



Section 6. Psychology

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ELEANOR ROOSEVELT DECLARED, "NO ONE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL INFERIOR WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT". IS SHE RIGHT?

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Abstract

Through a discussion of Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent," this paper uses psychology and sociology research to explore how such a view is oversimplified and idealistic. Since consenting or giving permission is a conscious choice, this paper argues that by attributing feelings of inferiority to weakness, choice, or lack of willpower, Roosevelt's perspective overlooks the pivotal role of subconscious conditioning and past trauma in feelings of inferiority.

Keywords: *inferiority, perception, psychology, consent, conscious, unconscious, sociology, Festinger's social comparison theory, Daryl J. Bem's self-perception theory, emotion schema theory, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)*

Introduction

Consent is permitting something to occur, and feelings of inferiority are perceptions of not being good enough. According to John Locke, perception is an **unconscious** process of receiving ideas. However, consenting or giving permission is a **conscious** choice (Berkeley, 1961). Therefore, Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent," is misleading. For example, in Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll tests of racial perceptions due to segregation, most of the Black children chose the white doll over the identical Black doll, which demonstrates that they see Black people like themselves as infe-

rior due to societal conditioning without conscious choice or consent (Clark & Clark, 1949).

In one of my favorite books, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, after the biggest marlin that the fisherman Santiago has ever seen is lost to savage forces of nature, he famously says, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." By saying this, Santiago states that he will never consent to feeling inferior, even if he is physically on the edge of life and death. Such a never-give-up attitude has inspired numerous readers over many generations. However, there is one major problem: Santiago, the fisherman with ultimate willpower, is fictional. In the real

world, psychologists have shown that individuals' feelings often arise from conditioning and subconscious processes, not active choice. The word "consent", in contrast, implies an active choice. To cope with this sad reality, psychological research has provided ways to cope with feelings of inferiority by retraining the subconscious process of automatic feelings, making those scientific ways more effective than wishing to be the man with infinite willpower. Hence, Eleanor Roosevelt's quote is oversimplified and idealistic because she overlooks the pivotal role of subconscious conditioning in feelings of inferiority by attributing such feelings to weakness and lack of willpower.

Psychological Studies

Discovering the how and why behind feelings of inferiority involves the idea of perception, a fundamental concept of psychology that has long been studied by researchers. Cognitively, how do individuals form self-perceptions? Is the process conscious or subconscious? Leon Festinger's social comparison theory suggests that people evaluate their abilities and self-worth by subconsciously comparing themselves to others. For those comparisons, individuals prefer objective standards. However, in the absence of objective standards, people have a hardwired instinct to compare themselves to others (Suls & Wheeler, 2012, pp. 1, 460–482).

In other words, people do not wake up and choose to compare themselves to others, but rather their brains naturally do so in the absence of objective data. Research by Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler shows that comparing yourself to others will cause you to refine your thought patterns according to the results of these comparisons (Suls & Wheeler, 2012, pp. 1, 460–482). These results demonstrate that when we repeatedly find ourselves on the losing end of social comparisons, it perpetuates a loop of negative thoughts that condition us to feel inferior. The innate, instinctive tendency to compare oneself to others quietly uses data we collect from those comparisons to sculpt our self-perceptions.

Daryl J. Bem's self-perception theory demonstrates another reason why people can feel inferior without consent – individuals' attitudes and emotions are often inferred

from observing their behavior in context. That means it is natural for people to feel unworthy when their behavior falls below expectations. Bem's study includes a fascinating example that uses cartoons and colored lights to show that participants' perceptions are influenced by previous behaviors.

In this experiment, participants are initially asked to rate a series of cartoons as "funny," "unfunny," or "neutral." Then, they undergo a training session in which they need to answer simple questions about themselves with colored lights. They are instructed to tell the truth under an amber light or lie under a green light. After the training session, participants will re-rate their "neutral" cartoons as either "funny" or "unfunny" with green and amber lights. However, they are not reminded to follow the rules from the "training" session. Finally, after the lights are turned off, they are asked to re-rate the cartoons that they previously rated as neutral based on their honest opinions as either "funny," "unfunny," or "neutral" (Bem, 1967). Just as the Self Perception Theory predicts, people who say that the cartoon is funny under the truth light are more likely to rate the same cartoon as funny when asked for their honest opinion. That is, the truth light has molded their perception like clay!

Inferiority can occur without consent because one's opinions of oneself and others are subconsciously inferred from observation. For example, if the teacher gives you a bad test grade by mistake, you will likely infer that you are stupid or lazy because society conditions you to believe that your grades define your intelligence or work ethic, even if it is not your fault. Self-perception theory reveals that our convictions are not self-determined. Instead, self-perception is something that we infer based on numerous factors, such as the event, our environment, and our upbringing. With perception's tentative, inference-based nature, our perceptions of self are based more on our environments than our personalities. Therefore, by succumbing to negative sentiment, individuals do not actively "consent" to feeling inferior. Instead, their environment and upbringing, which are beyond their control, strongly influence their self-esteem.

The emotion schema theory, a popular and recent psychology theory widely discussed in academia and used for therapies, can also

provide an explanation why people can feel inferior without consent. According to the emotion schema theory, emotion schemas or thought patterns used to organize knowledge are triggered by external stimuli and resulting changes in hormone levels (Izard, 1993). Moreover, psychological studies have found that emotional schemas are sculpted by childhood experience (e.g., Gottman et al., 1996; Greenberg, 2004; Young et al., 2003) and cultural influence (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). In other words, emotion schemas are automatic psychological and physiological responses set up throughout our youth and the environment in which we grow up.

Along the same line, psychologists find that childhood trauma is a common cause of feelings of inferiority without consent because emotional responses are involuntarily trained by childhood experience. The study by Yansen Zhang provides an extreme example: A Chinese girl named Xiao Tian has always had low self-esteem. She regularly endured physical and sexual abuse from her stepfather, and her mother did nothing about it. These negative experiences led to an extreme fear of men and boys, along with feelings of inferiority due to a lack of love. Xiao Tian communicates logically, speaks earnestly, has good judgment, focused attention, and decent intelligence. Nonetheless, the abuse she had suffered, and her mother's lack of support caused Xiao Tian to believe she was incompetent, unlovable, and worthless (Zhang, 2024). Xiao Tian's case study demonstrates that adverse childhood experiences can create negative thought patterns by default. Negative interactions with any group can induce fear of that group, and feeling unloved growing up can foster feelings of inferiority. Therefore, in the case of Xiao Tian and many other trauma victims, inferiority does not result from consent or active choice. Instead, it results from automatic conditioning from a traumatic upbringing.

Overcoming Feelings of Inferiority by Scientific Methods

Traditionally, bullying victims were frequently told to "toughen up," as if they were weaklings giving consent to feel inferior. However, that piece of advice is faulty, dismissive, and ineffective. As a matter of fact, bullying rates have skyrocketed over the years, and

bullying is now a national mental health epidemic. So, what is the real cause of bullying, and how can we scientifically get rid of it? According to John Saroyan, victims of bullying are often different from their peer group and struggle with fitting in. They think, look, or act in ways their peers perceive as weird. Once mocked, they may internalize their peers' negativity and construct a negative self-image. This creation of a negative self-image causes anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, and isolation, which will eventually lead to self-blame, low self-esteem, and mental health disorders (Saroyan, 2019). In other words, bullying causes the creation of harmful core beliefs because children are not consciously aware that being bullied is not their fault. Such negative self-belief will lead the victims to automatically form mental patterns of inferiority.

Although people can feel inferior without consent, modern psychology has developed ways to overcome those feelings. For example, one study shows that consistently increases self-efficacy in adolescent bullying victims (Kim, J. W., & Kim, H. S.). This study demonstrates that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) increases self-efficacy by effectively challenging negative core beliefs that bullying victims previously formed. After their core beliefs of weakness and inferiority are replaced with more positive ones, their self-esteem automatically goes up. Later, the increase in self-esteem after therapy will help people further reinforce the idea that they are strong and confident, forming a positive mental feedback loop. Such methods of retraining children's core beliefs have helped many bullying victims and have proven to be a more effective and superior way than simply asking children to "toughen up."

Therapies based on psychological results, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), are not limited to helping bullying victims. Through CBT, people learn to challenge negative thought patterns like inferiority complexes and foster healthier thought patterns and coping mechanisms. For example, throughout her therapy, Xiao Tian learned to cope with the core beliefs of "I am incompetent, unlovable, and worthless" by forming the healthier beliefs of "I am capable, valuable, and worthy of love" by learning the reasoning behind her core beliefs, destroying unhealthy

intermediate beliefs, and challenging automatic thinking. At the end of her therapy, her scores for depression, anxiety, and inferiority returned to normal leading to equanimity and emotional stability (Zhang, 2024). This case study demonstrates that modern therapy techniques, such as CBT, can help individuals overcome feelings of inferiority by teaching them the reasoning behind negative core beliefs. Once a person understands the reasoning and logic behind unhealthy core beliefs, it is easier to challenge them and form healthier alternatives, leading to higher self-esteem.

Coping mechanisms are another area where therapies based on modern psychology, such as CBT, can help reduce people's uncontrollable feelings of inferiority. For example, outside of bullying or trauma, envy is another potential source of people's feelings of inferiority. CBT can mitigate such inferior feelings by modifying people's coping mechanisms and transforming people's counterproductive envy into constructive envy. A recent study showcases how CBT works in this situation. First, with the help of clinicians, clients recognize sources of envy beyond personal control, including cultural, social, and evolutionary factors. Then, the clinicians will guide the clients to accept envy and transform it into admiration and emulation. Lastly, along with learning techniques to address sour aspects of envy and methods to modify automatic, unhealthy assumptions, clients can gradual-

ly reduce avoidance, sabotage, and giving up (Leahy, 2021, P. 45(3), 418–427). This study on therapy and envy demonstrates another way CBT diminishes feelings of inferiority in people. With the help of clinicians, clients can identify unhealthy patterns, reroute destructive coping mechanisms, and ultimately form more constructive ones to productively channel their social comparison instincts.

Conclusion

Eleanor Roosevelt's claim that no one can make you feel inferior without consent fails because it assumes conscious control over involuntary processes. As demonstrated through social conditioning studies, social comparison theory, and emotional schema theory the formation of inferiority feelings arises from processes beneath the threshold of conscious choice. Anything as abrasive as trauma or as subtle as consistently finding yourself on the losing end of social comparison can cause feelings of inferiority without conscious choice or consent. Simply pretending one is as strong as Santiago the fisherman is not nearly enough to counter feelings of inferiority. In contrast, therapies based on modern psychology have proved that they can help trauma victims like Xiao Tan and non-traumatized individuals boost their self-esteem and happiness through various scientific measures, such as challenging negative self-beliefs and modifying coping mechanisms.

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