

# Revisiting Eleanor Roosevelt's Claim: A Multidimensional Analysis of Inferiority, Consent, and Social Dynamics

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## Abstract

**This paper critically examines Eleanor Roosevelt's famous statement that "no one can make you feel inferior without your own consent." Drawing from psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, the study argues that inferiority is not a singular or voluntary emotion, but a complex interaction of primary and secondary emotions, often triggered automatically without conscious consent. Case studies of public shaming on social media demonstrate how digital algorithms and online mobs can externally impose inferiority, overriding individual resilience. Theoretical frameworks such as Social Comparison Theory, Sociometer Theory, and the Six Pillars of Self-Esteem further reveal the biological and cultural constraints that shape self-worth. Cross-cultural differences between dignity and honor cultures also highlight the limits of Roosevelt's claim, as inferiority can be socially or culturally enforced. While personal agency and growth mindset may mitigate the impact of inferiority, these resources are unevenly distributed, making consent a privilege rather than a universal capacity. The paper concludes with a revised interpretation: although rejecting inferiority may be theoretically possible, in reality, structural, biological, and cultural forces often restrict the effectiveness and availability of such consent.**

## Keywords

**Inferiority; Consent; Social Comparison; Self-Esteem; Public Shaming.**

## 1. Introduction

As a common emotion, everyone should have experienced a sense of inferiority. It is generally believed that such an emotion occurs when people are made to feel inadequate, leading to a series of feelings, usually negative. As suggested by Eleanor Roosevelt, who proposed that "no one can make you feel inferior without your own consent," some people believe that the feelings of inferiority can be made to not occur. Roosevelt's quote seems to emphasize the "consent" that internalizes inferiority. By breaking down the concept of inferiority, discussing inferiority in public and social media, studying social comparison and self-esteem, and finding connections among dignity, honor, and self-esteem, we may see the answer: taking cultural background, biological fact and personal growth path into consideration, Roosevelt's statement is highly incomprehensive and incorrect.

## 2. Understanding Inferiority as an Emotion

Inferiority is not a singular emotion but a combination of primary and secondary emotions [1]. Primary emotions represent the emotions that occur without any cognitive processes, whereas secondary emotions come up with cognitive processes. "Consent" means that one has probably undergone a cognitive process. For example, when I receive harsh criticism of my homework, I will automatically feel ashamed, then either view it as the alarm reminding me of my incompetency or my need to improve things. True agency of emotions often requires

both primary and secondary emotions, and in this case, when both emotions are involved, the primary emotion still tells me to feel shame, and secondary emotion is just giving consent to the shame. Roosevelt's quote seems to assume that the secondary emotion can come before the primary emotion, making people not feel inferior with their own consent.

### 3. Social and Digital Forces Shaping Inferiority

Alongside the progression of today's society, some brand-new forces shape inferiority. According to case studies on the Internet, viral humiliation makes subjects passively trigger deep shame, while there seems to be no need for "consent" to make individuals vilified and humiliated by online mobs. Contrary to Roosevelt's proposal, societal judgements are totally responsible for overwhelming the resilience of one's own. Algorithms play an important role in online humiliation. In Jon Ronson's case studies, he includes an interesting anecdote of Justine Sacco, a New York PR executive. Meaning to lampoon American ignorance and exceptionalism, she tweeted a joke, saying "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" (Ronson, Jon) The insensitive use of words made her suddenly exposed to terrible cyberbullying, in which people destroyed her life to punish her erratic behavior [2]. The shaming continued after she deleted the tweet and apologized, indicating that the inferior emotion is forcefully imposed on her [3]. The algorithms and the crowds that enforce inferiority make the ability to subjectively delete this emotion meaningless. However, there is also a man called Max Mosley, a British socialite. He faced tabloid exposure of his involvement in a German-themed orgy, and he rejected the shame entirely, suing the newspaper for invading his privacy, and winning this case.

Inferiority is structurally forced on most people, but few possess the privilege of resisting inferiority, like Max Mosley. Nevertheless, before he cancelled the emotions brought by inferiority by himself, he was still exposed to them initially. While proving Roosevelt to be wrong, the cases also indicated that people are responsible for stopping inferiority from bringing further impacts onto themselves. The difference can actually be explained with ingroup and outgroup effects. I would like to consider Sacco as an outgroup's scapegoat, because her tweet is interpreted as a violation by online mobbing, being framed as a "white outsider," making her suffer from social media's outgroup bias when people try to affirm their moral superiority by defining Sacco to be "deviant." On the other hand, Max Mosley tends to be an ingroup defier as his status granted him default credibility, so moral things can all be just attributed to a private matter.

### 4. Psychological Mechanisms Behind Inferiority

As social comparison can lead to inferiority, Festinger has developed Social Comparison Theory [4], explaining why and how people constantly measure themselves against others. Comparisons within a society can be divided into two different categories: upward and downward comparisons. While the former boosts self-esteem, the latter suppresses self-esteem. Due to SEM (Self-Evaluation Maintenance) Model (Tesser) [5], comparisons hurt most when the domain is self-relevant, and the competence is close. For instance, in the real world, a professor prefers candidates who greatly outperform them than those who are fiercely competitive in all aspects, since the abilities of the former turn out to be more appealing to the professor. All these inferiorities here arise as a byproduct of hardwired psychology. The reactions are automatic, not a matter of deliberate consent. Roosevelt's claim ignores this hardwired reality: inferiority arises before the intervention of consciousness, which again proves Roosevelt to be incorrect.

Despite the subconscious social comparison that can cause inferiority, how can we successfully override this comparison? The growth mindset, which means viewing comparisons as learning opportunities, mentioned by Carol Dweck, suggests reframing comparisons. As many people act as if social comparison is of no good, social comparisons could be positive in ways. "The engine of social comparison can also provide the push you need to rise to the occasion and increase your motivation and therefore make progress toward your goals" (Garcia, Stephen and Halldorsson, Arnor) [6]. Mastery goals make comparisons of no pain, since the domain is exorbitantly far away from oneself, alleviating inferiority from upward comparisons. By this way of "consent," inferiority could be significantly diluted and even vanish.

## 5. Self-Esteem and Biological Constraints

Mark Leary's Sociometer Theory hypothesizes that self-esteem is a reflection and evaluation of social acceptance (M.R. Leary) [7]. According to Eisenberger et al., rejection activates specific regions in the brain linked to biological pain, which is equivalent to negative emotional responses, and in this case inferiority. Like the hand contraction reaction when touching boiling water, this response is totally automatic, as suggested earlier in this text and is overlooked by Roosevelt [8]. However, we ought to figure out the science of self-esteem. Nathaniel Branden introduces the concept of Six Pillars of Self Esteem [9]. The formation of these six pillars boosts self-esteem, requiring a healthy growth environment. While nurturing children, not only should parents avoid overprotectiveness on the offsprings, but refrain from underprotectiveness. Although the construction of six pillars is critical, both too much and too little protection from parents to children widely occurs today, which means that after the maturity of the offspring, they step into society with "broken pillars." On the other hand, those who are equipped with intact pillars can avoid inferiority continuously harming themselves with subjective will, but as they are still normal human beings whose rejection activates biological pain, they cannot simply reject inferiority.

## 6. Social and Developmental Factors in Consent

Most of the time, individuals also derive their self-worth from membership in social groups. This explains the concept of collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). Unlike the more well-known personal self-esteem, which suggests the way a society views an individual is crucial to self-evaluation, collective self-esteem works with the judgement that the social groups (e.g. race, gender, religion) of the subject receive. The way that social groups are judged immediately connects to the self-evaluation of an individual, regardless of individual consent. However, Roosevelt simply overlooked this point by only focusing on individual negotiation. The Clark Doll Study (1947) reveals that black children consistently labeled white dolls as "better than the black ones" [10]. After the long history of suppression suffered by the whole race, the black children would subconsciously lower their own evaluation, compromising their own confidence by "recognizing" that black dolls are naturally worse than those in white. This type of phenomenon correlates with elevated stress hormones, making inferiority biologically internalized [10,11].

After talking about consent in a social group, let's look at the consent of kids. As mentioned before, the way a child nurtures affects the way he/she views things. Specifically speaking, if a kid is brought up in an almost completely clean environment where he/she is overly treasured or too criticized by his/her parents, he/she is likely to form a wrong attitude towards comparisons after stepping into the society, making him/her fragile towards comparisons and more likely to feel inferior in his/her subconscious mind. Obviously, Roosevelt's point does not work here. Furthermore, to speak from a biological aspect, a number of parts of

our brains play a serve for self-regulation, like prefrontal cortex which plays a critical role in whether social comparisons or external judgments translate into feelings of inferiority. However, prefrontal cortex is not fully mature before 25, so the functions that are responsible for not all work in the correct way before that age, especially before the age of 18. The immaturity can cause the inability of consent, which makes people before 25 not capable of rejecting inferiority by themselves. Therefore, from both sociological and neuroscientific perspectives, Roosevelt's words turn out to be more applicable to adults with developed agencies.

Finally, the cultural environment shapes an individual's ability to avoid inferiority with his/her own consent. Generally, there are dignity culture (most modern Western societies) and honor culture (Southern U.S.) in this world. While dignity culture emphasizes self-worth to be intrinsic, honor culture holds that self-worth comes from public reputation. Roosevelt grew up completely in Western culture, which represents dignity culture, and that is maybe her motion to propose that the ability of accepting and rejecting inferiority is an intrinsic thing. Sarcastically, even though in this culture, people should feel valuable regardless of external content, in Sacco's example, it is apparent that people in dignity culture can still be forced to feel inferior. In honor culture, it is widely accepted that shame arises when others disrespect you. As is pointed out by Sommers, women in honor cultures may face violence for "dishonoring" families, showing how inferiority is externally dictated.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, Eleanor Roosevelt's statement is a powerful ideal, but it is highly limited to psychological, sociological, and biological aspects. As the system may forcefully impulse inferior feelings through oppression and algorithms on the Internet, inferiority often arises without consciousness due to social comparison and sociometer theory. Though agency is possible through forming mature "pillars" and biological traits, they are not equally accessible. Finally, we have come to a revised version of Roosevelt's statement: "Though no one can make you feel inferior without your own consent theoretically, the real problem lies in the availability and effectiveness of consent."

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