

Why ‘Tight’ Cultures Had Better COVID Responses

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“Culture is omnipresent: It’s all around us, but it’s invisible. We take it for granted,” says Michele Gelfand, professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. “Often, when we get outside of our cultural bubble, we realize we’ve been socialized profoundly to have a certain set of norms and values.”

How those norms vary and evolve is one of the primary focuses of Gelfand’s research. Most notably, she has found that cultures’ adherence to social norms falls along a spectrum from tight to loose. “Tight cultures, generally speaking, have more order,” she says. “They have less crime, more monitoring. There’s more self-regulation.” Think Japan, Singapore, Austria. Loose cultures, on the other hand, “have more openness and more tolerance. They have more creativity and they also, generally speaking, are more open to change.” Examples include Brazil, Greece, and the United States.

Gelfand introduced these ideas in a study of 33 nations in [Science](#) in 2011 and has since expanded upon them in additional studies and her 2018 book, [Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Our World](#) (Scriber, 2019). With her collaborators, she has found that the tight-loose model doesn’t just apply to countries, but to American states, organizations, households, and to some extent individuals. (You can [take a quiz](#) on her site to see how tight or loose your mindset is.)

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