

# Tightness–Looseness Revisited: Some Preliminary Analyses in Japan and the United States

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The construct of tightness–looseness is considered to be important in differentiating cultures (Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 1977, 1989). The objective of the present paper is to advance understanding of this construct. Specifically, we present a conceptual framework for the construct and formulate some general research hypotheses derived from our conceptualization. In addition, we examine one of our general hypotheses that cultures differing in the tight–loose dimension will differ in the way language is used. Using a data set from Osgood, May, and Miron (1975), we compared the Japanese and the US samples of this study and found evidence supporting the hypothesis that Japan is a tighter culture, as compared to the USA. In addition to studying the construct of individualism–collectivism, we suggest that tightness–looseness is an important cultural dimension that can explain and predict cultural differences in many kinds of social behaviour.

Le construit de rigidité–permissivité (tightness–looseness) est important pour différencier les cultures (Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 1977, 1989). Le but de cet article est de faire avancer la compréhension de ce construit. Plus spécifiquement, nous présentons un cadre conceptuel pour ce construit et formulons des hypothèses générales de recherche dérivées de notre conceptualisation. De plus, nous examinons l'une de nos hypothèses générales selon laquelle les cultures qui diffèrent sur la dimension rigidité–permissivité diffèrent dans la façon d'utiliser le langage. Nous comparons les échantillons japonais et américains d'un ensemble de données provenant de Osgood, May et Miron (1975) et mettons en évidence des données appuyant l'hypothèse que le Japon est une culture rigide comparativement à celle des Etats-Unis. En plus d'étudier le construit d'individualisme–collectivisme, nous suggérons que la rigidité–permissivité est une dimension importante d'une culture qui peut expliquer et prédire des différences culturelles dans plusieurs catégories de comportement social.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant advances in the study of culture has been the empirical identification of dimensions of cultural variation (e.g. Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Fiske, 1992; Hof-

stede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). In particular, the dimension of individualism–collectivism has received much attention, and a large literature has developed identifying its antecedents (Triandis, 1989), defining features (Triandis, 1994), and consequences

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for social behaviour (see Triandis, 1995 for a review). Although there has been much progress in understanding this dimension of variation, there has been little or no focus on other dimensions that may be important in differentiating cultures and predicting behaviour. In this paper, we introduce a theory of the cultural construct of *tightness-looseness*, or the degree to which cultures impose clear norms and reliably provide sanctions for deviation from norms, and argue that it is another important cultural dimension that needs to be examined.

### Previous Conceptualizations of Tightness-Looseness

The postulation of the dimension of tightness-looseness dates back to Pelto (1968), and has been echoed since then by Triandis (1977, 1989), and Hofstede (1980).

Pelto (1968) was the first to speculate on the existence of a dimension which he referred to as *tightness-looseness*. Based on his anthropological work in traditional societies, he postulated that typical loose cultures include the Skolt Lapps of Northern Finland, and the Thais. According to Pelto (1968), in *loose* cultures, norms are expressed within a wide range of alternative channels and there is a lack of regimentation, regularity, and discipline. These cultures tend to be tolerant of deviant behaviour and values such as formality, permanence, group organization, and solidarity are undeveloped. Pelto argued that at the opposite end of the continuum are *tight* cultures, which include the Japanese, Pueblo Indians, Israeli Kibbutzim, and the Hutterites. In contrast to loose cultures, in tight cultures, norms are expressed very clearly and unambiguously, and society is rigorously formal, disciplined, and orderly. In these cultures, deviation from normative behaviour is not tolerated, and severe sanctions are imposed on those who deviate. At the extreme end of the tightness continuum, Pelto argued that there would be corporate ownership of most facets of life (i.e. land, business), as is found in most theocracies.

According to Pelto, determinants of tightness in traditional societies include high reliance on food crops, such as is found in agricultural societies. In such environments, rigid norms are imposed to attain goals for survival (i.e. an abundant harvest). In addition, differences in kinship systems may account for tightness and looseness.

In a unilineal kinship system, in which descent can be traced to either the male or female, clear and strict norms are enforced. In a bilateral system, the male and female are given similar weight, and norms are likely to conflict. Finally, Pelto argues that population density is a determinant of the tightness. Societies with dense populations will develop strict rules and regulations to provide order and to minimize conflict among people.

Triandis (1977) expanded upon the tight-loose construct and noted that tightness should correlate positively in pre-literate societies with the degree of societal differentiation. Specifically, dependence on food crops, as a determinant of tightness suggested by Pelto, requires that the group must cooperate in tasks such as developing an irrigation system. Therefore, tight cultures are more likely to have a complex and differentiated social organization in which norms are clearly stated and strongly imposed. In hunting and herding society, such norms are not quite as important for the survival of the group, so that violations of norms can be tolerated. However, not much empirical work has yet been done to examine the validity of this conception.

Hofstede (1980) provided one of the first empirical examinations of cultural dimensions related to the tight-loose construct, based on surveys of IBM employees in 53 countries. Through an ecological factor analysis, Hofstede identified four dimensions of cultural variation; *individualism-collectivism*, *masculinity-femininity*, *power distance*, and *uncertainty avoidance*. Most relevant to this discussion is the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, which refers to the degree to which a culture feels threatened by ambiguous situations, and tries to avoid uncertainty through the establishment of structure (Hofstede, 1980). High uncertainty avoidance countries include Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Japan, Peru, and France. In such cultures, high levels of anxiety create the need for many formal rules and regulations, consensus about goals, and a need for certainty and security. By contrast, low uncertainty avoidance countries are Singapore, Denmark, Sweden, Hong Kong, Ireland, Great Britain, India, Philippines, and the United States of America. In these cultures, low levels of anxiety allow for a reduction of structure, and a willingness to take risks (Hofstede, 1980).

According to previous discussions of the features of tight and loose cultures, it is likely that people in a tight culture would be higher in uncertainty avoidance since they live in an environ-

onment where norms and rules are well defined, and where deviations are not tolerated. Consistent with this argument, Hofstede (1980) found that attitudes toward rules and regulations differ in high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures. In high uncertainty avoidance countries, attitudes favour not breaking company rules, and punishing people if they do break the rules. In low uncertainty avoidance countries, people advocate that rules can be broken or completely changed for pragmatic reasons. Moreover, although Hofstede focused on modern societies rather than traditional societies, he did find that at least one tight culture, Japan, was relatively high on the uncertainty avoidance dimension. However, Hofstede's (1980) analysis was inductive and used only three items, so it is unknown whether there is a one-to-one relation between tightness-looseness and uncertainty avoidance.

In his recent theorizing, Triandis (1989) argues that tightness-looseness is an important dimension, and is distinct from other dimensions of cultural variation, such as individualism and collectivism and cultural complexity. For instance, although there is likely to be a linear relationship between collectivism and tightness, he argues that it is probably small. He contends that the two constructs have different antecedents (antecedents in collectivist cultures include common fate and limited resources, whereas antecedents of tightness include population density) and are likely to have different consequences.

Furthermore, cultural complexity (simple versus complex cultures) is generally not related to tightness (Triandis, 1989). Indeed, it is possible to identify types of cultures in the four quadrants defined by these two variables (Triandis, 1990). For example, industrial democracies tend to be characteristic of loose/complex cultures; hunting and gathering cultures are characteristic of loose/simple cultures; totalitarian industrial states are characteristic of tight/complex cultures; and agricultural and pastoral societies are illustrative of tight/simple cultures (Boldt, 1978).

### Remarks: Tightness-Looseness

Whereas it is evident that researchers have been theorizing about the tight-loose construct, there have been no *empirical* studies that have actually demonstrated that cultures differ along this dimension. In fact, there has only recently been a surge of research to define other cultural con-

structs, such as individualism and collectivism. However, the time is ripe for identifying other dimensions of cultural variation. Indeed, the programme of research on individualism and collectivism has provided a valuable guide for other researchers interested in identifying other dimensions of cultural variation. For instance, as Triandis (1989) discusses, a programme of research should begin with an attempt to define the construct and identify social and behavioural manifestations of the construct. Researchers should next attempt to find preliminary evidence that the construct exists. Once preliminary evidence has been found to support its existence, other studies which measure the construct, its determinants, and its consequences can be conducted using multiple methods in many cultures.

Thus far, the analysis of tightness-looseness in the literature has been based on anthropological observations (Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 1977, 1990) as well as on speculations (Hofstede, 1980). Although these provide useful "culture for thought," there is a need to provide empirical evidence for its existence. We will next articulate a theory of tightness-looseness, and provide a preliminary test that justifies future research.

### The Present Conceptualization of Tightness-Looseness

Based on our analysis of the relevant literature, we argue that tightness-looseness is an important dimension of cultural variation, and propose an integrated conceptualization of the construct that includes both antecedents and manifestations in various aspects of life. This conceptualization is represented schematically in Fig. 1.

#### **Antecedents of Tightness-Looseness**

Our conceptualization considers three different factors as antecedents of the construct, namely, *population density*, *homogeneity*, and *isolation* from other cultures. Although these factors are now considered separately, they may be related to one another to a certain extent.

*Population Density.* In a highly populated society, people are likely to run into each other and face difficulties in interaction unless their behaviour is governed by well-defined norms. According to Pelto (1968), the more densely

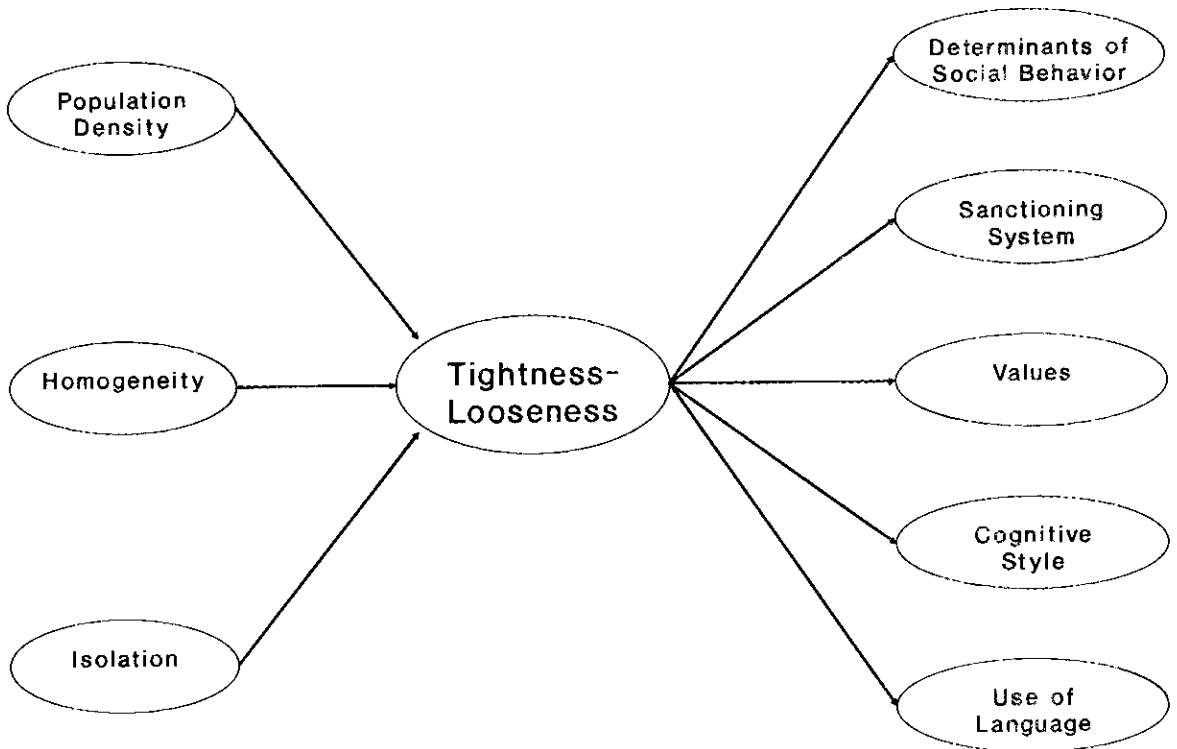


FIG. 1. Conceptualization of tightness-looseness.

populated a culture, the more well-defined and strict will be the social norms and rules so that smooth interpersonal functioning is attained. However, it is possible that this relationship is curvilinear, e.g. the culture may become so crowded that people will no longer pay attention to maintaining interpersonal harmony. Looseness should occur when density is low, since if the next human is far away and does not follow expected behaviour, this will have little effect on the members of a culture.

*Homogeneity.* When a culture is relatively homogeneous, people are similar. That is; they agree on important norms and values. Heterogeneous societies consist of people with dissimilar norms and values. In all cultures where a member deviates from the group norms, other group members may have to decide whether to punish that individual (e.g. ostracize or interact less with him/her). Because rejection of ingroup members is emotionally draining for both groups and their members, cultures may develop tolerance for deviation from group norms. This is especially likely in heterogeneous cultures, where people are used to people being different, and are consequently more flexible in dealing with

members who deviate from group norms. In homogeneous cultures, where people are more similar, groups are often more rigid in requiring that group members behave according to group norms (Triandis, 1990). Additionally, when a culture is at the intersection of two different cultures (e.g. Thailand is at the intersection of India and China), people are aware of different types of norms, and may become loose as a result.

*Isolation.* Homogeneity relates to the third proposed antecedent, geographic isolation. That is, the more isolated a culture is from other cultures, the more likely it is to be homogeneous. However, the opposite also seems to be plausible, the more homogeneous a culture, the more likely it is to resist external cultural influences. Therefore, we propose these two antecedents of tightness as separate but correlated factors.

Other antecedents of tightness may include: (1) the extent people are interdependent in the activities required for survival, and (2) the stability of the culture. Presumably, the more interdependent the people, the more they have to develop norms that will regulate their activities, so their activities can occur smoothly and with little conflict. In a culture where rice is cultivated, for instance,

planting is sometimes done with a row of individuals walking across the field, shoulder to shoulder, making sure that no fertile parts of the field are neglected. Such efficiency in planting probably increases the probability of survival in such an environment, whereas looseness may decrease the probability of survival. Moreover, stability is required for tightness, because when there are many environmental changes, such as economic upheavals and wars, new norms may have to develop to deal with new circumstances.

### **Manifestations of Tightness-Looseness**

Whereas we generally agree with Peltó's definition of tightness and looseness, we attempt to elaborate the particular manifestation of the construct further. Specifically, we propose that the tight-loose construct is manifested in different aspects of life.

*Determinants of Social Behaviour.* According to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action, the intention to perform a volitional behaviour (X) is determined by two factors, the attitudinal component (whether one likes to perform X) and the normative component (whether one feels social pressure to perform X). We predict that normative pressure will be the more important determinant of behaviour in tight cultures, whereas the attitudinal factor will be more important in loose cultures.

Although a similar conceptualization has been proposed for the influence of collectivism on social behaviour (see, e.g., Bierbrauer, Meyer, & Wolfradt, 1994), and empirical evidence has been found to support this (e.g. Davidson et al., 1976), we suggest that there should be qualitative difference in the content of the normative component. Specifically, for collectivist cultures, the normative pressure primarily comes from specific ingroup members (e.g. parents or best friends), whereas for tight cultures, it originates from the general rules and norms an individual encounters. In other words, it comes from society in general (i.e. people in general).

*Sanctioning Systems.* Although psychologists have examined the effects of sanctions on specific social behaviour (e.g. the effects of establishing a sanctioning system in a social dilemma situation [Yamagishi, 1986, 1988]), not much has been done to examine cultural differences in the effects of

sanctioning systems on social behaviour. According to our discussion, we suggest that, in tight cultures, sanctioning systems will be better developed, and the magnitude of sanctions applied when norms or rules are violated will be more severe. In loose cultures, sanctions will be less frequent and less severe, since deviant behaviour will be tolerated. Indeed, it is often difficult to determine whether a behaviour is deviant because norms and rules are not well-defined in such cultures.

Perhaps some observations by Kidder (1992) can highlight this difference. Specifically, she described how young Japanese returning from abroad often find it difficult to adjust to the strict rules and formalities in Japan. She quoted one teenager (Kidder, 1992, p. 385) as saying:

I had a perm in my hair and the school had a rule which said no permanent, so my teacher said I should cut my hair, and I did. Also, my hair got browner from more sun in the US. And the teacher said I should colour my hair black, and students teased me too. So I was unhappy. I didn't want to colour my hair because I said "this is my natural hair." And I wanted to go back to the US because there nobody cares about my hair.

Similar types of sanctions imposed on Japanese students returning from abroad have been documented in the literature (e.g. Ferguson, 1989).

*Values.* According to Hofstede (1980), cultures which differ in uncertainty avoidance emphasize different types of values. Similarly, we suggest that people in tight versus loose cultures will have different value priorities. Specifically, since formality, structure, and order are all defining attributes of tight cultures, we expect that in these cultures, values such as conformity, past tradition, stability, morality, law and security will be most important. In contrast, people in loose cultures will emphasize relativism, change, and tolerance, and are likely to endorse values such as risk-taking, stimulation, daring, and variety.

*Cognitive Style.* The tight-loose dimension should also be manifested in the different cognitive styles developed in different cultures. As Triandis (1977) proposed, children who are reared in environments that are not complex (e.g. which have few levels of social

stratification and political integration) will receive little information and thus develop simple cognitive structures whereas those who are reared in complex environments will be more likely to develop complex cognitive structures to deal with the information they encounter daily. Since these environments are always changing, cognitive complexity becomes an adaptive tool.

An analogy can be drawn for the effects of tightness-looseness on cognitive development. In tight cultures, since social behaviour is relatively structured and governed by social norms and rules, individuals do not need to develop complex cognitive structures for dealing with others. However, in loose cultures, few specific norms or rules are present and individuals constantly have to process information and choose their actions from a variety of options. Thus, they are more likely to develop complex cognitive structures.

*Language.* It is likely that the formality and rules in a tight culture will be reflected in the language. Kiddler and Muller (1991) point out that in Japan (a tight culture), there are many rules that people must follow when speaking. For instance, the obligation to be polite and humble requires a woman to use the term *Watashi* when addressing herself, as opposed to the male term for I, *boku*. Indeed, following etiquette of the language is so important (Kiddler & Muller, 1991, p. 147) that "a speaker who violates the rules risks getting into trouble and being discredited in the very act of speaking." This requires a common understanding of the meaning of words, and their usage in numerous contexts. In a loose culture, such as the USA, people have more liberty to define terms as they wish and do not have any strict requirements of usage (Triandis, 1989).

Thus, we expect that there will be more agreement concerning the meaning of words and their usage in tight cultures as compared to loose cultures, where such consensus about the meaning of words is less crucial for everyday interaction.

To summarize, we suggest that whether a culture is tight or loose should be reflected in one or more of these five aspects of daily life. In the following section of the paper, we will examine one of our general hypotheses by presenting some analyses of the difference in language between a tight culture (Japan) and a loose culture (USA). Specifically, we will explore if there is greater agreement about the meaning of words in a tight culture as compared to a loose culture, by using

data from the *Atlas of Affective Meanings*, compiled by Osgood, May, and Miron (1975).

## METHOD

As a preliminary examination of the hypothesis, we conducted two analyses from the *Atlas* data. Before the measures and analysis are described, we will present a brief description of how the *Atlas of Affective Meaning* was compiled.

First, Osgood and colleagues employed a naturalistic approach in selecting 100 diverse concepts (including abstract terms such as "SUCCESS," "POWER," and "HOPE" as well as concrete terms, such as "BIRD," "DOCTOR," and "HOUSE") commonly used in 25 different communities. These concepts were verified for their cross-cultural equivalence in both translation and contextual usage. The concepts were then used as stimuli in a modified word association task to elicit, from a group of teenage boys, 10,000 qualifiers in each community.

Based on the assessment of their overall frequencies of usage by all subjects, diversities of associations elicited by the 100 concepts, and congruent relationships with other qualifiers across all subjects and concepts, between 50 to 80 most productive qualifiers were retained and used to construct 50 bipolar semantic differential (SD) scales for each indigenous culture.

In the second step of the research, the same 100 concepts were rated against the 50 indigenous SD scales by another group of teenage male subjects in each community. The within-culture mean ratings were computed for each culture as well as across 25 cultures, yielding both 25 data matrices of  $100 \times 50$  and a data matrix of  $100$  (concepts)  $\times 1250$  (SD scales = 50 scales  $\times$  25 cultures). All matrices were factor analyzed. The latter matrix provided a so-called pancultural factorization (see Osgood et al., 1975; Tzeng, Osgood, & May, 1980). In almost all analyses, three dominant factors were prevalent and identified as universal affective semantic features: Evaluation (E), Potency (P), and Activity (A). For each culture, the 12 most salient scales were chosen as markers (4 scales each for E, P, and A). These markers, indigenous to each culture, are approximately functionally equivalent across different cultures in the same semantic space.

In the third step of research, 620 diverse concepts were selected from each research community and were checked for their cross-linguistic equivalence (by back-translation into English)

and contextual certainty with respect to the objects, things, or social roles being referred to. These concepts therefore represent cross-culturally common entities for studying within and between cultural similarities and differences in various aspects of life experiences.

Within each culture, a new representative sample of 1200 high-school male subjects, aged 13–18 years and from average high schools in urban settings, was asked to rate the 620 concepts (in subsets) against the 12 SD markers of the universal E–P–A dimensions. As the objective indicators of subjective (affective) meanings, the composite factor scores of each concept were obtained by computing the mean ratings across the four indigenous markers for the E–P–A dimensions respectively.

In order to assess similarities and differences between concepts within and between cultures, 47 categories of concepts were derived and organized under 12 supercategories in accordance with the ways that humans structure their life experiences.

## Measures

For each category, a standardized data extraction and manipulation programme for within-category analysis was devised, yielding various statistical measures (for a summary of all of the measures, see Tzeng, 1983). Two specific measures were selected for the present study. First, the *Distance from the Origin* (D–O) measure represents each concept's distance from the geometric origin in the three-dimensional E–P–A space. This measure will index the total affective saturation of each concept within each culture. In other words, the D–O index is used as a measure of how “meaningful” the concept is in each culture.

Second, the *Culture Instability* (CI) measure represents the absolute deviation between the

individual and group polarities of each concept. Whereas individual polarity represents each culture's average in *absolute* ratings (between +3 to –3) of the concept computed across all subjects and all 12 E–P–A markers, group polarity represents each culture's average in *absolute* ratings computed from the cultural-mean of each concept on the 12 E–P–A markers.<sup>1</sup> Within each culture, the CI measures of all concepts were further standardized with respect to the overall mean and standard deviation of all 620 concepts' CI values, resulting in the so-called CI–Z scores.

Psychometrically, the CI measure presents the level of intracultural instability (lack of consensus) over each affective conception. Cultural instability for a concept is usually attributable to the fact that there is disagreement in the perception of the meaning of the concept (Osgood et al., 1975). The CI–Z, by the nature of its within-cultural normalization, can be used to index relative diversities of any concept for both within- and between-culture comparisons.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### Analysis 1

As previously mentioned, we expected that in tight cultures, there would be more agreement about the meaning of words, whereas in loose cultures, there would be more disagreement about the meaning of words. One way of operationalizing this is through the *variance* that is found in the perception of the meaning of words in a particular language. In other words, we expected that:

*Hypothesis 1: Concepts in loose cultures will have higher CI–Z scores (more cultural instability) than the same concepts in tight cultures (less cultural instability)*

Following Pelto's (1968) and Hofstede's (1980) descriptions of tight and loose societies, Japan was selected as a representative of tight cultures, and the USA was chosen as a representative of loose cultures.

To test this hypothesis, we used a sign test for significant differences (Siegel, 1956). The null hypothesis tested by the sign test is:

$$P(X_A > X_B) = P(X_A < X_B) = 0.5$$

$$^1 \text{ Individual polarity} = \frac{\sum \sum \sum (X_{ijk})}{12N}$$

$$\text{Group polarity} = \frac{\sum \sum (\text{Mean } X_{ij})}{12}$$

where  $i = 1$  to 3 (i.e., the E–P–A dimensions)

$j = 1$  to 4 (i.e. the 4 marker scales)

$k = 1$  to  $N$  (i.e., the number of subjects responding to all 620 concepts)

where  $X_A$  is the number of times the cultural instability index was greater in the USA as compared to Japan, and where  $X_B$  is the number of times the culture instability index was greater in Japan as compared to the USA. Thus, if the null hypothesis is true, then there are as many concepts that have higher cultural instability indices in Japan, as there are concepts that have higher cultural instability in the USA. As Siegel (1956) describes, those pairs which have "no differences" are dropped from the analysis and the  $N$  is correspondingly reduced. Thus, the cases where there are differences in signs (either positive or negative) are of most interest in this analysis.

This analysis proceeded in several steps. First, we identified all of the concepts in the *Atlas* that had equivalent meaningfulness (the same D-O index) in the USA and Japan. According to Osgood et al. (1975), a difference of 0.86 indicates a significant difference in the D-O index across cultures. This results in a total of 352 concepts. For each concept, the significance of a difference in the CI-Z was noted, using Tzeng's (1983) criteria that a difference of 0.5 between the two indices is indicative of a significant difference. Next, we determined the number of signs for the USA and Japan on each concept, such that a plus sign (+) indicated that the USA had higher instability than Japan, and a minus sign (-) indicated that Japan had higher instability than the USA. From this analysis, 170 concepts had plus signs and 85 concepts had minus signs. As per Siegel (1956), the concepts for which there were no difference were dropped ( $N=97$ ) and the  $N$  was reduced to 255. Alpha was set at 0.01.

Since the sample size was large, the normal approximation to a binomial distribution was used. For this test, a  $Z$  score is computed based on the following formula:

$$Z = \frac{X - 0.5N}{0.5\sqrt{N}}$$

where  $x$  is equal to the number of minuses, since the prediction is that pluses will predominate.

The  $Z$  test showed a highly significant difference such that the USA had significantly more cultural instability as compared to the Japanese sample ( $P < 0.00003$ ). Thus, the hypothesis that tightness may be reflected in the language was supported in this analysis.

## Analysis 2

A rival hypothesis to that saying the higher the tightness of the culture the lower the CI-Z is that Japan is more homogeneous in every way, including the use of language. Since homogeneity is theoretically linked to tightness, this hypothesis is consistent with the theory. However, if we could show that the differences in tightness are important in the case of specific concepts that are related to the postulated theory of tightness, then it may suggest that the link between homogeneity and low CI is mediated by tightness.

The 620 concepts in the *Atlas* represent diverse human life experiences and each signifies a "probe" of subjective culture (Tzeng, 1983). Therefore, we examined the perception of the meaning of the concepts related to the theory and, more specifically, the *variance* of concepts related to the theory. As derived from the previous conceptualization of the tight-loose construct, we then tested the hypothesis that:

*Hypothesis 2: In loose cultures, there will be greater cultural instability on the meaning of concepts related to (1) sanctions; (2) normative pressure; and (3) values, as compared to tight cultures.*

Our conceptualization of tightness-looseness (see Fig. 1) was used as a guide in selecting the concepts to be analyzed. Three investigators independently chose concepts from the Osgood data set that were presumed to reflect the aforementioned categories. Only those concepts for which there was at least two-thirds agreement between the researchers were chosen for the analysis. Next, all of the concepts were chosen that had equivalent meaningfulness (similar D-O indices) in the USA and Japan. For each concept, the sign of the difference was noted, resulting in 21 concepts in which there was a plus sign (i.e. where the USA had higher cultural instability than Japan) and 6 concepts in which there was a minus sign (i.e. where Japan had higher cultural instability than the USA). The  $Z$  test demonstrated that there was a greater number of concepts that had higher cultural instability indices in the USA, as compared to Japan ( $P < 0.003$ ).

Thus, the fact that these differences were found even with a small set of theoretically relevant concepts provides further support for the argu-



ment that tightness-looseness is linked to differences in the language.

Table 1 lists the differences in the CI-Z indicates for all of concepts in Analysis 2. The differences can be summarized into the following areas related to the tight-loose construct:

1. *Sanction*. Consistent with the notion that tight cultures will have more clearly defined ideas of absolute truth in order to apply sanction, the Japanese sample had less cultural instability in the meaning of "TRUTH," with  $-1.8$  on CI-Z for the Japanese sample as compared with  $-0.9$  in the USA sample. The clear standards that were hypothesized to be found in tight societies are reflected in the perception of the concepts of "JUSTICE" and "SIN" in the USA and Japan: The overall conception of

"SIN" is much more homogeneous in Japan (CI-Z =  $-1.0$ ) than in the USA (CI-Z =  $0.3$ ), as is the conception of "JUSTICE" (CI-Z =  $-1.3$  and  $-0.7$  for Japan and USA, respectively). Similarly, the Japanese sample had less cultural instability in the perception of "TRAGEDY" and "GUILT" (CI-Z =  $-0.8$  and  $-0.4$ , respectively), as compared to the USA (CI-Z =  $0.5$  and  $1.2$ , respectively).

2. *Normative Pressure*. The Japanese clearly have more agreement about the meaning of obligations, as evidenced by the concept "DUTY" with  $-1.1$  on CI-Z for the Japanese, as compared with  $-0.3$  on CI-Z for the Americans. Similarly, the Japanese sample had much less disagreement in the meaning of concepts reflecting *specific* norms. For instance, in the area of sexuality, Japanese have greater agreement about the mean-

TABLE 1  
A Comparison of Cultural Instability in Concepts Related to Tightness-Looseness in Japan and the USA

Context Domains	D-O		CI-Z	
	USA	Japan	USA	Japan
1. Sanction				
TRUTH <sup>a</sup>	2.4	1.8	-0.9	-1.8
SIN <sup>a</sup>	1.9	2.5	0.3	-1.0
TRAGEDY <sup>a</sup>	2.3	2.1	0.5	-0.8
GUILT <sup>a</sup>	1.8	1.7	1.2	-0.4
2. Normative Pressure				
DUTY <sup>a</sup>	1.8	1.4	-0.3	-1.1
JUSTICE <sup>a</sup>	2.5	2.5	-0.7	-1.3
QUESTION THINGS <sup>b</sup>	1.2	1.4	-0.5	0.2
CONTEMPLATION <sup>b</sup>	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.5
CONFLICT <sup>b</sup>	1.7	1.7	0.0	0.5
PROBLEM <sup>b</sup>	1.0	0.8	-0.3	0.3
NAKEDNESS <sup>a</sup>	1.2	1.5	0.7	-1.8
PROSTITUTION <sup>a</sup>	0.9	1.6	2.9	-0.6
ILLEGITIMATE CHILD <sup>a</sup>	1.4	1.2	0.8	-1.5
MARRIAGE <sup>a</sup>	2.4	2.0	1.0	-0.1
DIVORCE <sup>a</sup>	1.8	1.0	1.0	-0.1
ANGER <sup>a</sup>	1.6	1.6	0.3	-1.5
AGGRESSION <sup>b</sup>	2.3	1.6	-0.2	1.5
PASSION <sup>a</sup>	2.1	1.6	0.3	-1.3
HATE <sup>a</sup>	1.9	2.1	1.3	-0.9
SYMPATHY <sup>a</sup>	1.3	1.9	0.8	-0.7
SADNESS <sup>a</sup>	2.1	2.3	1.4	-0.9
PAIN <sup>a</sup>	1.7	2.1	1.6	-0.9
LAUGHTER <sup>a</sup>	2.3	2.9	-1.0	-2.9
3. Uncertainty Avoidance				
FEAR <sup>a</sup>	1.4	1.8	1.0	-0.9
IMMORTALITY <sup>a</sup>	1.2	0.5	1.1	0.6
PAST <sup>a</sup>	1.3	0.8	0.6	-0.4
TRADITION <sup>b</sup>	1.5	1.3	-0.8	0.3

<sup>a</sup> Illustrates a hypothesized difference.

<sup>b</sup> Illustrates the reverse of what was predicted.

ing of the concepts of "NAKEDNESS," "PROSTITUTE," and "ILLEGITIMATE CHILD." In the area of nuptials, the concepts of "MARRIAGE" and "DIVORCE" evoke more agreement in the Japanese sample. On the other hand, the Americans had more agreement about "QUESTION THINGS," "CONTEMPLATION," "CONFLICT," and "PROBLEM." Perhaps there is more agreement of these concepts in a loose culture because they are more acceptable.

As expected, there was also more agreement in the Japanese sample on the perception of concepts related to emotional expression. That is, the conceptions of "ANGER," "PASSION," "HATE," "SYMPATHY," "SADNESS," "PAIN," and "LAUGHTER" were much more homogeneous in the Japanese sample. The only exception was the perception of "AGGRESSION"; there was much more disagreement in the conception in Japan ( $CI-Z = 1.5$ ) than in the USA ( $CI-Z = -0.2$ ).

3. *Values.* Consistent with some of the values assumed to be endorsed in tight cultures, the *Atlas* data demonstrated that concepts such as "FEAR," "PAST," and "IMMORTALITY" (e.g. reflecting permanence) reflect less cultural instability in Japan than in the USA.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to re-introduce the cultural construct of tightness–looseness, to provide a theoretical framework for the dimension, and to test empirically one idea related to the framework. Our analyses of data from the *Atlas of Affective Meaning* (Osgood et al., 1975) demonstrated that Japan and the USA, two cultures that were postulated to reflect tightness and looseness, respectively, differed significantly in the way that language was perceived. Specifically, there was much more agreement on the perception of the meaning of concepts in Japan as compared to the USA across the *Atlas* data as a whole and on the very specific concepts related to the framework. We believe that this provides preliminary evidence that the cultural construct of tightness–looseness exists, at least in the domain of language.

This is only the first step in the development of a theory of tightness–looseness. In addition to demonstrating that tightness–looseness is relevant to other domains postulated in the framework, future research should be directed toward examining several important theoretical issues,

such as the generalization of tightness–looseness across domains of life, as well as the discriminant validity of tightness–looseness and other cultural constructs.

## Conceptual Issues

Are those so-called "tight" cultures indeed tighter in all aspects of life? Or is this tight–loose construct situation-specific or domain-specific? For instance, it is possible that in all cultures, there are certain domains in which norms are clear and are strictly enforced, and other domains in which norms are unclear and deviance is tolerated. In Latin America, being on time is not important and thus people are relatively loose in this domain of life, yet people are very tight in other domains such as infidelity. Alternatively, it is possible that tightness or looseness exists in *most domains of life* in a particular culture, with only a few domains being the exception. This latter possibility echoes what research on individualism in the USA has found, namely that this construct applies in many domains (e.g. aesthetics, education, public behaviour; see Triandis, 1995), but there are also some situations that elicit collectivistic responses (e.g. war, common fate).

One empirical way to answer this question is to design items tapping different domains of life, and examine cultural differences in each of these domains. For instance, one can follow Spranger's (1923) conception that there are basically six different domains of life: aesthetic, social, economic, political, religious, and truth. We anticipate that some cultures will be tighter in some of these domains than the others, reflecting the relative importance of these domains. More research is needed to examine if this perspective is supported empirically.

Another conceptual issue that should be addressed is the differences between tightness–looseness and other cultural constructs, such as collectivism and individualism. As mentioned previously, Triandis (1989) suggested that these two constructs, though correlated, are probably distinct because they have different determinants and consequences. Moreover, the relation between tightness–looseness and uncertainty avoidance is thus far only speculative. Hofstede (1980) used an inductive approach to identify this dimension, and only used three items as justification of its existence. It is unknown whether or not this dimension would be replicated in future work. Undoubtedly, the relations among the constructs

will need to be clarified in future research, preferably using a multi-trait, multi-method approach (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Toward this end, a measurement of tightness-looseness tapping different domains of life is now being developed and tested (Gelfand, Chan, Triandis, & Yamaguchi, in prep).

Although only future research will indicate which cultural constructs are most important to predicting social behaviour, we postulate that the tightness-looseness construct may be relevant to a broader range of situations than collectivism. Research on collectivism focuses on the ingroup-outgroup relationships and how individuals from different cultures behave differently when interacting with ingroup versus outgroup members (e.g. Chan et al., unpublished; Leung, 1988; Leung & Bond, 1984). Whereas this heightened ingroup-outgroup distinction for collectivists is theoretically meaningful and has stimulated a lot of cross-cultural research, it is also rather obvious that a lot of social behaviours do not involve the ingroup-outgroup contrast (e.g. how people from different cultures react to the idea of protecting the environment, or how superiors manage subordinates of different cultural backgrounds). We suggest that the idea of tightness-looseness can help explain and predict this broader set of social behaviours, and perhaps even non-social behaviours.

Lastly, future research should be conducted to disentangle the postulated antecedents, such as homogeneity, and the features and manifestations of the construct of tightness-looseness outlined in Fig. 1.

## Potential Implications

The cultural construct of tightness-looseness may have important implications for intercultural relations and training. As the number of multinational corporations keeps increasing, and intercultural contacts are becoming part of our daily life, an increased understanding of this cultural construct can facilitate more harmonious and/or effective interactions between people from different cultures. For instance, imagine a situation in which a superior is managing a work-group consisting of people from both tight and loose cultures. According to our conceptualization, it seems to be more effective for the superior to provide different types of guidelines: Clear and explicit instructions may be more motivating for subordinates from tight cultures, and broader and less rigid

guidelines may be more motivating for those from loose cultures.

Lastly, there may be both strengths and weaknesses of tightness and looseness for society as a whole, depending on the criteria being used. If conformity to societal norms is important, there may be lower crime rates, child abuse, and homicides. Likewise, tightness may be beneficial for manufacturing of high precision, and generally high-quality management, which requires attention to norms and little deviation. On the other hand, looseness may be related to innovation and creativity.

It will be important to distinguish the domains in which tightness is desirable and undesirable. Training programmes might then be developed to enable people to recognize situations in which they would benefit from changing their behaviour. For example, in the case of the Japanese intolerance of small discrepancies in behaviour, exposure to heterogeneity and greater integration into world culture could reduce undesirable aspects of tightness. In the case of Americans, exposure to societies where virtuous action is of paramount importance could reduce excessive looseness in domains such as crime, environmental issues, etc.

In conclusion, this paper is an initial attempt to bring the tightness-looseness construct back to the attention of cross-cultural researchers. It is our hope that future conceptual as well as empirical work will be done to further our understanding of this dimension of cultural variation.

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