

## Profile of Michele J. Gelfand

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“Culture affects everything, from our nation to our neurons,” says Michele J. Gelfand, the John H. Scully professor in cross-cultural management and a professor of organizational behavior and psychology at Stanford University. Forging multicultural and multidisciplinary collaborations, she has advanced the scientific study of culture. Her work often addresses societal questions, ranging from negotiations and diversity to conflict, terrorism, and pandemics. Gelfand’s Inaugural Article (1), following her election as a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 2021, reports the development of a computationally derived threat dictionary. The linguistic tool not only permits empirical examination of past threat effects, but also offers predictive insights into societal responses to mass-communicated threats, whether real or manipulated.

### Early Years and Mentoring

Gelfand and her two brothers were raised in New York by her parents. She attended Colgate University, where she received a bachelor’s degree in psychology in 1989. During a semester abroad, Gelfand studied at City College, London, and experienced culture shock. “I was a sheltered kid from Long Island and thought it strange that people in my study group would go on short weekend trips to cities outside of the [United Kingdom]. My father Martin said, ‘Well, imagine it’s like going from New York to Pennsylvania!’” She did, and immediately booked a low-budget tour to Egypt, later lived on an Israeli *kibbutz*, and has been regularly traveling ever since.

Gelfand planned to study culture and psychology with the goal of working at the US State Department as a cross-cultural trainer. There were no related doctoral programs at the time, so she consulted with cross-cultural expert Richard Brislin, who was then director of the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. He suggested that she work with one of the founders of the field of cross-cultural psychology, Harry Triandis at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She followed Brislin’s advice and earned Master’s and doctoral degrees in social/organizational psychology with Triandis as her advisor.

In a 2013 biographical piece for *Psychology International* (2), Gelfand wrote, “Triandis was an incredible mentor who profoundly influenced my thinking and my approach to science. His sheer breadth and depth in the study of culture—from basic cultural processes and applications to personality, social and organizational psychology, and beyond—is forever inspiring to me.” In 1995, Gelfand served as a visiting professor of psychology at New York University and then accepted a position as assistant professor of psychology at the University of Maryland in 1996, advancing to associate professor, professor, and



Michele J. Gelfand. Image credit: Jonah Koch (photographer).

distinguished university professor, before assuming her present positions at Stanford.

In addition to Triandis, University of Maryland professors Benjamin Schneider and Paul Hanges, Kellogg School of Management professor Jeanne Brett, Technion–Israel Institute of Technology professor Miriam Erez, and *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman have been frequent sources of support and inspiration.

Gelfand teaches executives, undergraduates, and business school graduate students about negotiation. She has sought to expand the dominant paradigm in negotiation research, which was largely based on Western samples, to understand cultural dynamics in negotiation. She found that culture influences cognitive representations of conflicts and metaphors for negotiation and negotiators’ judgment biases (3). Gelfand also advanced a culture-by-context perspective in negotiation, showing that cultural effects in negotiation are dynamic and change depending on context (4).

She led one of the first studies to determine whether organizations create socially shared and normative ways to manage conflict—what she calls conflict cultures (5)—and later found that third parties can escalate conflict through communication biases (6). Gelfand has also examined the psychology of negotiation in the Middle East (7), the psychology of revenge and conflict contagion (8), and factors that promote forgiveness (9).

On another front, Gelfand has advanced the theory and measurement of sexual harassment and its antecedents and consequences in organizations (10). She was among

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the first researchers to study bias in the evaluation of workplace misbehavior. Working with a colleague, she examined how achieved and ascribed status characteristics, such as race and gender, affect the evaluation of workplace behavior (11). They found that the psychological experience of higher status decreased rule observance and increased preferences for social hierarchy. As a result, higher status evaluators often evaluate higher-status individuals more leniently.

## Development of Tightness–Looseness Theory

Gelfand has conducted pioneering work on cultural tightness–looseness (TL), which refers to the strength of social norms. In a landmark study compiling data from 33 nations, Gelfand and an international team reported that TL is part of a multilevel system comprising ecological and historical threats, broad versus narrow socialization in societal institutions, the strength of everyday recurring situations, and more (12). She has found that extremes on the TL spectrum are problematic and demonstrated with colleagues that freedom and constraint exhibit a curvilinear relationship with many indicators of societal well-being (13).

Testing TL theory in a sample of 86 nonindustrial societies, Gelfand and colleagues found that tightness covaries across domains of social norms, such as socialization, law, and gender, and is also predicted by ecological and historical threat (14). She additionally applied the theory of TL to all 50 US states (15). In another application of TL theory, she and her team determined that sojourners living in a tighter culture had poorer adaptation than those in a looser culture, but that certain personality traits can reverse this trend (16). In an article published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Gelfand and her colleagues illustrated how large differences in TL can affect the success of cross-border acquisitions (17).

Inspired by her father, Gelfand wrote the popular book *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Our World* (18). This and many other efforts, such as a 2018 TED talk (19), exemplify her passion for educating the general public about her field. She has authored several Op-Ed pieces in *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, among other outlets.

## Multidisciplinary Work and Diverse Perspectives

Gelfand was one of the first researchers to study social norm violations at the neurobiological level. Combining electroencephalography with a new paradigm, she and her team revealed how culture-specific neural substrates underlie the detection of norm violations (20). To identify the neurobiological underpinnings of revenge, Gelfand and colleagues integrated functional MRI and measurements of endogenous oxytocin in participants who viewed an ingroup and an outgroup member's suffering that was caused either mutually (revenge group) or by a computer (control group) (21). The former was associated with an increased level of oxytocin in saliva compared with that in the control group. The researchers noted differences in medial prefrontal activity in the brain that, together with other findings, could help explain both revenge propensity and conflict contagion across individuals during intergroup conflicts.

Gelfand's multinational, multidisciplinary collaborations have inspired a shift toward greater consideration of non-Western cultures in psychology and organizational behavior. To facilitate this work, she has developed a strong collaborative network throughout Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines. With an international team, Gelfand developed an honor dictionary that the authors used to complement a dominant model of negotiation found in the West with a new honor model of negotiation found in many Arabic-speaking populations (7). She also elucidated the evolutionary basis of honor cultures, finding that they are mutually dependent with aggressive cultures and survive when the effectiveness of authorities is low (22).

Surveying 198 Muslims in the United States about their cultural identities and attitudes concerning extremism, Gelfand and her team determined that immigrants who identify with neither their heritage culture nor the culture they are living in feel marginalized and insignificant (23). She and her coauthors wrote in the journal *Behavioral Science & Policy* (23), "Experiences of discrimination make the situation worse and lead to greater support for radicalism, which promises a sense of meaning and life purpose. Such insights could be of use to policymakers engaged in efforts against violent extremism, including terrorism." On many occasions, Gelfand has briefed the US Department of Defense on her research and lobbied on behalf of immigrants at the US Capitol.

## Innovative Uses of Evolutionary Game Theory

Gelfand says, "Integrating research in cross-cultural psychology with evolutionary game theory is a great intellectual marriage." Uniting the disciplines, she and her team showed that different degrees of norm strength are evolutionarily adaptive to societal threat (24). She and colleagues also used an evolutionary game theoretical approach to better understand norm change (25).

More recently, Gelfand developed an evolutionary game theoretic model to analyze the relationship between TL and COVID-19 cases and deaths (26). As she explained in a 2021 piece for *Foreign Affairs*, tight groups were found to cooperate much faster when facing COVID-19 and have higher survival rates than loose groups (27). The results suggest that tightening social norms might confer an evolutionary advantage in times of collective threat.

## New Tool to Index Threat Level

The threat dictionary reported in Gelfand's Inaugural Article (1) applies not only to pandemics but also to numerous other threats. She says, "It's important to develop different methods to study culture and cultural change and linguistic dictionaries are new to that toolbox. This is one of the first such dictionaries to assess threat in mass communication channels." Both the honor and threat dictionaries, along with a TL dictionary, are freely available to academics and others via her website (<https://www.michelegelfand.com/>).

Gelfand has served in numerous leadership roles, including as the President of the International Association for Conflict Management, Treasurer of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Division Chair of the conflict division of the Academy of Management, and

cofounder of the Society for Cultural Evolution. She also cofounded the annual series *Handbook of Advances in Culture and Psychology*.

She has received numerous academic honors, including the Outstanding International Psychologist Award from the American Psychological Association, the Rubin Theory to Practice Award from the International Association for Conflict Management, the Contributions to Society Award from the Organizational Behavior Division of the Academy of Management, the Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award from the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and elected membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

When Gelfand left the University of Maryland in 2021, more than 80 former postdoctoral associates, graduate students, undergraduates, and colleagues wrote tributes expressing gratitude and admiration (28). Many noted Gelfand's integrity, creativity, and joy in her personal life and work that extend to others. She, in turn, is grateful for their support and for that of her husband, daughters, and her dog. Gelfand says, "I want my daughters and students to dream big and to imagine themselves in the future in ways they never could have before. Harry (Triandis) had a tripartite philosophy that I share with them: Be passionate about what you do, don't be afraid to be controversial, and don't take yourself too seriously."

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