

Understanding Cultural Differences Around Social Norms

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Q: Societies have norms which you've described as tight or loose—what does it mean for norms to be tight or loose, and how is that put into practice?

Today more than ever, we need to understand cultural differences. A lot of times, we think about our differences in terms of rather superficial characteristics like red versus blue, East versus West, rich versus poor, religious versus secular. I'm a cross-cultural psychologist and have been trying to understand the deeper codes that drive behavior.

My focus has been on the degree to which groups strictly adhere to social norms. All groups have norms, or unwritten rules for behavior. We need them to predict each other's behavior and coordinate on a daily basis. But what I've found is that certain groups are *tight*—they have strict rules and punishments for deviance—and other groups are *loose*—they're more permissive and accept a wider range of behavior.