

There Are Consequences For Lying
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Brain scientists tell us that when brains are scanned to see which areas light up, brains scan differently when told a known lie or truth. Even without brain scans, it should be obvious that those who live where truthfulness is promoted live in a community of trust. Those who are accustomed to living in a culture where lying is part of survival are resigned to it, but not happy.

Trust and truth go hand in hand. As children, we either learn to trust our parents and their truthfulness or learn early that lying is the only way to survive or avoid punishment.

Some of our earliest monotheistic religions promoted truth over lies. Zoroaster, Iran's earliest founding prophet (long before Islam), considered the lie the single most disastrous behavior for society. He identified "the lie" with God's shadow, Ahriman (or Satan). Both Judaism and Christianity promoted accountability and truth, which is why we swear oaths of truth on the Bible. From the beginning of western society, we have valued truth as the basis for trust, the bedrock of civilized society. Unfortunately, only Islam justifies lying (taqqia) in their scriptures.

Why do people lie? People lie when they fear punishment. Children lie to their parents when they have done something they know is wrong. Wives lie to husbands when they fear violence, and husbands lie to wives when they fear deprivation of love. Governments lie to citizens when they fear that the truth will discredit them and citizens lie to government officials when they fear punishment. In modern cultures with respect for law, truth is expected and perjury is punished. This is not so in much of the world.

Authoritarian Societies. When kings, dictators, and religious clerics rule a society, leaders lie out of fear of public outrage and their subjects lie out of justified fear of their authorities. Punishments for stepping out of line are draconian. These are societies of distrust, and when they finally come apart, they do so violently. We can just watch the Middle East to see this scenario unfold.

Shame or Guilt Societies. Shame is the oldest tool in small societies' small towns or tribal cultures. People who are shamed for their actions face shunning or worse' loss of honor. In guilt societies (which is the model of the West), conscience punishes a person whether or not the bad action is known. This internal monitor is one of the strongest elements of modern western society' individual responsibility. Unfortunately, even some of our own famous people have been caught lying, but we smoke them out. It is not OK.

Problems With Lying. In societies of distrust (most dictatorships), rumors always trump official statements. This produces societies in which incredible nonsense (a conspiracy theory) is accepted because it does not come from official sources. The popularity of the most bizarre conspiracy theories testifies to this, theories that resist logic or credibility:

Belief that we were not attacked by 19 Arab suicide bombers on 9/11; it was a plot, they say, of the Bush Administration and the Israelis to discredit Arabs.

Belief that Osama Bin Laden was not killed by the US Special Forces, no matter what proof. This is another product of the strength of the rumor mill and conspiracy theories among the unthinking masses.

Delegitimizing through lies is a form of nasty political cynicism. Both President Obama (by rumors about his birth) and the State of Israel (that they, not their Muslim enemies, should be defunded) are targeted by political extremists on the far right or far left. This delegitimizing requires lying and flawed logic, and is the barest cover for racism and anti-Semitism. If you can't defeat them, delegitimize them.

Serious Consequences of Lying. Trusting the global rumor mill rather than truth can have deadly consequences. Middle East dictators lie that the unrest is caused by foreigners, which encourages mobs to attack American visitors, raping and nearly killing one woman journalist, Lara Logan.

Most serious of all is that the flood of Internet and political lying in the US itself may rupture our culture of trust. Do we really want to live without trust?

686 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *How Do You Know That?* You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.