INTRODUCTION

Michele Gelfand is a cultural psychologist, best known for being an expert on tightness–looseness theory, which explains variations in the strength of social norms and punishments across human groups. She is currently a Distinguished University Professor in Psychology and the RH Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, College Park. Gelfand uses field, experimental, computational and neuroscience methods to understand the evolution of culture and its multilevel consequences for human groups. She is the author of Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire the World (Scribner, 2018), co-editor of Values, Political Action, and Change in the Middle East and the Arab Spring (Oxford University Press, 2017), The Psychology of Conflict and Conflict Management in Organizations (Taylor & Francis, 2013), and The Handbook of Negotiation and Culture (Stanford University Press, 2004), and is the founding co-editor of the Advances in Culture and Psychology Annual Series and the Frontiers of Culture and Psychology series (Oxford University Press). Gelfand studied at Colgate University, where she graduated with a B.A. in psychology in 1989. She graduated from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1996 with a PhD in social psychology and organizational psychology.

WHY DO I CARE?

It seems that we are at a point in Anglo-Saxon countries where an awareness about the role of culture is taking a backseat to those of biology and our genes in the popular mind. This seems (anecdotally speaking), to be a result of some kind of backlash against forces of political correctness that view biological explanations for social outcomes as being universally wrong and possibly deriving their motivations or scientific findings from some kind of eugenicist or white supremacist agenda. I think it’s interesting, therefore, that Michele has written this book today, amidst this environment, and I think it will be valuable for us to explore the topic in this context as well.

It would be useful to explore contemporary examples of tight-loose dichotomies and how effective (and ineffective) understandings of these distinctions may have hindered or aided progress in various areas (Iraq War, European Union, Election 2016, etc.). In addition, I’d like to apply these ideas to the workplace and see how the fit.

I’m also curious how fuzzy the distinctions between tight and loose are, and if it’s really that
easy to categorize nations, people, communities, etc., as being one or the other. This brings us to an interesting question about how difficult it is to actually conduct studies in this domain, and how reliable the data is (reproducibility crisis).

Lastly, I think we tend to view liberals as being more tolerant and thus, “looser,” and conservatives as being less tolerant, and thus, “tighter.” I question this mental model, because I see the American left (to the extent that they even are representative of a liberal society) as being far more intolerant of differences of opinion than their conservative counterparts. I’d like to explore this point as well.

**Book Summary**

Cultural psychologist Michele Gelfand argues that the world’s cultures can be classified into two categories by virtue of their norms. “Tight” cultures, like Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Germany, embrace rigid norms and mete out harsh punishments for those who deviate. “Loose” cultures, including New Zealand, the United States and Brazil, are more tolerant of a wide assortment of behaviors. Because countries, families, companies and US states all act in accordance with their divergent conceptions of “normal,” misunderstandings and conflict often arise. Gelfand offers a lucid explanation of how and why cultures become tight or loose and outlines their different societal attitudes. In a particularly relevant section, she describes how businesses also develop tight or loose cultures and how a cultural mismatch can doom a merger or undermine cooperation among a corporation’s divisions. Gelfand offers eye-opening insights for development professionals, policy makers and those in international business.

- The world’s nations have evolved into either “tight” or “loose” cultures.
- Tight cultures have a large number of social norms that enforce order and conformity. Loose cultures have more lenient norms and tolerate a wider array of behaviors.
- Tight cultures evolve in nations that face many natural and human-made threats.
- Loose cultures generally face fewer chronic threats – but may tighten up temporarily in the event of an acute threat.
- Tight and loose cultures each have advantages and disadvantages.
- Differing social norms cause conflict between cultures.
- Modifying a nation’s norms can address protracted social problems.
- Corporations also develop tight or loose cultures.
- Mergers have a greater risk of failure when there is a mismatch between tight and loose corporate cultures.
- The best leaders are ambidextrous; they can balance tight and loose in organizations.

**Customs and Taboos: What’s Normal?**

Every group of people – whether a family, a business or a nation – develops “social norms”: a set of often unspoken rules that govern behavior. Norms cover activities in almost every sphere, like which side of the sidewalk you walk on or whom you can marry. **Without the predictability that Social norms are regarded as collective representations of acceptable group conduct as well as individual perceptions of particular group conduct. They can be viewed as cultural products (including values, customs, and traditions) which represent individuals' basic knowledge of what others do and think that they should do. From a sociological perspective, social norms are informal understandings that govern the behavior of members of a society.**

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?” – David F. Wallace
norms bring to behavior, cooperation would be impossible. And, according to anthropologist Joseph Henrich, cooperation is the reason for the evolutionary success of the otherwise vulnerable human animal.

"Without even realizing it, we’re all prone to following group norms that can override our sense of right and wrong.” — Michele Gelfand

The dichotomies among the norms of different cultures can undermine international cooperation and lead to conflict, so being aware of social norms strengthens a leader’s predictive skills in knowing where conflicts might flare up and finding ways to avoid or defuse them. Social norms are so integral to a culture that its members are generally not even aware of them. People begin absorbing norms in infancy and continue doing so throughout their lives. Some norms set general standards; for example, a society may agree that everyone should wear clothes in public or shouldn’t litter. Other norms are specific and mandate different behaviors in varied settings, such as a rock concert, a funeral or a library.

“We rarely notice the extent to which norms pervade our lives and how much we need them.” — Michele Gelfand

Social norms diverge widely around the world, and cultures differ in how firmly they enforce their norms. “Tight” cultures have multiple rules and taboos and a highly codified system of etiquette. They mete out severe punishments to those who fail to follow their norms. In Singapore, for instance, spitting on the street can trigger a fine of up to $1,000. The nation banned chewing gum, and smuggling gum into the country can incur being fined up to $100,000 or being sent to jail. You can be jailed for two years for homosexual activities and the government suppresses dissent.

“Figuratively speaking, in the tightest of cultures, people feel as though they’re in a library for a greater portion of their lives… In the loosest of cultures, people feel as though they’re often at a park, with much more freedom to do as they wish.” — Michele Gelfand

Tight cultures are usually found in South and East Asia, the Middle East, and in European countries of Nordic and Germanic origin. The tightest nation is Pakistan – followed by Malaysia, India and Singapore. “Loose” cultures have fewer and less stringent social norms. In New Zealand, discrimination against homosexuals is illegal, dissent is common, and society tolerates and
sometimes celebrates eccentric behavior. Looseness is common in English-speaking countries and Latin-American and Latin-European cultures. The loosest nations are Eastern European or formerly Communist countries, including Ukraine, Estonia and Hungary.

Tightness-looseness is independent of the scholarly categorizations of “collectivist” – with its emphasis on family ties – or “individualist” – which esteems self-reliance. Tight cultures have sprung up in collectivist societies like Japan and Singapore as well as in individualist ones such as Austria and Germany. Loose cultures evolved in collectivist Brazil and Spain and in the individualist United States and New Zealand.

Adversity

Whether a country turns out to be tight or loose seems to depend on how much adversity it endured throughout its history. A tight culture will generally evolve in an environment where the people face multiple threats, including natural disasters, disease, scarce resources or invaders. Germany, for instance, dealt with the Thirty Years' War, the Franco-Prussian War, two world wars and the Soviet takeover of East Germany. The tight cultures of Asia and the Middle East underwent repeated invasions, conflicts and colonizers. A tight culture responds to a chaotic, dangerous environment by creating mechanisms to enforce order and marshal a quick response to threats.

“People in tight cultures view effective leaders as those who embody independence and great confidence – that is, as people who like to do things their own way and don’t rely on others.” — Michele Gelfand

Countries that face fewer threats have less need to impose order. The loose cultures of Greece, Hungary and Ukraine have been comparatively free of natural disasters. The United States, New Zealand and Australia face little danger of invasion because their surrounding oceans offer natural defense. The link between threats and tightness extends to other spheres, such as social class. People in the working class generally develop a tighter culture because they face more threats – such as crime, dangerous working conditions and a greater chance of falling into poverty. The upper class, with its greater power and resources, faces fewer threats. This class has fewer rules and its members feel more comfortable breaking the rules they do have. Tightness-looseness is dynamic, and can change. When people perceive threat, whether real or imagined, they tighten.
Tight Cultures

Life in a nation with a tight culture is relatively orderly and predictable. Tight nations have lower crime rates than loose countries, and their cities are cleaner and quieter. Swiss railways, for example, have a 97% on-time record. Citizens exhibit greater self-control than residents of looser countries. The rates of obesity, alcohol consumption and gambling are lower, and national savings rates are higher.

“People in loose cultures prefer visionary leaders who are collaborative.” — Michele Gelfand

Achieving a low crime rate usually involves severe punishments and extensive monitoring. Tight nations have greater concentrations of police, deploy more security officers to keep tabs on public behavior and install urban surveillance cameras. Tight cultures resist change and suppress ideas and activities that threaten the status quo. They are less tolerant of people of different religions, races and sexual orientation. Many tight cultures stigmatize unmarried women and single mothers.

Loose Cultures

Loose cultures are more broad-minded and accepting of change and new ideas. They experience wider public participation in political activities and are more innovative. In America, people in looser states have earned more patents for inventions per capita. These states host a higher ratio of artists, writers and other creatives. California, with its loose societal and corporate cultures, is fertile ground for tech start-ups. Loose cultures are more tolerant of differences in race, ethnicity, marital status and sexual orientation.

“Each of us has developed tight and loose mind-sets that effortlessly help us navigate our social surroundings.” — Michele Gelfand

Loose cultures can have higher crime rates, the streets can have more litter and the cities are often noisier. Citizens have less self-control: They save money at a lower rate than average, consume more alcohol and are more likely to gamble.
The Dangers of Extremism

Comparing the tight and loose paradigms, neither one does a better job of promoting the general welfare than the other. And, each can generate negative consequences when taken to extremes. An analysis of well-being in more than 30 countries found the lowest levels of contentment and the highest rates of suicide in countries that have the most extreme levels of tightness and looseness. The same relationship holds true for life expectancy, political stability, national wealth, and death rates from cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

“Just as countries have practical reasons for becoming collectively tighter or looser, so do industries.” — Michele Gelfand

In every sphere – from individuals to nations – the most productive state is a balance between laxity and restriction. For example, parents in lower classes generally allow their kids less latitude and autonomy. Children from extremely controlling environments may lack assiduousness when away from their parents and may be more likely to develop depression or anxiety. Conversely, excessively permissive parenting can also cause problems. Children can develop weaker self-control and, as teenagers, become more prone to risky behavior.

Corporate Norms

Tight and loose cultures develop in businesses as well. Tight business cultures stress discipline and favor decisive, confident leaders who are less reliant on other people. Loose business cultures prefer collaborative leaders who embrace change, and they encourage autonomy among workers. Cultures can vary across different industries as they evolve in response to the degree of threat they face. Businesses such as airlines or construction firms are tight, because any operational slip-up can have fatal consequences. Industries that face fewer threats have looser cultures. Looseness is most appropriate in businesses that thrive on innovation, such as design studios, R&D groups and tech firms.
Much like a person who can write fluidly with both...hands, organizations need to learn to wield both tight and loose capabilities to operate effectively.” — Michele Gelfand

Tight-loose dichotomies can create problems, particularly in mergers. A merger can collapse if the two companies’ cultures can’t mesh. A review of more than 6,000 international cross-border mergers, each valued at more than $10 million, involving 30 countries between 1980 and 2013, showed that mergers of two culturally incongruous companies required longer negotiations and led to depressed stock prices after the deal. “When there was a pronounced cultural mismatch, the acquiring company lost $30 million on average within five days of the merger announcement.”

“By understanding the hidden force of social norms in their organizations, business leaders can effectively shepherd their companies toward greater tight-loose balance.” — Michele Gelfand

Individual companies get into trouble when they veer to extremes of tightness or looseness. Uber had such a loose culture that some employees compared it to a frat house. The environment led to unprofessional behavior, culminating in the resignation of the CEO after a sexual harassment scandal. United Airlines — exemplifying the other end of the spectrum — faced a public relations disaster after allowing airport security to remove a passenger forcibly from an overbooked flight. In the airline industry, strict adherence to rules and protocols is a necessary component of safety, but extreme constraints can backfire when unusual circumstances arise.

“Countless studies have shown that social norms are critical for uniting communities into cooperative, well-coordinated groups that can accomplish great feats.” — Michele Gelfand

Companies need to develop “tight-loose ambidexterity” — the ability to switch between tight and loose approaches depending on changing conditions. An ambidextrous company may generally default to a tight or loose culture, but it will inject a degree of flexibility or rigor when necessary. For example, at Toyota, a tight company, executives outline general goals, leaving it to employees to come up with the best strategies to meet them.

Norms and Global Issues

Chaotic environments present opportunities for autocratic leaders who promise tightness, as exemplified by President Vladimir Putin gaining and holding power in Russia, which had fallen into disarray following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It lost nearly a third of its GDP amid soaring crime, drug use and alcoholism rates, and the populace sought a return to order. Putin suppressed dissent, restricted the press and imprisoned gay people. He won broad support by restoring order and security and reviving the economy. In 2017, Putin’s approval rating surpassed 80%.

“When people have thrived in the face of adversity, they’ve done so because of other people and the social norms they’ve created together.” — Michele Gelfand
The desire for order fueled radical groups such as ISIS. In the turmoil following the United States’ withdrawal from Iraq, ISIS restored a semblance of normality. It repaired electrical and water services and provided public transportation and health care. ISIS gained the most success by conquering provinces that suffered the worst deprivations, but it imposed harsh codes of conduct and merciless punishments for violations.

“With greater awareness of our personal tight-loose mind-set, we can better understand why we act the way we do and, also, be more sensitive to the ways in which layers of culture have shaped the habits of others.” — Michele Gelfand

A hunger for order is driving a global rise in populist politics. The Brexit referendum in Britain and the Trump election in the United States resulted from a yearning for order and security in a time of accelerated change. Populist politicians in America, France, Poland, and elsewhere have capitalized on perceived threats – such as violence and a poor economy – and harnessed nationalistic feelings by casting immigrants as the source of these threats. Modifying a country’s social norms is a promising way to address challenges and crises.

“I sometimes we need to tighten norms that have become too loose. Sometimes we need to loosen norms that have become too tight.” — Michele Gelfand

Iceland, for example, tightened its social norms to counter an epidemic of alcohol abuse among teenagers. In 1998, more than 40% of Icelandic teens were getting drunk once a month or more. The government stiffened laws, set a curfew for those younger than 16 and encouraged more parental involvement in kids’ home and school life. By 2016, only 5% of teenagers had gotten drunk in the prior month, only 7% had used marijuana and only 3% were smoking tobacco daily. The charity CARE used the opposite strategy in Kenya, which has tight norms for gender roles, contraception and family size. CARE worked to mitigate population growth by “recalibrating” the norm favoring large families. The initiative united political and religious leaders, health workers,
teachers and others in community-wide dialogues. Recalibration also may reduce abusive, criminal behavior in the loose setting of the Internet. It could help counter climate change and other global threats by cultivating international social norms that facilitate cooperation among nations and ethnic groups.

AUTHOR’S ORIGINS

Getting Started — You talk about how you were “culturally sheltered” until your first experience studying abroad in London. Q: What was it about your experience traveling that changed you?

Culture’s Omnipresence — Q: What intrigues you about culture? Q: Can you tell us what you mean by the “omnipresence” of culture, and why this immersion makes it difficult to detect?

CULTURAL ORIGINS

Biological Origins | In Our Genes? — Q: Is there a deeper code driving our behavior that has existed across time and space and that is driving the tight vs. loose is expression in individuals? Q: What is the relationship between the biochemical tendencies that individuals have towards being “tight” or “loose” and its manifestation in culture as normative behavior?

Evolutionary Origins | Adaptive Benefits — Q: Why do we have social norms? Q: Could humans survive without them? Q: How important are social norms in advancing/allowing for cooperation?

Environmental Origins | Molded by Threats — Q: How does threat (over population, war, etc) cause an evolution towards tighter cultures? Q: What type of environments lead to the evolution of looser cultures? (Q: Is it as simple as environments that are less threatening?) Q: As the world becomes more threatened, are we going to see more tightness? Q: If we experience more austere climate and resource conditions, should we expect to see a surge in tight societies (and politics)?

PAST VS. PRESENT: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

![Graph showing scores on tightness-looseness around the world (2011).](image)

Figure 2.1. Scores on tightness-looseness around the world (2011).
**Differing Origins** — **Q:** What are some differences between these two groups (tight vs. loose)?

**Q:** What are the reasons for their evolutions, what are the benefits, and what conflicts arise when people from these different groups collide? (cultural clashes in the anthropological record)

**Differing Norms** — **Q:** What are the different type of norms that these groups express? ***Great example from pg. 49 comparing Persians and Indians being paid to eat their dead relatives - both above idea for different reasons.

**Differing Cultures** — **Q:** What are the loosest/tightest cultures and why? **Q:** What are Japan and Singapore like when compared to Greece and Argentina? **Q:** Is America really “loose?”

**North/South** — **Q:** Are there climactic differences in tight vs. loose cultures along geographical lines. (e.g. North vs. Southern Europe)

**TIGHT VS. LOOSE CHARACTERISTICS**

**Tight Commons** — **Q:** What do tight cultures have in common? (Police presence, synchronized clocks, stock market synchrony, etc.) **Q:** What do tight cultures struggle with? **Q:** What is the relationship between tight cultures and closed societies? ***I’m reminded of how you could always tell how far south you were in Italy, because bus schedules would become less and less reliable (sometimes, the 16:05 would come before the 15:30!)

**Loose Commons** — **Q:** What do loose cultures have in common? (Sexual practices, late dinners, long vacations, etc.) **Q:** What do loose cultures struggle with? (“Loose cultures struggle with order but corner the market on openness.”) **Q:** What is the relationship between loose cultures and open societies?

**TIGHT/LOOSE DYNAMICS**

**Relaxing vs. Contracting** — **Q:** How quickly can the shift from loose to tight happen, whereas how slow is the shift from tight to loose?

**BUSINESS CASES**

**Corporations are Tight** — **Q:** What are the characteristics that make corporations tight? **Q:** How does this relate to Steve Jobs’ observation about “process oriented companies?”

**Startups are Loose** — **Q:** What are the characteristics that make start-ups loose? **Q:** What are the disadvantages/advantages associated with each?

**Phase Transition** — **Q:** Is there a need to transition from loose to tight as you move from small to large company (reminds me of Safi Bahcall’s “phase transition”). **Q:** How do companies and businesses navigate this transition successfully?

**Messy Desks** — I love the example of order vs. chaos in the book, as it is captured in the “orderly vs. disorderly rooms” used in Vohs and colleagues’ studies. **Q:** Can you tell us a bit about this?
**Tight/Loose Mergers** — Q: Can you give us some examples (maybe the Daimler-Chrysler case) of "mergers-gone-bad" on account of poor cultural fit? Q: Can you give us an example of a merger that has worked well?

**Tight/Loose Leaders** — Q: How do such cultures differ in terms of their ideal leadership archetype?

**LAWS AND CULTURE**

**Social vs. Moral Justice** — Q: What is the relationship between laws and norms? There are times in history where the nation’s laws are grossly out of step with changing societal norms and values (e.g. civil rights), and therefor the laws are changed in order to bring the two closer into balance. Q: How can norms drive change in laws? Q: Could the opposite also be true (e.g. laws are enacted, which change culture?) *** Reminded of Creon, King of Thebes, declaring that Antigone’s brother Polyneices should be left unburied as such a conflict

**TIGHT VS. LOOSE POLITICS**

**Right-Wing Renaissance** — Q: How much of the surge in popularity of conservative or far-right candidates in Western countries is the result of a change in our culture from loose to tight? Q: How much of that is driven by perceptions of threat?

**Cancel Culture** — Q: Is there a shift happening on the Anglo-American Left that has supplanted loose for tight? (e.g. intolerance of alternative views)
ROMANTIC CULTURES

Playing Tight and Loose — Q: Do opposites attract when it comes to romantic relationships and tight vs. loose people?

MISCOMMUNICATIONS

Playing Tight and Loose — There are many interesting, commical, and sometimes even deadly examples in history of miscommunications resulting from what seem to be differences between tight and loose. Take the case of Korean airliner Avianca (Flight 52) that ran out of fuel while circling JFK, all because the pilots felt *intimidated* by the loud-mouthed JFK air-traffic controllers. Q: Do you have any other interesting examples like this to share?

Figure 7.2. Tight-loose ambidexterity. Ways to achieve structured looseness or flexible tightness.
The difference in what is considered both moral, as well as lawful behavior across the spectrum of the modern world is pretty remarkable. I’d like to stop and reflect on this a bit. I’ve pulled two examples – one recent, and one semi-ancient – to reflect on while speaking with Michele.

**Language Differences** — A recent example of how norms differ across cultures that share a great deal in common, including the same language, can be captured in the recent experience of Peter McCormack, a popular crypto podcaster whose Twitter account was suspended for using the words ‘c***’ and ‘mangina’ in a tweet. In the UK, my understanding is that the first word mentioned is totally innocuous in the UK. Q: Can you tell us a bit about how cultural differences manifest along linguistic lines, and also, how language impacts cultural norms? Q: Can you give us some further examples?

**Legal Differences** — An example that you highlight in your book is the case of Michael Fay, the US citizen who was the subject of international attention in 1994 when he was sentenced to six strokes of the cane in Singapore for theft and vandalism at age 18. This was a huge, international scandal. Another great, contemporary example is in Hong Kong today, where the norms of the Hong Kong citizenry are proving incompatible with China’s under the “One Country, Two Systems.” Q: Can we talk about some of these examples?

**Family Cultures & Child Rearing** — Q: How do parents navigate “tight” and “loose” culture when it comes to raising kids and instilling family culture?

**Norms and the Stock Market** — Q: Are there correlations between different cultural norms and the state of the stock market? (i.e. looser norms associated with bull markets, tighter norms with bear markets…lipstick/hemline indicator) Q: What is “stock synchronization?”

**Research Methods** — Q: Can you speak to me about your research methods?