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Cultural tightness-looseness: Its nature and missiological applications

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Abstract

The focus of much missionary work concerns sharing the gospel with others so that they may put their faith in Jesus Christ. However, members of some cultures are much more resistant to this than are members of other cultures. The concept of *cultural tightness-looseness* helps explain why some cultures are more closed to the gospel than are others. Tight cultures, in contrast to loose cultures, have strong social norms, violations of which are met with intense sanctions. Numerous recent studies reveal the antecedents, consequences, and the geographical distribution of cultural tightness-looseness. There are important missiological implications at the societal level, the individual level, and the organizational level when missionaries work in host cultures which are tighter than their home cultures. Understanding these implications can help missionaries better love and respond to the needs of members of their host culture.

Keywords

culture, missiology, tightness-looseness, cultural psychology, church planting, social norms

One of the principal goals of many missionaries is to bring the gospel to people groups who have yet to respond positively to it (Matt. 28:19-20; Winter & Koch, 1999). However, the gospel is resisted in many cultures and missionaries may find that few people are willing to put their faith in Jesus Christ (Woodberry, 1998). Recent research in social psychology, cultural psychology, anthropology, and biology concerning *cultural tightness-looseness* (Aktas, Gelfand, & Hanges, 2016; Carpenter, 2000; Geeraert, Li, Ward, Gelfand, & Demes, 2019; Mrazek, Chiao, Blizinsky, Lun, & Gelfand, 2013), one of the more well defined dimensions describing cultures (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 2004), provides insights into why some cultures are more closed to the gospel and what missionaries can do to better demonstrate Christ's love to people from such cultures.

Definition, Relationship to Other Cultural Dimensions, and Antecedents

Tight cultures are cultures having strong expectations concerning adherence to social norms and little tolerance for deviance from them. Loose cultures, in contrast, have fewer expectations for conformity and may even encourage new forms of behavior and social interactions. Cultural tightness can be defined as “the strength of social norms and degree of sanctioning within societies” (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006, p. 1226). People in tight cultures have less variation in their behavior and are held more accountable for their behavior than people in loose cultures. This tightness spills over into organizations and other institutions, resulting in less variety and innovation within the culture. Tightness-looseness can be viewed as composed of two dimensions: 1) the strength of norms, depending on how clear and pervasive they are in the culture, and 2) the strength of sanctioning, depending on the degree to which deviance attracts negative responses.

Cultural tightness-looseness was first described by Berry (1967) and Pelto (1968) who described the Japanese, Hutterites, and Pueblo Indians as tight cultures with strong social norms and with severe sanctions for violation of them. In contrast, the Skolt Lapps of Finland, Thais, and modern western cultures were described as loose because of their lack of formality and order and their tolerance for deviant behavior. Triandis (1989, 1994) then described it as one of the three main dimensions of culture (along with collectivism and complexity). More recently, Michelle Gelfand of the University of Maryland and colleagues have been studying cultural tightness-looseness in depth (e.g., Geeraert et al., 2019; Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011).

Relationship with Other Cultural Dimensions.

Cultural tightness-looseness is moderately correlated with collectivism-individualism, but is conceptually different (Carpenter, 2000; Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011). Whereas tightness focuses on the strength and explicitness of social norms, collectivism measures commitment to the ingroup’s goals at the expense of individual interests. Although most tight cultures are collectivistic, Brazil is an example of a collectivistic country that is loose, and Germany is relatively tight but individualistic (Gelfand et al., 2006). In a study of tightness and collectivism within the 50 United States (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), there was not a significant correlation between the two dimensions. States that were both tight and collectivistic include Alabama and South Carolina; similarly, Oregon and New Hampshire were both loose and individualistic. However, California and Hawaii were collectivistic and loose, while Kansas and Ohio were individualistic and tight.

Early studies viewed cultural tightness as the equivalent of Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011; Neumann, 1999; Triandis, 2004). However, more recent studies have found the relationship to be weak or non-existent (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011; Uz, 2015). Because Hofstede’s original study was done with a very restricted range of participants (English speaking employees of IBM in various countries), it is possible that the dimension of uncertainty avoidance is measuring something else other than what was originally believed (Schmitz & Weber, 2014), perhaps national levels of personality traits (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) or commitment to and acceptance of a country’s or organization’s culture (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014) which certainly could be related to cultural tightness.

Cultural tightness-looseness is also distinct from power distance (the strength of social hierarchies; Hofstede, 2011) because social norms can be enforced by others regardless of their

power distance (Gelfand et al., 2006). However, the two dimensions are positively correlated, perhaps because they are both associated with collectivism or perhaps because of the utility of power distance for enforcing social norms (Gelfand et al., 2011; Uz, 2015). In addition, Uz (2015) found that cultural tightness was positively correlated to culturally sanctioned restraint (vs. indulgence) but not correlated with Hofstede's (2011) masculinity-femininity scale.

Antecedents

Several factors seem to be at the origin of variations in cultural tightness-looseness. Cultures that are isolated from other cultures tend to be tighter than cultures that have regular exposure to other cultures either directly or through technology (Triandis, 1994). Strong group norms require homogeneity in values whereas exposure to other cultures, values, and lifestyles presents other options that group members may wish to choose. In technologically sophisticated and urbanized contexts, people tend to be exposed to more lifestyles but are less interdependent on one another, making the sanctioning of social norms more difficult. Similarly, traditional agricultural societies appear to be tighter than traditional hunter-gatherer societies (Berry, 1967; Gelfand et al., 2006). Whereas hunter-gatherer societies might benefit from creativity and divergent thinking in order to obtain food, agricultural societies benefit from cooperation which is facilitated by sharing and enforcing a common set of behaviors.

Another set of factors that appears to promote cultural tightness are threats to survival and restricted resources (Carpenter, 2000; Triandis, 1994; Uz, 2015). When a society's existence is threatened or when mortality rates are high, there is often little tolerance for deviant behavior. The number of rules and their sanctioning increases so as to ensure that approved routes to safety and survival are followed. More frequent natural disasters, the prevalence of disease, lower levels of natural resources, historical mortality rates (e.g., mortality rates 50 years ago) and greater historical threat of invasion are all moderately to strongly associated with cultural tightness on both a national level across the world and a state level within the U.S. (Gelfand et al., 2011; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014; Uz, 2015).

There also seems to be a genetic component to cultural tightness and looseness. The presence in a population of one form of the region 5-HTTLPR of the serotonin transporter gene (SLC6A4) is strongly correlated with a population's cultural tightness (Mrazek et al., 2013). This form of the gene is associated with greater negative emotion (Sen, Burmeister, & Ghosh, 2004), greater levels of fear in response to threat (Lonsdorf et al., 2009), paying more attention to negative information (Munafò et al., 2009), and greater susceptibility to depression when facing stress (Caspi et al., 2003). In general, it is associated with "greater aversion toward harmful and morally questionable behaviors" (Mrazek et al., 2013, p. 104). This form of the gene is the dominant form in tight countries such as Turkey, Japan, and Singapore, but occurs much less frequently in loose countries such as Estonia, Netherlands, and Brazil (Mrazek et al., 2013). It is likely to be one of several genes that make people sensitive to social norms, motivating them to go to great lengths to conform and to enforce conformity in others.

Country-Level Variations in Cultural Tightness Looseness

Two major studies have used different methods to measure cultural tightness-looseness on a national level (Gelfand et al., 2011; Uz, 2015). Measuring this cultural dimension on a national level is useful to some degree, but not as useful as understanding the level of tightness of specific cultures within a nation. For example, some nations may be composed of cultures that are relatively tight, but if the cultures have different values and have managed to learn to live together, the country as a whole may appear relatively loose because of the variation of behaviors that are tolerated (e.g., India). Nevertheless, looking at the variation in cultural tightness-looseness across nations provides a broader understanding of this cultural phenomena.

In Gelfand et al.'s (2011) study, researchers from around the world organized studies in 33 countries which measured people's level of agreement with statements such as "There are many social norms that people are supposed to abide by in this country" (to measure the strength of norms) and "In this country, if someone acts in an inappropriate way, others will strongly disapprove" (to measure the tolerance of deviate behavior). Such a study is limited by the representativeness of the population surveyed (which tends to be more urban than typical of the population) and by the frame of reference that the participants use for comparing their country to another. An alternative approach was used by Uz (2015) to measure cultural tightness-looseness in 68 countries. Uz based his measures on the variation (the standard deviation) in responses collected in the European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association (EWVS) data set from 2000 (EWVS, 2006). Various items were chosen, such as those measuring the acceptability of divorce, abortion, or suicide. Countries that had large variations in response were assigned a value on the loose end of the scale. Countries that had little variation in responses (hence greater uniformity or conformity) were assigned a value on the tight end of the scale.

The results of these two studies were significantly correlated, but not strongly (Uz, 2015). Figure 1 presents the merged results of the two studies. The results from both studies were normalized and averaged if scores existed for a country from both studies. If only one study provided a value for a country, that value was used. As can be seen in Figure 1, Muslim countries tend to be among the tightest. It is quite likely that cultural tightness-looseness is one of the factors contributing to a culture's resistance or openness to the Gospel. A common biblical theme is that those who follow Christ have different values than those of "this world" (Jn 15:19, 17:14-16, Rom. 12:2, I Jn 2:15). Following Christ necessarily means adopting values that may be in contradiction to a culture's social norms. Living out such values is likely to be more costly in tight cultures than in loose cultures due to the sanctioning of such deviance.



Figure 1. Cultural Tightness and Looseness. Based on an average of normalized cultural tightness-looseness scores from Gelfand et al. (2011) and Uz (2015).

Missiological Implications of Cultural Tightness-Looseness

Whereas loose cultures allow individuals to have greater variation in beliefs and behavior, tight cultures emphasize conformity to social norms and sanctioning deviant beliefs and behavior. Missionaries from the West typically come from cultures that are looser than their host culture, especially if they are working among people who are relatively resistant to the gospel. Missionaries can have more effective ministries if they understand the differences associated with cultural tightness-looseness across cultures, individuals, and organizations (Gelfand, 2018; Gelfand et al., 2006).

Working in Tight Cultures

In tight cultures, there is a greater accountability for conforming to social norms (Gelfand et al., 2006). This means that individuals will often experience social sanctions for merely

considering alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Missionaries must be aware of the social pressures that members of tight cultures experience and the pain that they experience when they begin to deviate from what is deemed socially appropriate. Whereas in the loose countries, following Christ may only be moderately costly, in tight cultures cost is far greater due to the social ostracism that can follow.

People from tight cultures differ psychologically from people from loose cultures in important ways. People in tighter cultures see themselves as having a narrower range of options concerning beliefs and behaviors (Uz, 2015). Whereas missionaries may view humans as having the freedom to believe and live as they please, this idea may be foreign to members of tight cultures, who have perhaps never even experienced a desire to do so.

To help members of tight cultures make their own decision concerning the gospel, missionaries may encourage people to develop more complex social identities (Feitosa, Salas, & Salazar, 2012; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). A person's social identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is the set of one's beliefs about one's self that are derived from and influenced by one's various group memberships. The stronger one's identity is tied to a group, the more strongly the group influences one's behavior so that one tends to act as he or she believes a member of such a group should act. In tight societies, people tend to belong to few groups, perhaps only one, limiting the range of what they believe is acceptable behavior. This makes following Christ all the more difficult if following him is not considered acceptable behavior for a member of their group.

However, when people belong to more than one group, their social identity becomes more complex (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Such people learn to navigate the cultural nuances in all the groups which are important to them and generally become more tolerant and open to other points of view. This means that missionaries should strive to provide a social community that members of tight cultures can join, attracting them to a supplementary group identity which may make them more open to considering the claims of Christ. Such communities necessarily need to begin small, perhaps limited to a dyadic friendship. However, such a community is necessary to make following Christ a viable option. This also means that members of tight cultures who are already members of two or more groups that have different social norms are more likely to be open to the gospel than those who are members of only one group.

Further psychological differences of people from tighter cultures compared to people from looser include those due to greater *felt accountability*, "the subjective experience that one's actions are subject to evaluation and that there are potential punishments based on these evaluations" (Gelfand et al. 2006, p. 1229). They tend to have greater cognitive accessibility to social norms, more often thinking about what they "ought" to do in a situation rather than what they "might" do and the options that they have (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Gelfand et al., 2006). This means that making a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ is genuinely more difficult for them. Not only will they have an internal voice telling them that they should not, the fear of the consequences of violating social norms makes following Christ less attractive. Missionaries should emphasize the benefits of following Christ, so much so that they outweigh the extreme costs involved in doing so. These benefits should include a new healthy and safe community (Matt. 19:29; Dunaetz, 2008), peace with God (John 14:27), and eternal rewards (Matt. 5:12). Since radical Islam (e.g., suicide bombings) tends to flourish in tight cultures (Ramakrishna, 2015), one approach a missionary may take is to respond to a person's sense of ought by encouraging a submission to God so radical that one is willing to love one's enemies and forsake all to follow Christ, such as Jesus did with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31).

Cultural tightness appears to be a reaction to strong environmental threats to a people's health and physical safety, such as war, isolation, susceptibility to natural disasters, and disease (Gelfand et al., 2011; Triandis, 2000; Uz, 2015). Even during times of prosperity and safety, tight cultures continue to emphasize conformity and social cohesion that make survival more likely during difficult times when cooperation for the social good is essential. Since tighter cultures are more aware of health and safety issues, missionaries should emphasize salvation and deliverance in the message that they proclaim. Whereas people from looser cultures may be more concerned about personal happiness and self-fulfillment, people in tighter cultures are concerned more about survival (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014; Triandis, 2000); hence, the promises of salvation offered by Christ may be more attractive than promises of a fulfilled and meaningful life, especially since following Christ may increase the likelihood of physical danger due to the very real possibility of persecution.

The constant presence of threat also means that abandoning whatever steps an individual has taken to follow Christ is a possibility. Missionaries should strive not only to create a warm and nurturing community that provides emotional and relational support for both those considering the claims of Christ and for those following Christ, but also the cognitive foundation for a strong faith in Christ, a certainty that faith in God is justified and that following Christ will be rewarded by God (Heb. 11:1-6). Such certainty comes from personal experiences with God, verbally expressing one's beliefs, learning how to resist counterarguments, peer support for one's beliefs, and continual, active processing of new information related to these beliefs, such as regularly discussing and developing personal applications of what God has communicated in the Bible (Dunaetz, 2016a).

Because self-control, self-regulation, and conformity to social norms are so important in tight cultures for preserving social order (Gelfand et al., 2006; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), missionaries, who typically come from cultures that place less emphasis on these qualities, need to pay special attention to their behavior to develop credibility (Dunaetz, 2019). Whereas missionaries from loose cultures may be proud of their freedom in Christ (Gal. 5:1), any consumption of alcohol, overeating/obesity, gambling, or impoliteness is far more likely to be viewed negatively in tight cultures (compared to loose cultures) as indicating a lack of self-control, reducing a missionary's credibility and providing a stumbling block to faith in Christ (Rom. 14:1-23).

Individual Differences in Tightness-Looseness

Just as cultures can vary in tightness-looseness, so can individuals (Gelfand, 2018; Gelfand et al., 2006). Some people are more committed to following social norms and sanctioning those who violate them. Others are more open to behaviors and ideas that may vary from their culture's conventions. Individuals in tight cultures will, on the average, be higher in personal tightness than individuals from loose cultures, but there are likely to be some individuals in even the tightest cultures who are relatively loose.

From a missiological perspective, individuals who are low in personal tightness-looseness are likely to be the most open to the gospel. However, a nascent church consisting mainly of such individuals may produce a cultural mismatch, creating a community of social outcasts that have little or no potential for growth. Self-monitoring, the tendency to effectively regulate one's behavior and emotions in order to accomplish one's goals in social situations (Kudret, Erdogan, & Bauer, 2019; Snyder, 1974), is important in all cultures; however, it is even more important in tight

cultures where norms for social interactions are clearly defined and readily sanctioned (Gelfand et al., 2011). In young churches where leadership development is essential, missionaries working in tight cultures should focus on emerging leaders who have the social skills, such as self-monitoring, to navigate the cultural intricacies of being a counter-cultural Christ-follower without being unnecessarily offensive to those outside the church.

Similarly, missionaries working in loose cultures need to be concerned about cultural mismatches. Individuals who are high in personal tightness tend to be conservative, less creative, and religious (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014; Uz, 2015). In loose cultures, such people might be the most attracted to churches or other forms of religiosity because of the structure and strict social norms associated with religion. Churches in loose cultures that are primarily composed of, and especially those led by, individuals high in personal tightness might be very ineffective in both attracting outsiders toward the gospel and integrating such seekers or young believers into the community; this is because such churches are likely to be viewed as highly rigid or intolerant by most people who become familiar with them.

Organizational Differences in Tightness-Looseness

For most missionaries, organizations are an essential element of their ministries. Whether church planting, providing social services, or responding to people's needs through a specific program, missionaries tend to carry out their ministries in the context of one or more organizations. These may be previously existing ones or ones that the missionaries create themselves. These organizations will all develop an *organizational culture*, the normative way for members to perceive, think, feel, and behave within the organization (Schein, 2004). Like cultures and individuals, organizations will differ in tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2006). Looser organizations will encourage creativity and new ways of addressing problems and accomplishing goals. Tighter organizations will emphasize maintaining order, functioning smoothly, defining structure, following rules, and using a limited set of responses to problems that occur. In organizational contexts, this dimension of culture is sometimes called flexibility versus control (Cameron & Quinn, 1999) or innovation versus stability (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

The tightness-looseness of an organization depends on the tightness-looseness of both the national culture in which the organization is situated and on the personal level of tightness-looseness of the individuals, as well as on the history of the organization as it has learned to respond to problems that have arisen (Gelfand, Lim, & Raver, 2004; Schein, 2004). However, when there is a mismatch in tightness-looseness between an organization and the national culture, conflict becomes more likely. Although conflict management can result in constructive problem solving in mission contexts (Dunaetz, 2016b; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018), conflict is often destructive and dysfunctional.

Several observations can be made about organizations in tight cultures and their leadership that may help prevent destructive conflict. Whereas members of loose cultures tend to prefer charismatic and team-oriented leadership which casts a vision to accomplish an organization's goals, members of tight cultures prefer and view as more competent autonomous leaders who are rule-following and polite, enforcing stability within the organization (Aktas et al., 2016; Stamkou et al., 2019). A mismatch of leadership styles may lower a leader's credibility and effectiveness. Autonomous leadership that is confident in its ability to face challenges (and thus feels little need to consult others), in contrast to task-focused charismatic leadership that is open to the input from others, may, however, lead to abuses in power, be disconnected from new ideas, and focus on

maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, autonomous leadership may be reassuring in times of threat when other members of the organization do not know how to respond.

In general, tight cultures are less open to creativity and produce less creative individuals than open cultures (Chua, Roth, & Lemoine, 2015; Jackson, Gelfand, De, & Fox, 2019). This means that innovation will often be resisted and organizations of the same type (e.g., other churches) will likely be quite similar to each other within the culture with little tolerance for deviance or new forms of expression (Gelfand et al., 2011). Similarly, churches that seek to be multicultural in tight cultures will experience a unique set of problems because members of the dominant culture tend to feel threatened by foreign influences (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014; Mrazek et al., 2013; Uz, 2015). However, leaders from within tight cultures tend to have a better understanding of how to influence people within their own cultures than do creative individuals from loose cultures who seek to introduce new ideas (Chua et al., 2015). Hence indigenous leaders may not be as creative as Western missionaries would like them to be, but they tend to be more effective because they intuitively understand what is important to those whom they lead.

Conclusion

When missionaries enter a new culture to share the love of Christ with others, they need to understand the culture of the individuals with whom they will work. The cultural dimension of tightness-looseness provides many insights that can make a missionary from a loose culture more effective when working among people in a tight culture. It helps explain resistance to the gospel in many contexts and the fear and distress those from tight cultures might experience when considering the claims of Christ. It helps missionaries understand the importance of developing a strong and supportive community for believers in tight cultures. Tightness-looseness also helps explain differences in preferences concerning leadership styles and the dangers of cultural mismatches when a missionary from a looser culture tries to establish or integrate into an organization in a tighter culture.

When missionaries understand how national and local cultures differ in tightness-looseness, as well as how individuals and organizations can vary in this dimension, they are better equipped to both proclaim and live out the gospel in a way that accurately communicates God's love and plan for the people whom they desire to serve.

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