Inferiority and Consent: Navigating Personal Agency within Cultural and Systemic Structures

Eleanor Roosevelt famously declared that "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent," a statement which suggests that feelings of inferiority are largely subject to individual consent and personal beliefs. This implies, more broadly, that external factors such as societal pressure or personal challenges only have meaning when individuals accept or internalize them. This paper evaluates this idea from both individual and societal perspectives. It examines micro-level psychological processes, such as social comparison and cognitive dissonance, and concludes that individual agency does play a key role in combatting feelings of inferiority. However, a more nuanced view is also presented through macro-level theories like the System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which suggests that individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, often unconsciously internalize and justify social inequalities, thus perpetuating feelings of inferiority. Overall, this essay concludes that Roosevelt's assertion holds some truth, but requires deeper analysis within cultural and structural contexts.

Inferiority as a psychological phenomenon emerges from persistent feelings of inadequacy relative to oneself, others, or societal standards, and often takes root in early experiences of powerlessness or repeated devaluation. Modern psychology research further distinguishes between state inferiority (situational) and trait inferiority (chronic). State inferiority occurs in specific contexts and is often transient, while trait inferiority becomes a pervasive element of one's identity, constantly influencing how they perceive their self-worth. An inferiority complex is thus not merely the result of status comparison (Adler, 1927).

Consent, on the other hand, has different meanings across contexts, and acts as a dynamic construct that operates both consciously and unconsciously. The most common form of consent is explicit consent, where a person willingly agrees to something without coercion, fraud, or error (Cornell University, 2022). This active form of consent is similar to the conscious agreement associated with personal autonomy in most western legal frameworks. However, consent to inferiority is often shaped by social structure and systemic inequalities, instead of a clear awareness and correct assessment of one's inferiority. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus explains how social and cultural conditioning can internalize social structures, shaping an individual's perception of their abilities, often without conscious awareness. This is especially true in Asian cultures, where children internalize parental criticism as "common sense" (Bourdieu, 1990), resulting in a diminished self-perception. Neuroscientific evidence further complicates the idea of consent, suggesting that the internalization of inferiority may occur on a subconscious level, even before individuals consciously recognize it. For instance, the process of dealing with social conflict and inferiority directly engages the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) through automatic neural pathways, bypassing conscious awareness (Reihl, Hurley &

Taber, 2015). In sum, consent to inferiority can be implicit, unconscious, or conditioned. Systemic influences explored in the system justification theory (Jost et al., 2012), such as cultural values, institutional practices, and social hierarchies that shape perceptions of worth, may all contribute to this implicit form of consent, and are therefore critical to this discussion.

In individuals, the formation of inferiority can largely be explained by the psychological mechanisms of social comparison and cognitive dissonance. These two processes significantly shape how individuals evaluate their own worth and capabilities, leading to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), humans have an intrinsic drive to assess their abilities and opinions. This need for self-assessment often leads individuals to compare themselves with others, particularly those in similar situations, such as peers rather than experts, which can have profound implications on one's self-esteem and perceived inferiority. This theory is further corroborated by recent research on the impact of media and social expectations, particularly the role of social media in magnifying these comparisons. Adolescents, for example, often experience heightened feelings of inferiority as they compare themselves to idealized representations of peers on platforms like TikTok (Lauterman & Ackerman, 2014). These feelings of inferiority may have resulted from preference for competing with peer on social media and their cognitive outcome, aligning with Festinger's theory of social comparison (Lauterman & Ackerman, 2014).

Another important psychological process that contributes to the formation of inferiority is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance occurs when there is a conflict between an individual's actions and beliefs, or expectations, causing psychological discomfort. In essence, the feelings of inferiority that arise from cognitive dissonance stem from the subjective discomfort individuals experience when their actions do not align with their self-perception or beliefs. This misalignment can lead individuals to question their worth and capabilities, resulting in self-doubt and internalized inferiority. Adler (1927) also recognized the equally unbalanced "superiority complex," manifested in a constant need to strive toward goals. When attained, these goals do not instill confidence in the individual, but merely prompt her to continually seek further external recognition and achievements (Adler, 1927; Derin & Şahin, 2023). This creates a psychological conflict where people cannot fulfill the constantly rising levels of social expectations they wanted to live up to, causing them to become trapped in self-doubt.

The conscious processes of self-efficacy and growth mindsets may indeed play a significant role in reshaping these processes. Research shows that mindset is malleable, and individuals with a growth mindset can overcome challenges and achieve success. Bandura's self-efficacy theory, for example, emphasizes the role of individual beliefs in shaping behavior and coping mechanisms. Bandura (1997)

argues that individuals who believe in their capabilities tend to persist through challenges and regulate their actions effectively, which aligns with Roosevelt's emphasis on personal agency.

However, it is also crucial to recognize that this viewpoint fail to account for the environmental factors that profoundly influence personal perceptions. Neuroimaging evidence, for example, supports the fact that while individual agency is undeniably important, the overwhelming impact of the environment cannot be ignored. Research into the brain's response to social and physical pain shows that the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which regulates emotions and processes pain, is activated during social exclusion. This activation pattern mirrors that of physical pain. In experiments where participants were excluded from a ball-tossing game, the intensity of ACC activation correlated directly with the self-reported pain. This demonstrates that external factors, such as social rejection or criticism, can trigger emotional responses before individuals even have time to consciously process these feelings. These involuntary reactions prove that individuals' subjective agency is influenced by external factors, complicating the formation of inferiority in ways that transcend mere personal will or mindset.

Another such factor is the access to social resources. For example, in individualistic societies like those in developed countries, students attending private schools with access to high-quality educational resources are often exposed to a broader worldview. Their sense of self-worth and aspirations are shaped by the pursuit of higher, more abstract goals. In contrast, children in impoverished neighborhoods, such as those in underdeveloped countries, are primarily concerned with basic survival, such as securing food, shelter, and safety. This vast psychological difference is rooted in the unequal distribution of societal resources. The disparity in how inferiority is recognized and experienced stems from these social and environmental factors, which play a significant role in shaping individuals' beliefs and their frequency of experiencing inferiority.

Systemic structures also play a significant role in reinforcing social inequalities, and their power in shaping individual psychology cannot be ignored. System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) highlights how deeply-embedded societal systems influence feelings of inferiority, shaping them not only through personal perceptions but also through broader social hierarchies and power dynamics that disadvantage certain groups. This theory holds that the need to maintain social order, often to the disadvantage of oppressed groups, can lead to their implicit agreement with negative stereotypes about themselves. As lower-status groups are made to accept and legitimize the existing social order, their sense of inefficacy or inadequacy in reinforced. This theory is supported by the phenomenon of "learned helplessness," where individuals stop attempting to change their circumstances after repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors, serves as a striking example of how systemic forces shape one's psychological state. According to Seligman's theory of learned

helplessness, individuals in subordinated positions gradually accept their lack of control over their environment, even when opportunities for change or resistance are available. This resignation becomes more apparent in hierarchical settings, where individuals may adapt to their inferior status without actively seeking change.

Finally, the cultural context in which an individual is raised also plays a crucial role in shaping how inferiority is experienced and internalized. In individualistic cultures, self-worth is often tied to personal achievement and success, while in collectivist societies, social conformity and group harmony dictate how self-worth is defined. In more hierarchical and collective societies, long-standing cultural and structural norms may strongly encourage individuals from lower social classes to internalize their positions of inferiority (Hofstede, 2001). Evidence from Korean workplaces illustrates this phenomenon, where strict social and workplace hierarchies correlate with higher rates of depression, particularly among those in lower-status positions. This contrasts with more individualistic societies, such as the United States, where the focus on personal achievement may foster more overt expressions of self-worth or struggles for superiority. In Japan, employees often experience dissonance when they are forced to smile and provide excellent service despite their internal discomfort, which can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth. As reported by BBC News (2020), employees in Japan whose brutal office culture have led to negative consequences like depression, but have to keep providing service, have suffered severe consequences and even deaths. Employees in individualistic cultures, such as the United States, may be less affected by such pressures. They are more likely to prioritize work-life balance, avoid over-identifying with their jobs, and are less likely to internalize feelings of inferiority from workplace exploitation. This dynamic illustrates that the pressure to conform to societal expectations in Japan can lead to a more collective sense of inferiority (Lauterman & Ackerman, 2014). Such cultural divergence highlights the complexity of consent to inferiority, as it operates not only at an individual level but also within broader social and cultural frameworks.

Thus, the formation of inferiority is not merely a conscious, individual process, but a complex interaction between unconscious environmental influences and personal agency. Social, cultural, and material contexts shape individuals' sense of self-worth, making the experience of inferiority more intricate. Eleanor Roosevelt's assertion that "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent" is both insightful and limited. While the theory of personal agency, as seen in Bandura's self-efficacy theory, emphasizes the power of individual beliefs in shaping one's feelings of inferiority, the role of societal structures cannot be overlooked. System justification theory provides a compelling explanation for why individuals from disadvantaged groups may internalize feelings of inferiority, even when such feelings are against their self-interest.

Thus, while Roosevelt's idea holds true in some contexts, it must be considered within a more complex framework that includes both individual agency and the

societal structures that shape our understanding of inferiority. It is of significance to reconstruct the framework containing personal psychological and social structure elements for further experimental research, to identify the factors influencing inferiority.

Reference

Adler, A. (1931). *What life should mean to you*.

Adler, A., & Wolfe, W. B. (1927). *The feeling of inferiority and the striving for recognition.*

Ansbacher, H. L., & Ansbacher, R. R. (Eds.). (1964). *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler* (pp. 52-53). HarperCollins.

Ashby, J. S., & Kottman, T. (1996). Inferiority as a distinction between normal and neurotic perfectionism. *Individual Psychology*: *The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice, 52*(3).

BBC News. (2020). How the Japanese are putting an end to extreme work weeks. Retrieved 15th Jul 2025 from: https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200114-how-the-japanese-are-putting-an-end-to-death-from-overwork

Derin, S., & Şahin, E. S. (2023). Inferiority and Superiority Complex: Examination in terms of gender, birth order and psychological symptoms. *Primenjena psihologija, 16(3),* 375-401.

Gecas, V. (1989). The social psychology of self-efficacy. *Annual Review of Sociology,* 15(1), 291-316.

Gilbert, P., Broomhead, C., Irons, C., McEwan, K., Bellew, R., Mills, A., ... & Knibb, R. (2007). Development of a striving to avoid inferiority scale. *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 46(3), 633-648.

Gilbert, P., McEwan, K., Bellew, R., Mills, A., & Gale, C. (2009). The dark side of competition: How competitive behaviour and striving to avoid inferiority are linked to depression, anxiety, stress, and self-harm. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 82(2),* 123–136.

Jost, J. T. (2019). A quarter century of system justification theory: Questions, answers, criticisms, and societal applications. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 58(2),* 263-314.

Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology, 25*(6), 881-919.

Jost, J. T., & van der Toorn, J. (2012). System justification theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 313–343). Sage Publications Ltd.

King, A. (2000). Thinking with Bourdieu against Bourdieu: A 'practical' critique of the habitus. *Sociological Theory, 18(3),* 417-433.

Lauterman, T., & Ackerman, R. (2014). Overcoming screen inferiority in learning and calibration. *Computers in Human Behavior, 35,* 455-463.

Maddux, J. E. (1995). Self-efficacy theory: An introduction. In Self-efficacy, adaptation, and adjustment: *Theory, research, and application* (pp. 3-33). Boston, MA: Springer US.

Reihl, K. M., Hurley, R. A., & Taber, K. H. (2015). Neurobiology of implicit and explicit bias: Implications for clinicians. *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, 27(4),* A6-253.

Smith, R. H., Parrott, W. G., Ozer, D., & Moniz, A. (1994). Subjective injustice and inferiority as predictors of hostile and depressive feelings in envy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20(6),* 705-711.