

Low sense of personal control increases people's affinity for tighter, rules-based culture

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Theorized model and overview of studies. Credit: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2022). DOI: [10.1037/pspa0000327](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000327)

People who feel a lack of personal control in their lives are more likely to prefer a culture that imposes order, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. These "tighter" cultures, in turn, perpetuate their existence by reducing individuals' sense of personal control and increasing their sense of collective control.

"Strong social norms—a core feature of tight cultures—help people view the world as simple and coherent. As strong norms guide people's behaviors and allow them to predict others' behaviors, they can provide a significant source of order and predictability in everyday social life," said lead author Anyi Ma, Ph.D., of Tulane University. "So, when people lack control and desire structure, they may come to prefer tighter cultures."

The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Researchers analyzed [survey data](#) and conducted a series of experiments to better understand how a sense of personal control can affect a preference for cultural tightness, and how cultural tightness can affect people's sense of personal control.

First, the researchers looked at data from more than 5,700 participants from the Midlife in United States survey, a nationally representative, longitudinal study of health and well-being. Data were collected in two waves: 2004-2006 and 2013-2014.

As part of the survey, participants were asked a series of questions designed to assess their perceived level of personal control. Participants in both waves were also asked, "Thinking back over all the places you've lived during your lifetime, including where you live now, which state would you most like to live in for the next 10 years if you could easily move there now?"

Researchers used scores for tightness and looseness of individual states calculated by researchers from the University of Maryland in 2014. Scores for each state were derived using an established measure that included criteria such as strength of punishment (e.g., the legality of corporal punishment, punitiveness of laws), latitude/permissiveness

(access to alcohol), diversity (as measured by the percentage of [total population](#) that is foreign) and prevalence and strength of institutions (e.g., how religious the population is).

Individuals who reported lower levels of perceived personal control were significantly more likely to express a preference for states that scored higher in societal tightness. These findings remained true, and even strengthened, after controlling for participants' gender, age, income and education.

The researchers also conducted a survey of 225 employees from a large apparel retailer in southern China. As part of a larger study, participants were asked to respond on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to a series of statements on their perceived level of control (e.g., "I am in control of my life"), their need for structure (e.g., "I hate to change my plans at the last minute") and their preference for a tighter organizational culture (e.g., "My company should have more social norms that people should abide by").

Similar to the findings from the MIDUS survey, participants who expressed lower levels of personal control were more likely to express a preference for a tighter organizational structure. Additionally, employees who reported lower levels of personal control were more likely to express a higher need for structure and those with a higher need for structure were more likely to express a preference for a tighter organizational culture.

In another experiment, researchers found participants who expressed low levels of personal control were more likely to reward prosocial or punish selfish behavior of an anonymous individual within a simulated computer game.

Researchers also tested whether being in a tight culture reduces people's

perceptions of personal control. A total of 98 participants, recruited online, were randomly assigned to read a description of a company that either had a tight or a loose organizational culture and asked to imagine they had accepted a job there. Participants who were asked to imagine working for a company with a tight culture perceived significantly lower personal control than those asked to imagine working for a company with a loose culture.

A separate but similar experiment, comprising 96 online participants, also asked individuals to imagine working for a company with tight or loose organizational cultures, but instead of asking about personal control, individuals were asked to respond to a series of statements designed to measure their sense of collective control (e.g., "I would feel that employees in the company can work together to control the fate of the company").

Results from these experiments provide evidence for the idea that tight cultures lower people's feelings of personal control but increase their sense of collective control, according to Ma.

"Scholars have argued that tight cultures evolved as a way for people to collectively mitigate societal threats. We support this idea by showing that being in a tight culture increases people's perceptions of collective control, which makes them feel more confident in overcoming external threats as a group," she said. "The increased collective control afforded by tight cultures might be especially important in the current COVID-19 pandemic, in which a coordinated collective response is vital for survival."

While much of the findings were not surprising because of a robust base of theory and research supporting them, Ma said she still finds it amazing that an individual's feelings of [personal control](#) can have such an overwhelming effect on society as a whole.

"Before doing this research, I used to think that we are products of the [culture](#) we live in," she said. "The idea that we are individual beings capable of shaping the cultures that we live in is absolutely fascinating to me."

More information: Anyi Ma et al, The Mutual Constitution of Culture and Psyche: The Bidirectional Relationship between Individuals' Perceived Control and Cultural Tightness-Looseness, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000327](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000327)

Survey: midus.wisc.edu/

Provided by American Psychological Association

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