

# Mapping the brain to understand cultural differences

July 18 2013

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A University of Maryland-led research team is working to help diplomats, military personnel, global managers and others who operate abroad to peer inside the minds of people from very different cultures.

With a three-year, \$813,000 grant from the Department of Defense researchers will literally get inside the heads of people from various cultures to study the underlying neural-biological processes associated with cultural permissiveness versus restrictiveness.

"Some cultures are 'loose' and others very 'tight' – quick to spot and react to violations of social norms. Yet we know very little about how these vast cultural differences are realized in the brain," says University of Maryland cross-cultural psychologist Michele Gelfand, who is leading the interdisciplinary research team. "This work builds upon an exciting new field of cultural neuroscience to examine how differences in the strength of norms across the globe are 'embrained.'"

Gelfand's team will use brain measurements to help explain and predict a wide range of [cultural differences](#), from self-control to creativity to cooperation. Though the field is in its infancy, she says it can advance understanding of group identities, cultural norms and belief systems.

"Social norms, though omnipresent in our everyday lives, are highly implicit," Gelfand says. "This research has the potential to facilitate the development of [theoretical models](#) and measures with improved predictive power. It will advance our understanding of the connection

between culture, [brain](#), and behavior."

The team will focus on developing tools to assess the strength of [social norms](#), as well as [policy recommendations](#) for managing clashes of moralities, and techniques for better intercultural interaction.

Gelfand's co-investigators are Luiz Pessoa, who directs the University of Maryland Neuroimaging Center, Shinobu Kitayama, director of the University of Michigan Culture and Cognition Program, and Klaus Boehnke, a professor of social science methodology at Bremen, Germany's Jacobs University.

The research builds upon on an earlier 33-nation study in Science, in which a Gelfand-led team assesses the degree to which countries are restrictive or permissive and the factors that made them that way.

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Mapping the brain to understand cultural differences (2013, July 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-brain-cultural-differences.html>

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