

EDITORS' PICKS

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TIGHT AND LOOSE CULTURES: A 33-NATION STUDY

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TIGHT AND LOOSE CULTURES: A 33-NATION STUDY Gelfand, Michele J. et al.

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1100–1104.

This article, with 45 authors, mostly psychologists, examines the differences between tight and loose cultures, where tightness implies strong social norms and low tolerance of deviant behavior and looseness the opposite. The concept of cultural tightness or looseness is anthropological in origin and has been described for traditional societies but, according to the authors, not studied in current cultures. To do so, they collected statistical data for 33 countries from existing databases of ecological and historical threats and sociopolitical institutions. The threats included population density, resource scarcity, conflicts, natural disasters, and disease. The sociopolitical institutions were ones that reflect and institutionalize tightness and looseness in government, the media, education, law, and religion.

They also collected questionnaires in each country from about 200 middle-class indi-

viduals, many of them students in adult education classes. The surveyed individuals classified their own nation as tight, loose, or in between by degrees of agreement with six statements, yielding tightness scores that ranged from a low of 1.6 in the Ukraine to a high of 12.3 in Pakistan. The U.S. score was 5.1. The surveyed individuals

also answered questions about situational constraints—12 permissible behaviors, e.g., argue, eat, laugh, bargain, etc., in 15 everyday settings, e.g., bank, job interview, elevator, bedroom, etc., as well as personal psychological processes that support these constraints.

So why would readers of *Environment* be interested in this study? Well this reader resonated with three aspects of the study: the effort, difficulty, and utility involved in such studies,

the central question of what is universal and what is different in human societies and culture, and the central hypothesis of sustainability threats leading to tightness in cultures. The extent, breadth, and difficulties of the study (there are 29 pages of supplementary methods and materials) brought me back to my participation in a study of

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40 hazard studies in 15 countries in the early 1970s that also sought to link the local with the national.¹ More recently, Leiserowitz, Parris, and I emphasized the universal in sustainability values and attitudes.² But most interesting was the authors' basic assumption: "Ecological and human-made threats increase the need for strong norms and the punishment of deviant behavior in the service of social coordination for survival—whether it is to reduce chaos in nations that



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A busy crossroad in Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan.

have high population density, deal with resource scarcity, coordinate in the face of natural disasters, defend against territorial threats, or contain the spread of disease“ (Gelfand et al. 2011, p. 1101).

There is no evidence given in the paper for the hypothesis other than the data collected for it (the two citations are quite old and unfamiliar.) What is given is a set of correlations between the 33-nation tightness–looseness ratings and the available data on population density, resource scarcity, conflicts, natural

disasters, and disease. For the statistically familiar reader, the strongest correlation surprisingly is with population density for the year 1500 ($r = .77$); most of the correlations are in the .40s, as are the many correlations with the other data sets. These, while statistically significant and common to the behavioral sciences, may seem low to natural scientists.

I suspect that for most readers the paper will raise both many questions and interest, as it did for me, not only about its ambition and methodology, but espe-

cially its findings. Which is one of the reasons for editor’s picks.

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NOTES

1. G.F. White, ed., *Natural Hazards: Local, National, Global*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

2. Leiserowitz, A. A., R. W. Kates, and T. M. Parris, 2005. Do global attitudes and behaviors support sustainable development?, *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 47(9), pp. 23-39.