

Cultural Norms: Do they Matter?

by Winston Sieck - December 12, 2012

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In some countries, women are expected to cover themselves from head to toe. In others, bikini bottoms are plenty sufficient. In some places, baskets are carried in the arms. In others, they are placed on the head.

Cultural norms are the standards we live by. They are the shared expectations and rules that guide behavior of people within social groups. Cultural norms are learned and reinforced from parents, friends, teachers and others while growing up in a society.

Norms often differ across cultures, contributing to [cross-cultural misunderstandings](#).

Many studies have documented these differences. Far more casual observers have commented on them. Recently, Michele Gelfand and a large team of cross-cultural psychologists stepped back from the cataloging process and asked a bigger question.

They wanted to know how much cultural norms really matter. Do norms matter more in some places than others?

Some societies may care quite a bit about their cultural norms, insisting on strong conformity to them across the board. They reflect “cultural tightness.” Others tolerate a lot of deviance from the norms. These are “culturally loose” societies.

Gelfand and colleagues theorized that tightness and looseness are reflected at different levels within a culture that mutually support one another. They published their research in a *Science* article, “[Differences between tight and loose cultures](#).” In it, Gelfand’s team describes evidence for each of the following four levels:

1. **Ecological & Historical Threats.** Hostile neighbors, disease, and dense populations increase the need for coordinated and disciplined action from the population. More factors like these tighten the cultural norms. As the threats diminish, cultures loosen up.
2. **Socio-Political Institutions.** Culturally tight nations tend to have more autocratic governments, restricted media, stronger suppression of dissent, and more severe punishments for crime.
3. **Everyday Social Situations.** All kinds of interactions with fellow members of the culture are more formal in nations with tight cultural norms. These include situations at home, the workplace, school, places of worship, parks, and others. Loose cultures provide more room for individual discretion in such situations. A wider range of behavior is counted “appropriate.”
4. **Psychological Adaptations.** People’s minds become attuned to the different requirements of living in places with tight or loose cultural norms. Individual psychology then further supports the level of cultural tightness or looseness. People living in tight cultures become more focused on avoiding mistakes. They are more cautious in their own behavior, and more closely monitor

themselves and others for norm violations.

Culturally tight or loose societies appear completely dysfunctional when viewed from the other perspective. The cultural tightness-looseness framework can help you to take a step back, and see things a bit differently. It can help you [take a cross-cultural perspective](#). When you see or read about events around the world, think about whether the players involved are from tight or loose cultures. Consider how they got that way, and all the factors involved in maintaining the system as it is.

Without understanding, the differences between countries with tight and loose cultural norms provide much fodder for conflict. Going back to that first level, falling into conflict can increase tightness in cultural norms across the board.

Image Credit: [Gigi Ibrahim](#)

Gelfand, M., Raver, J., Nishii, L., Leslie, L., Lun, J., Lim, B., Duan, L., Almaliach, A., Ang, S., Arnadottir, J., Aycan, Z., Boehnke, K., Boski, P., Cabecinhas, R., Chan, D., Chhokar, J., D'Amato, A., Ferrer, M., Fischlmayr, I., Fischer, R., Fulop, M., Georgas, J., Kashima, E., Kashima, Y., Kim, K., Lempereur, A., Marquez, P., Othman, R., Overlaet, B., Panagiotopoulou, P., Peltzer, K., Perez-Florizno, L., Ponomarenko, L., Realo, A., Schei, V., Schmitt, M., Smith, P., Soomro, N., Szabo, E., Taveesin, N., Toyama, M., Van de Vliert, E., Vohra, N., Ward, C., & Yamaguchi, S. (2011). Differences Between Tight and Loose Cultures: A 33-Nation Study *Science*, 332 (6033), 1100-1104 DOI: [10.1126/science.1197754](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1197754)

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