**Why have some countries been more successful than others dealing with COVID?**

**A COVID variant is surging in America with over 100,000 infections per day in early August 2021. Why is this happening?**

**An expert suggests that "Tight" societies are much more effective than "Loose" societies**.

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than three million people worldwide, but the fatality rate is very uneven across the globe. Some countries/states/provinces responded to the first outbreaks with swift and decisive action, imposing sweeping lockdowns, shutting borders, implementing rigorous contact tracing, and enforcing social distancing and mask mandates.

**Other** countries did not impose similar conditions and had very different results. The variation in outcomes is striking. Comparing Taiwan and Florida, both have populations of about 20 million, yet as of May 2021, **Taiwan had suffered just 23 COVID-19 deaths,** *whereas* **Florida had recorded** **over 36,000 deaths**. *Why the huge difference?*

Some countries/states/provinces have well-developed threat reflexes that evolved over many years of dealing with chronic diseases, invasions, natural disasters, and other dangers. The ability of people to follow rules in a crisis has served some countries well during the pandemic, e.g. Taiwan. Places that have faced few such threats, such as Florida, failed to develop these reflexes—and dropped the ball when it came to responding to the menacing new virus, and resulted in thousands of deaths, instead of a few. Many Floridians continue to resist rules for social distancing and mask wearing.

Countries/states/cities that closely observe and uphold social norms can be considered **to be “tight.”** People in those societies don’t tolerate deviance and generally follow the rules. “**Loose” countries**/**states/cities** celebrate individual creativity and freedom. Many citizens in "Loose" countries do not like to be told what to do. "**Loose**" countries are lax in maintaining rules and customs, and are tolerant of new ideas and ways of being.

Researchers tracked and ranked "**tightness**" and "**looseness**" across 33 countries in a paper published in Science in 2011. Individuals were questioned about their perceptions of the strength of their country’s social norms, including whether people in their country had many social norms that they were supposed to abide by, whether their compatriots strongly disapproved of others who acted in inappropriate ways, whether they had the freedom to choose how they wanted to act, and whether people in their country almost always complied with social norms. Global perceptions were analyzed to assess the variation in tightness and looseness in many locations. Societies are not monoliths, of course, and there are some variations in many location. But tightness and looseness generally exist on a continuum. Austria, Germany, Japan, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, and Turkey are generally **"tight,"** while Brazil, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States are generally **"loose."**

Tight cultures have experienced frequent natural disasters, a greater exposure to diseases, greater resource scarcity, higher population density, and suffered territorial invasions. Groups exposed to frequent dangers need to be strict to coordinate to survive. Groups that have experienced fewer threats are more permissive. E.g. The United States, is separated by oceans from other continents, has excellent natural resources, and with friendly neighbors, and has endured no invasions, or any major natural disasters.

Of course, when considering all situations, there are a few exceptions, **but there is a pattern that is very consistent and global.**

As we noted, there are always exceptions. In August 2021, Russia, a "**tight**" country is having its third wave. There are many skeptics in Russia regarding the capabilities of their indigenous vaccines. If this attitude does not change, the virus will have a long tenure in this country.

Tightening up at times of threat is an important social behavior that helps groups plan, coordinate and survive. This principle describes of two problems plaguing societies today—populism and the pandemic. Populist authoritarian leaders hijack, amplify, and manipulate threats, and then promise to return their countries to the old tight order. During a pandemic, societies that have ignored threat signals have had tragic consequences. When we can't curtail any one virus within months, it will mutate, as we now know, and the new mutants can be more infectious, more powerful and deadly.

Scientists report that there are going to be more viruses in the future. What have we learned so that we can contain the future virus threat quickly and effectively?

Scientists advise that there are going to be more viral attacks. We do not know when, but the presence of many viruses found in many parts of the world means that it is just a matter of time before we are greeted by another varmint. Our current viral crisis is a dress rehearsal for the next, and the next, viral attack.

All governments must be prepared to explain the risks to their citizens in a lucid and consistent manner. Warfare and terrorism, threaten in a very clear and visible manner. Virus are too small for the human eye to detect, so many people will ignore that threat. They must be reminded that during our COVID -19 crisis, that millions were infected and many thousands died. We do not want a repeat of that 2020-2021 episode when we had so much death, infections with long term health consequences and serious impact on jobs and our economy. Therefore, American must tighten up, listen to the scientists, so that we can stop the virus from spreading during the tightening up period (90 days?) in order to carefully loosen up to return to normal times. Careful data collection needs to be conducted to identify any sudden hotspots that will require tightening up again to stop infections. These type of viruses only want warm bodies, and doesn't care whether it's victims, are young or old, male or female, or any particular race. We must acknowledge science and the facts and act accordingly.

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**The Threat Reflex**

*Why Some Societies Respond to Danger Better Than Others*

**By Michele Gelfand, *Foreign Affairs,* July-August 2021**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than three million people worldwide, but the fatality rate is wildly uneven across countries. Some countries responded to the first outbreaks with swift and decisive action, imposing sweeping lockdowns, shutting borders, implementing rigorous contact tracing, and enforcing social distancing and mask mandates. Many of these countries have so far evaded the worst of the pandemic, experiencing relatively low numbers of cases and deaths. Other countries struggled to fend off the disease with tragic results: rampant sickness, overwhelmed hospitals, and overflowing morgues.

The variation in outcomes can be striking. Taiwan and Florida both have populations of about 20 million, yet as of May 2021, **Taiwan had suffered just 23 COVID-19 deaths, whereas Florida had recorded over 36,000**. What accounts for this stark difference? New research from social scientists points to an often overlooked factor: variations in how societies respond to threats. Some countries have well-developed threat reflexes that evolved over centuries of dealing with chronic diseases, invasions, natural disasters, and other dangers. The ability of people to follow rules in a crisis has served some countries well during the pandemic, as was evident in Taiwan. Places that have faced few such threats failed to develop these reflexes—and dropped the ball when it came to responding to the menacing new virus. Many Floridians resisted rules for social distancing and mask wearing.

A country that closely observes and upholds social norms can be considered to be “tight.” People in those societies don’t tolerate deviance and generally follow the rules. “Loose” countries celebrate individual creativity and freedom. They are lax in maintaining rules and customs but very tolerant of new ideas and ways of being. Visitors to Germany might notice pedestrians waiting patiently for a crosswalk signal during rush hour; in the United States, one is more likely to see people dashing across the street at an opportune moment.

Social norms form the nervous systems of nation-states. Just as physical nervous systems have common pressure points that can trigger predictable mental and physical reflexes, societies have important pressure points, too. Understanding them can explain not just why some countries have so far beat COVID-19 and others have struggled but also larger political questions, such as why democracies have grown more susceptible to authoritarian politics. Populist autocrats appeal to a society’s desire for order by empathizing with people who feel threatened and promising them a return to tightness. Their power rests on a fundamental understanding of how social norms tighten and loosen.

**TIGHT AND LOOSE**

The Greek historian Herodotus, in his travels across the world in the fifth century BC, was the first to observe the opposing tendencies of societies toward either order or permissiveness. He singled out the Persian Empire for its openness to foreign ideas and practices: “There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes, considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate.” By contrast, he described the Egyptians as having very strong norms, especially about cleanliness, religion, and respect for authority. Two centuries later, the Greek historian Polybius contrasted Roman discipline, order, and rationality with Celtic impetuosity, chaos, and passion on the battlefield. These ancient writers had stumbled on one of the most important ways in which human groups varied—by the strength of their social norms.

It wasn’t until the late 1960s that social science took account of these essential differences. The American anthropologist Pertti Pelto introduced the terms “tight” and “loose” in his work on underlying cultural codes. Like many seminal discoveries, Pelto’s was something of an accident. He set out to study the impact of reindeer herding on community politics among the Skolt Sami in northern Finland. What intrigued him most, however, were the conspicuously loose norms he saw there. He expected to find families managing herding activities in an organized and systematic way. Instead, he observed that the Skolts routinely left reindeer unattended, paid them only irregular visits, and had a very vague sense of organized cooperation with one another.

Pelto later studied the strength of norms across 20 traditional societies. The “tight” Hutterites in North America, Hanos in Arizona, and Lugbaras in Uganda had strong norms, were quite formal, and had severe punishments for norm violations, whereas the “loose” Skolts in Finland, !Kung in South Africa, and Cubeos in Brazil had weaker norms and a greater tolerance for deviance. Pelto’s work never attracted the recognition it deserved and was buried in the stacks of libraries for decades.

A team of researchers and I picked up where Pelto left off. We tracked and ranked tightness and looseness across 33 countries in a paper published in Science in 2011. We queried individuals about their perceptions of the strength of their country’s social norms, including whether people in their country had many social norms that they were supposed to abide by, whether their compatriots strongly disapproved of others who acted in inappropriate ways, whether they had the freedom to choose how they wanted to act, and whether people in their country almost always complied with social norms. Analyzing these perceptions allowed us to assess the variation in tightness and looseness across the globe. Societies are not monoliths, of course, and can have areas in which norms are observed more closely or more laxly. But tightness and looseness generally exist on a continuum. Austria, Germany, Japan, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, and Turkey tend to be tight, while Brazil, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States tend to be loose.

Just as physical nervous systems have common pressure points, societies have important pressure points, too.

Tightness and looseness confer advantages and disadvantages to societies. Tight cultures exemplify order and discipline. Societies with tight cultures tend to consist of individuals who are more attentive to rules, have greater impulse control, and are more concerned about making mistakes. They have higher uniformity—even to the point where their clocks are more synchronized on city streets. Loose cultures have less order: people have lower impulse control and suffer from greater levels of debt, obesity, alcoholism, and drug abuse. But countries with loose cultures also boast much higher levels of openness: they are more tolerant of people of different races, religions, and sexual orientations; are more entrepreneurial; and have much higher levels of creativity.

But what explains these variations in social norms? Tight cultures and loose ones don’t share any obvious characteristics, such as geography, language, religion, or traditions. GDP isn’t a factor, either: rich and poor countries abound in both categories. Japan, a rich country, and Pakistan, a poor one, have tight cultures; the rich United States has a loose one, as does the far poorer Brazil. Instead, the extent to which societies have been exposed to collective threats in part determines their relative tightness or looseness.

Tight cultures have grappled with more frequent natural disasters, a greater prevalence of disease, greater resource scarcity, higher population density, and territorial invasions. Groups exposed to frequent dangers need stricter rules to coordinate to survive. Groups that have experienced fewer threats can afford to be permissive. The United States, for example, is separated by oceans from other continents, has abundant natural resources, and has faced relatively few invasions and major natural disasters in its history. Singapore, by contrast, has over 20,000 people per square mile, suffers from resource scarcity, and endured the risk of ethnic violence in the twentieth century. The architect of Singapore’s economic rise, Lee Kuan Yew, put it simply in his book From Third World to First: “We had one simple guiding principle for our survival, that Singapore had to be more rugged, better organized, and more efficient than others in the region.”

Although there are some exceptions to the general rule, the pattern is overwhelming across continents and centuries. Revisiting Pelto’s original data source—ethnographies—we expanded his sample to study over 86 nonindustrial societies in a paper published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B in 2020. Sure enough, we found the same connection between exposure to threats and tightness of social norms. Societies that have endured many severe crises and dangers tend to be more ordered, wary of difference, and disciplined in the following of rules than societies without that historical experience.

Tightening during times of threat is an important adaptation that helps groups coordinate and survive. This simple principle lies at the heart of two problems plaguing societies today—populism and the pandemic. Populist authoritarian leaders hijack, amplify, and manipulate threat signals and then promise to return their countries to a tight order. Faced with the pandemic, societies have ignored threat signals with tragic consequences. Understanding tight-loose dynamics can help countries better anticipate and manage these challenges.

**DEMOCRATIC RECKONING**

Whatever their excesses, populist authoritarians seek to provide their fellow citizens with an answer to an altogether rational question: Who will protect me? Before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, my research team found that Americans who perceived a lot of threats—including from illegal immigration, a lack of jobs, crime, terrorism, and Iran—wanted the United States to be tighter. They craved security and order in a community that seemed to be collapsing. This preference, far more than political orientation, predicted voter support for Donald Trump, as it did for his political counterparts elsewhere, such as Marine Le Pen in France.

Globalization, surging immigration, and the Internet have transformed societies, often in ways that seem to have upended the old order. Populist autocrats appeal to people who are wary of change and apparent disorder, who suspect that their societies are growing too loose. The power of these leaders rests on a fundamental understanding of how social norms tighten and loosen. Stoking fears of a country unmoored and adrift, they promise quick, simple solutions that will return the country to a tighter social order of yesteryear.

Recall Trump’s inaugural campaign speech in 2015, in which he underscored the threat from Mexican “rapists” and argued that China was “killing us.” The far-right Italian politician Matteo Salvini inveighed against immigration by declaring, “We are under attack. Our culture, society, traditions, and way of life are at risk.” Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has claimed that his country needs to get rid of “Muslim invaders.” In France, Le Pen warned that globalization and Islam will “bring France to its knees.” Invoking a menacing threat succeeds by tapping into the deep evolutionary impulse to tighten that has long helped groups survive.

Democracies have to reckon with this psychology. Populist leaders will come and go, but threats—perceived or real—will always abound and produce the desire for tightness. Some of the threats, such as the loss of well-paid and secure employment for working-class people in the West, are real. Rather than dismiss fears of these threats, authorities need to empathize with those who are struggling and develop innovative solutions, particularly for people put out of work by the decline of manufacturing and the rise of artificial intelligence. When fears are unwarranted, however, governments and civil society groups need to better dispel fake and exaggerated threats designed to manipulate a population.

U.S. policymakers also need to be more mindful of the unintended consequences of rapid changes in cultural norms. The sudden displacement of long-standing regimes can unleash extreme disorder that allows populist autocrats to step into the breach and promise to replace chaos with tightness. This happened during the Arab Spring: after a popular uprising ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, it quickly became apparent that Egypt was transitioning not to freedom but to chaos. In my surveys of Egyptians in the spring of 2012, those who felt the country had become unsafe and had lost its traditional social norms expressed keen support for autocratic rule. Egypt soon jolted back to an even tighter regime—call it autocratic recidivism. In much the same way, populations in disorganized and chaotic Iraqi districts initially welcomed the so-called Islamic State (or ISIS), which promised to restore order and fix essential services that had been neglected by the government. History repeatedly shows that chaos pushes people toward a yearning for tightness. This psychology leaves populations in places where norms have collapsed vulnerable to extremists.

**THE PANDEMIC THREAT**

The examples above show how perceived threats—whether real or imagined—can promote tightening. But the COVID-19 pandemic has tragically demonstrated the devastating effects of societies failing to tighten when facing a genuine threat. As COVID-19 cases exploded in 2020, governments and citizens turned to global health officials, contagious-disease specialists, and economists to help formulate strategies for containment, mitigation, and recovery. But it wasn’t only experts who shaped how countries handled the pandemic; the relative strength of their social norms did, too.

Loose societies have struggled with the pandemic far more than tight ones. Our analysis of more than 50 countries in the autumn of 2020, published in The Lancet Planetary Health, found that those with high levels of looseness had over five times the cases and eight times the deaths as compared to those with high levels of tightness. These effects were found even when controlling for wealth, inequality, age, population density, climate, authoritarianism, and the stringency of the government’s response. Ironically, people in countries with loose cultures had far less fear of COVID-19 throughout 2020, even as cases skyrocketed. In tight countries, 70 percent of people were very scared of catching the virus. In loose ones, only 50 percent were. Not all loose countries have done poorly, and not all tight ones have been successful at limiting cases and deaths during the pandemic. **Yet the results of our study suggest that cultural looseness can be a liability in times of collective threat**.

People in countries that are adapted to low levels of danger didn’t respond as swiftly to the pandemic’s threat signal. Indeed, the virus benefited immensely from some societies’ propensity for rule breaking. Americans exemplify this maverick spirit, which fuels the **United States’ world-class creativity and innovation but is a major liability during times of collective threat**. Countless Americans flouted public health protocols by holding parties, shopping without wearing masks, and generally scoffing at the virus. Instead of fearing COVID-19, many Americans were more troubled by lockdowns and mask mandates. Meanwhile, people in Singapore and Taiwan voluntarily abided by rules about physical distancing, the wearing of masks, and not congregating in large numbers. Both places managed to protect their populations from COVID-19 without entirely shutting down their economies.

**Leaders play an enormous role in influencing the psychology of tightness and looseness.** Notably, threat signals may be intentionally distorted and manipulated by leaders who are more concerned about avoiding blame and maintaining their political standing than the health of their citizens. **In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro described the virus as causing mere “sniffles,” and in the United States, Trump frequently promised that the virus would just “disappear.” This sneering in the face of death encouraged their followers to do the same**. In evolutionary terms, minimizing a threat can reduce the necessary tightening response needed to fend it off.

**CRACKING THE CODE**

**The pandemic can be seen as a dress rehearsal for future threats and a reminder of the importance of cultural intelligence**. **Governments in loose countries need to be prepared to explain risks to their citizens in clear and consistent ways. Unlike concrete and vivid threats, such as warfare and terrorism,** **germs are invisible and abstract, so people can ignore the threat signal more easily.** **Governments must remind their citizens that tightening during times of collective threat is temporary**. **The sooner a society tightens in the face of a threat, the faster it can defeat the threat and return back to its cherished looseness.** New Zealand, which is famously loose, got this right. Through great leadership and the willingness of its citizens to follow rules, the country beat COVID-19 rather than being beaten by it. It displayed what I call “tight-loose ambidexterity”: the ability to tighten when there is an objective threat and loosen when that threat recedes. India, which leans toward tightness, did the opposite: it loosened prematurely, with tragic consequences.

Understanding tightness and looseness can allow governments and societies to better anticipate trends in rapidly changing regions and develop national strategies informed by a more sophisticated appreciation of cultural differences. Herodotus recognized these cultural codes several millennia ago, and it’s time for thinkers and policymakers today to do the same.