

**The Skimm on the Psychology of Good & Evil
Chapters 33-35 & associated lectures/readings**

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces.” – Philip Zimbardo

1. WHEN AND WHY DO PEOPLE CONFORM?

Conformity refers to how we change our behavior to fall in line with a group. **Obedience** is how we react when an authority figure gives us a directive. It's important to keep in mind that we are often subject to the **fundamental attribution error** – attributing a person's behavior to their **internal dispositions** and underestimating the **influence of the situation**.

1a. THE STORY.

We tend to **conform** when the situation is **ambiguous** and you don't know how to behave (e.g., Sherif, 1936) and/or when it is important to be **accurate** (e.g., Baron et al., 1996). We conform to gain **social approval** (e.g., Asch, 1956), because of **social roles** (e.g., Stanford Prison), and because of **cognitive dissonance**. Cognitive dissonance is a big one – one of the most powerful causes of human behavior is the need to preserve a stable/positive self-concept. **Obedience** is a little different than conformity – it refers to how people react when given a command from an **authority figure**. Often, this is a good thing (e.g., following instructions of your parents, professors, law enforcement, etc.). However, like with many things, there is a dark side to obedience – an unintended by-product of an adaptive behavior.

1b. REMIND ME.

Asch did a study in 1956 showing that people just want to look normal. He put individual participants with several **confederates** and asked them to do an EASY perceptual judgment task. What he found was that the participants would give the WRONG answer to the perceptual judgment task when the confederates uniformly gave the incorrect answer prior to them. People also conform to their social roles, like in **Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment**, which he had to stop after just a few days because of how much the “guards” were conforming to their roles. **Milgram's** measured the willingness of participants (the teachers) to **obey** an **authority figure** (e.g., the experimenter). Specifically, he asked participants to administer shocks to a confederate (the learner). What Milgram found was that “ordinary people...can become agents in a terrible destructive process...” More specifically, approximately 65% of participants continued to administer shocks to the very end of the research session, even after the confederate became nonresponsive (note: no real shocks were administered).

1c. Umm...WHAT ABOUT ETHICS? WILL THE RESEARCH I PARTICIPATE IN BE LIKE THIS?

The short answer is no. A huge point of controversy in Milgram's research, and Zimbardo's, concerns the **ethical treatment of research participants**. Participants in these studies likely experienced intense stress during and after the experiment. Because of experiments like these, guidelines and procedures have been developed to protect human (and animal) research participants. For example, at SNC, we have an **Institutional Review Board**, which is an ethics committee dedicated to reviewing, approving, and

monitoring research activities involving humans. (By the way, hopefully you've completed most of your research credits by now, if not, here is a reminder!)

1d. theSKIMM.

The people around us influence us more than we probably know – we want to fit in, play our role, and we have adapted to obey authority figures. In many ways, the people we surround ourselves with define us. This can be a good thing or a bad thing.

2. REPEAT AFTER ME...

2a. What to say when society puts all the blame on the individual.

Let's not fall into the **fundamental attribution error** trap. Although each individual is unique and makes their own choices, the situation certainly shapes and influences how we behave as well.

2b. What to do when your cognitions are inconsistent with your behaviors.

Well that's probably uncomfortable. According to **Festinger's** theory of **cognitive dissonance**, you'll probably want to try to balance that out. You can reduce this dissonance (this inconsistency) by changing your cognition to be consistent with the behavior, changing your behavior to be consistent with the cognition, or justifying/ignoring conflicting cognitions & behaviors.

3. THINGS TO KNOW (i.e., vocab)

3a. Terms: Bystander effect, cognitive dissonance, conformity, descriptive norm, discrimination, FAP, foot in the door, fundamental attribution error, gradually escalating commitments, IAT, informational influence, normative influence, obedience, prejudice, self-categorization theory, social approval, social dominance orientation, social identity theory, social roles, Stanford Prison Study, stereotypes, subtle biases, triad of trust, trigger features

3b. Some Names: Asch, Festinger, Milgram, Zimbardo

3c. (But these aren't the only things that are important!)

Can't get enough? Listen to the Hidden Brain podcast, Episode 13: Terrorism.