

Study rates 'tight, 'loose' scenarios in 33 countries

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Kiss, cry, sing, talk, flirt, listen to music, read the newspaper, bargain, eat, laugh, swear, argue.

Rate the appropriateness of each behavior in 15 settings: bank, doctor's office, [job interview](#), library, funeral, classroom, restaurant, public park, bus, bedroom, city sidewalk, party, elevator, workplace, movies.

When 6,823 people from 33 nations were surveyed about the "tightness" and "looseness" of these everyday situations, significant differences emerge. The study was published this spring in Science.

"Differences Between Tight and Loose Cultures: A 33-Nation Study" potentially "has wide ranging implications for the world of work," said Lisa Nishii, ILR School associate professor of human resource studies and one of the study's lead researchers. "Tight" cultures have strong norms and a low tolerance of deviant behavior. "Loose" cultures have weak norms and a high tolerance of deviant behavior.

Although scholars have studied [cultural differences](#) since at least 400 B.C., tightness-looseness had been unexplored until now, according to Nishii's team.

Study authors link tightness-looseness -- "a critical aspect of modern societies" -- with ecological and historical threats such as disease and disasters, as well as with a nation's social-political institutions such as media and religion, and individuals' psychological tendencies.

Since 1998 Nishii has been working with her colleagues to develop their theory. It has been, she said, "a real labor of love. It was a huge part of my 'growing up' in grad school."

The [empirical study](#) that led to the publication in Science began in 1999, when Nishii and collaborators received a National Science Foundation grant. They partnered with 40 scholars to survey people from Iceland to South Korea to Australia to gauge reactions to 180 scenarios.

Tightness scores varied from a low of 1.6 for a sample gathered from Ukraine to 12.3 for Pakistan. The score for the United States was 5.1.

"Understanding tight and loose cultures is critical for fostering cross-cultural coordination in a world of increasing global interdependence," the study said.

The research shows how differences among cultures could appear "dysfunctional, unjust and fundamentally immoral" and feed conflict, the authors said.

The freedom of individual choice that is prized in loose cultures can appear unpredictable and undisciplined, and perhaps even dangerous, in tight cultures, according to the study.

Provided by Cornell University

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