations across the 33 nations and created an index of situational strength. Participants were asked how appropriate is it to do things such as talk in a library, cry in a public park, kiss in a restaurant, curse in an elevator, argue in a classroom, sing on a bus, or read a newspaper in the classroom, across all possible Behavior \times Situation pairs. They were also asked to directly rate the strength of 15 situations by answering questions such as “To what extent does this situation require that people monitor their own behavior or watch what they do” and “To what extent does the situation have clear rules regarding appropriate behavior?” Results showed that people within the same nation generally share perceptions about situational strength, and that the strongest situations universally included job interviews, funeral ceremonies, and visits to libraries, whereas the weakest situations included time spent in one’s bedroom, visits to public parks, and parties. At the same time, there was wide cultural variation in the overall level of strength across situations, such that situations were generally stronger in tight nations and generally weaker in loose nations (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Finally, individuals in tight and loose cultures tend to have different psychological profiles, generally speaking. Put simply, individuals who are chronically embedded in nations with strong situations (and thus may continually feel that their behavioral options are limited, that their actions are subject to evaluation, and that there are potential punishments based on these evaluations) tend to develop distinct self-guides, self-regulation strategies, psychological needs, and abilities (e.g., self-monitoring abilities; Gelfand et al., 2011). Individuals in tight nations have greater chronic accessibility of normative “ought” self-guides (i.e., proscriptions established by the generalized other; Higgins, 1996), and consequently have a regulatory focus that is more oriented toward prevention (i.e., they are more cautious and dutiful) than do individuals in loose nations. Self-regulatory strength (e.g., impulse control; see Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996) is also greater in tight nations, in which it is functional to the extent that it helps individuals avoid being censored for inappropriate behavior. Individuals in tight nations also have a greater need for structure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). By contrast, people in loose nations have a lower need for structure, which is adaptive in weaker normative environments in which a wide range of behavior is permissible. Finally, individuals in tight nations have greater self-monitoring ability (i.e., the ability to monitor and adjust one’s behavior to a given context; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), which reflects an adaptation to chronic levels of situational constraint. More generally, such psychological processes become naturally

attuned to, and supportive of, the degree of constraint (or latitude) in the larger cultural context.

Summary, Implications, and Future Directions

In all, this research showed that modern nations vary considerably on tightness-looseness and that such differences are related to ecological and historical factors, societal institutions, the strength of everyday situations, and the psychological attributes of citizens. Although this research has focused on tightness-looseness at the national level, there are other levels of analysis at which the construct likely lives, including regional, ethnic, and organizational levels. Research is now being conducted, for example, on variation in tightness-looseness across the 50 United States (Harrington & Gelfand, 2012). It is also important to note that tightness-looseness can also be highly domain specific. As a general principle, all cultures have domains that are tight and domains that are loose, even if these cultures are generally tight or loose across domains. It might be that any domain that is particularly important in a country (e.g., individual rights in the United States) develops to be tight.

Future research is also needed to understand the evolutionary basis of tightness-looseness. In our own work, my colleagues and I have found evidence to support a unique cultural-genetic coevolutionary model that helps explain how tightness-looseness coevolved with the allelic frequency of the serotonin-transporter-linked polymorphism (5-HTTLPR; Mrazek, Chiao, Blizinsky, Lun, & Gelfand, 2012). Evolutionary game-theoretic models also show that groups that face greater societal threats require harsher punishment of norm deviators in order to avoid a breakdown of cooperation and to survive (Roos, Gelfand, Nau, Zuckerman, & Lun, 2012).

This research opens up a number of interesting directions for research in psychological science. For cognitive and social psychology, it invites questions regarding basic psychological processes in tight and loose societies. The strong social control that exists at the cultural level in tight cultures should be mirrored at the individual level. This suggests that individuals in tight societies should have greater cognitive accessibility of normative requirements (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003), a greater tendency to adopt “intuitive prosecutor” mind-sets (i.e., concern with upholding the social order and with sanctioning others for violations of norms; Tetlock, 2002), greater self-control (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), and a greater need for closure (i.e., a desire for firm answers; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) as compared to individuals in loose cultures. In line with emerging perspectives on culture and neuroscience, tightness-looseness may be associated with the degree of activity in the anterior cingulate cortex and thalamus, areas that have been linked to greater error-related negativity and sensitivity to punishment (Knutson, Westdorp, Kaiser, & Hommer, 2000; Potts, George, Martin, & Barratt, 2006). In turn, these psychological processes arguably help to further reinforce and sustain the institutions that make up tight and loose cultures.

For developmental psychology, tightness-looseness has implications for the nature of child-socialization practices, parental belief systems, peer-rejection and peer-acceptance processes, and norms at different developmental stages. For clinical and counseling psychology, what is considered “normal behavior” and the etiology and expression of disorders may vary across tight and loose societies. For example, children’s psychological distresses may be expressed with more internalizing problems in tight cultures but with more externalizing problems in loose cultures. In addition, the degree of stigma associated with mental illness and barriers to the utilization of mental health services might vary between tight and loose cultures. Finally, for organizational psychology, tightness-looseness is relevant to organizational culture and human resource management, innovation and efficiency, effective leadership styles, and team processes (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006). Beyond formal organizations, tightness-looseness may help to understand such diverse groups as the Taliban, the military, and inner-city gangs in terms of the practices and psychological attributes that make them up.

Research on tightness-looseness also expands work in cultural and cross-cultural psychology, which has tended to focus on cultural variation in values, to incorporate variation in social norms. It also highlights the important role of social situations—in terms of situational strength—in cultural systems. In particular, this research shows that cultural variation in the strength of situations is a key conceptual and empirical bridge between macro ecological and historical factors and more micro and proximal psychological processes. It also helps to illuminate why cultural differences persist at the individual level, as they generally represent adaptations to, and further reinforce, differences in the strength (or weakness) of everyday social situations wherein people live out their cultural lives. Cultural differences in the chronic strength of situations may ultimately help to explain differences in a wide variety of psychological processes, including processes relating to attributions, preference for choice, attention to context, and communication styles, among others (Lun, Gelfand, & Mohr, 2012). More generally, research on tightness-looseness opens up an exciting frontier of research linking the micro-structural level to the psychological level across cultures, and responds to the growing call to incorporate the systematic study of situations in cultural and cross-cultural psychology (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkiti, 1997; Oyserman, Kimmmeier, & Coon, 2002),

Understanding tightness-looseness is important not only for research but also for practice. Knowledge gleaned through such research could be useful for training sojourners and helping them adapt to new environments. Individuals traveling from a loose culture to a tight culture are likely to experience greater population density, more social monitoring, more environmental and disease-related threats, more constraint in a wide range of societal institutions (e.g., government, media, police), and more behavioral restrictions in everyday situations. It is possible that transitions across the tight-loose divide

are equally stressful for different reasons. People going from loose to tight cultures may experience strain as a result of the increased degree of monitoring, sanctioning, and overall constraint. People going from tight to loose cultures, by contrast, will likely experience a sense of normlessness, anomie, and ambiguity regarding behavioral expectations. In all, both tight and loose societal contexts can elicit sources of stress. This is consistent with Pelto’s (1968) speculation that, although individuals might assume that looseness is associated with “less nervous strain on individuals . . . it is also possible that tight and loose societies simply produce different kinds of comforts and anxieties in their people” (p. 40).

More generally, by understanding the factors that relate to tightness-looseness, we can help humans around the globe to be less ethnocentric. This is particularly important given that many of the world’s clashes in today’s geopolitical scene involve conflicts between societies that are highly constrained and those that are highly permissive, creating a clash of moralities of sorts. People in loose societies may view tight societies as overly restrictive and thus immoral; likewise, people from tight societies may view loose societies as overly permissive and thus equally immoral. Herodotus, the Greek historian, was of the first to say that all humans are ethnocentric, believing their own societies to be better than others. By understanding why cultures develop the way they do, it is much easier to understand and appreciate cultural differences, which is critical in a world of increasing global opportunities and global threats.

Recommended Reading

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- Carpenter, S. (2000). (See References). One of the first studies to differentiate cultural tightness from collectivism.
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