

# Why do pivotal cultural differences among countries exist?

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In today's world, conflicts and misunderstandings frequently arise between those who are from more restrictive cultures and those from less restrictive ones. Now, a new international study led by the University of Maryland offers insights that may help bridge such cultural differences.

Published in the May 27 issue of the journal *Science*, the study for the first time assesses the degree to which countries are restrictive versus permissive and what factors have made them that way. The researcher's findings reveal wide variation in the degree to which various societies impose social norms, enforce conformity and punish anti-social behavior. They also show that the more threats a society has been exposed to, the more likely they are to be a restrictive society, the authors say.

University of Maryland Psychology Professor Michele Gelfand, who led the study, says she and her colleagues "examined a neglected source of cultural variation that is dominating the geo-political landscape and has the potential to be a major source of cultural conflict: the difference between nations that [social scientists](#) refer to as "tight" with strong norms and low tolerance for deviation from norms and nations that are "loose" with weak norms and high tolerance for deviation from those norms.

"We believe this knowledge about how tight or loose a country is and why it is that way can foster greater cross-cultural tolerance and understanding," said Gelfand. "Such understanding is critical in a world

where both global interdependence and [global threats](#) are increasing."

The researchers surveyed 6823 respondents in 33 nations. In each nation, individuals from a wide range of occupations, as well as university students, were included. Data on environmental and historical threats and on societal institutions were collected from numerous established databases. Historical data (e.g., population density in 1500, history of conflict over the last hundred years, historical prevalence of [disease outbreaks](#)) were included whenever possible, and data on a wide range of societal institutions (government, media, criminal justice) were obtained. The research team also developed new scales of tightness-looseness and the degree to which everyday situations are strong versus weak and also included measures of psychological 'world views' of citizens in each country.

Gelfand and colleagues found that countries such as Japan, Korea, Singapore and Pakistan are much tighter whereas countries such as the Ukraine, Israel, Brazil, and the U.S. are looser. Their research further showed that a nation's tightness or looseness is in part determined by the ecological and human factors that have shaped its history – including wars, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, population density and scarcity of natural resources. Tight and loose societies also vary in their institutions—with tight societies having more autocratic governments, more closed media, and criminal justice systems that had more monitoring and greater deterrence of crime as compared to loose societies.

The study found that the situations that people encounter differ in tight and loose societies. For example, everyday situations—like being in park, a classroom, the movies, a bus, at job interviews, restaurants, and even one's bedroom—constrain behavior much more in tight societies and afford a wider range of behavior in loose societies.

"We also found that the psychological makeup of individual citizens varies in tight and loose societies," Gelfand said. "For example, individuals in tight societies are more prevention focused (attentive to rules), have higher self-regulation strength (more impulse control) and have higher needs for order and self-monitoring abilities than individuals in loose societies. These attributes, Gelfand said, help people to adapt to the level of constraint (or latitude) in their cultural context, and at the same time, reinforce it.

The research team combined all these measures in a multi-level model that shows how tight and loose systems are developed and maintained.

Gelfand said she thought knowledge about these [cultural differences](#) can be invaluable to many people-- from diplomats and global managers to military personnel, immigrants and travelers – who have to traverse the tight-loose divide. "When we understand why cultures, and the individuals in those cultures, are the way they are it helps us to become less judgmental. It helps us to understand and appreciate societal differences."

"The findings of this ambitious 33-nation study are important in today's globalized world, where many of the key challenges facing humanity demand cooperation between cultural groups with different approaches to regulating [social norms](#)," says Prof. Ara Norenzayan, Dept. of Psychology, University of British Columbia, who authored a commentary piece that accompanies Gelfand and colleagues' study in Science. "Their approach goes a step further in advancing our understanding of human behavioral diversity by exploring simultaneously multiple factors, ranging from the ecological and historical to the institutional and psychological," said Norenzayan, who was not involved in the study.

Provided by University of Maryland

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