

The power of the brain, the mind, and society: why feeling inferior is not entirely consensual

Wanrong Yang
Hong Kong International School

Abstract

Feelings of inferiority are often regarded as products of individual perception and personal choice. This paper argues that such feelings are not entirely consensual because they frequently emerge through subconscious biological, psychological, and sociocultural processes that operate beyond conscious awareness. Drawing upon the biopsychosocial model, the essay examines how genetic predispositions, neural mechanisms, developmental experiences, and social environments collectively shape an individual's susceptibility to inferiority. Evidence from neuroscience demonstrates that brain regions involved in emotional processing and social comparison function automatically, while developmental psychology shows that early childhood experiences and trauma can internalize feelings of inadequacy without conscious intention. Furthermore, sociocultural influences, including gender stereotypes, racial bias, and the pervasive effects of social media and algorithm-driven content, continuously reinforce upward social comparisons that intensify inferiority. Although individuals retain some agency in regulating their responses, the paper contends that many of the underlying mechanisms generating inferiority occur outside voluntary control. The discussion concludes that recognizing the subconscious origins of inferiority has important implications for mental health, education, and digital media literacy, encouraging interventions that reduce harmful social comparisons while promoting resilience and self-awareness.

Keywords: inferiority; social comparison; biopsychosocial model; neuroscience; developmental psychology; stereotype threat; social media; self-perception

Date of Submission: 26-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 05-10-2026

I. Introduction

In 1880, a child named Helen Keller was born. In three years she would catch a high fever that would deprive her of vision and hearing. Many expected her to sink into a permanent state of inferiority; she didn't. Helen not only became a renowned scholar, but she also worked as an activist for the disabled community. Her unflinching confidence and resilience amidst challenges inspired millions.

Did Keller ever experience feelings of inferiority? In fact, she admitted that it was her sense of inferiority—a perceived lack of ability, skills, or importance—that motivated her to succeed and adapt (Transcription for Report., 2025). From an evolutionary perspective, Keller's response is valid; humans and even other phylogenetically similar animals assess themselves in relation to others in a social hierarchy (Rasmussen and Dover, 2006; Gilbert et al., 1995). Feeling inferior motivates us to improve, but it can also lead us to engage self-defense mechanisms like superiority complexes (Balangee, 2020).

Humans are vulnerable to feeling inferior, and this process often occurs outside of our consciousness (Winerman, 2004). However, to give consent requires voluntarily and knowingly participating in the activity—in other words, consciously moulding our feelings of inferiority (Cohen, 2001). In this essay, I will delve into the biopsychosocial determinants that address why inferiority can be subconscious and thus non-consensual. I will also demonstrate why it is strenuous to avoid subconsciously feeling inferior because of the twenty-first century's inundation of technologically-curated content.

Biological Factors

First, genetic predispositions, which are outside of one's consent, can determine one's susceptibility to feelings of inferiority. Specifically, variations in the oxytocin receptor gene likely influences whether a person is able to feel inferior (Saphire-Bernstein et al., 2011). Oxytocin is responsible for generating feelings of love and connection, while the oxytocin receptor is a protein involved in the neuromolecular process of oxytocin binding (Shimon Saphire-Bernstein et al., 2011). Thus, the oxytocin receptor facilitates emotions and amplifies social cues (Kim et al., 2021).

Second, regions in the brain are responsible for the process of generating inferior feelings. A roughly almond-shaped structure inside the cerebral hemisphere, the amygdala coordinates complex emotions like social anxiety and inferiority (Ressler, 2010). However, it operates automatically, meaning that we could feel an emotional response to an event prior to cognitively realizing it.

The amygdala is one discrete place where inferior feeling subconsciously develops, but the entire brain, working as an integrated system to orchestrate thoughts and emotions, generates feelings of inferiority (Oosterwijk et al., 2012). Contrary to conventional beliefs, in which different mental states are governed by different domains of the brain, the constructionist hypothesis posits that diverse mental states emerge from interactions of general brain processes (Barrett & Satpute, 2013). Inferiority, likewise, is one of the mechanisms that occurs across domains. Specifically, neuroimaging studies highlight brain regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex, anterior insula, ventral striatum, and dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, which participate in interpreting social status, reward, and emotional responses during comparisons (Oosterwijk et al., 2012). This neural network functions continuously regardless of the individual's consent.

Psycho-Developmental Influence

Developmental psychology also contributes to the formation of inferior feelings. Specifically, personal experiences in childhood and later development can contribute to whether someone is subconsciously susceptible to feeling inferior. Since birth, children commence to rapidly absorb information from the stimuli of the world around them. They then act upon the behaviors they see. This early process of imitation, or “imprinting”, is when early experiences, especially those that involve connections with caregivers, mold the brain's limbic system, build emotional development, and construct lifelong behavioral patterns (Meltzoff & Marshall, 2018).

Notably, children do not imitate simply the behaviors of their caregivers; they internalize abstract, subtle attitudes and habits. If, for example, a parent berates a child for a shortcoming, their children will likely internalize the belief that they are inept (Aguilar-Yamuza et al., 2023). According to psychologist Elaine N. Aron, PhD, “When you are very young and impressionable and faced with constant criticism, you feel powerless, worthless, ashamed, shy, and unenthusiastic most of the time,” and “feeling that it all must be your fault, you undervalue yourself chronically” (Aron, 2009, as cited in Alberts, 2024).

Individuals with existing mental illnesses may also have diminished sense of self-perception. For example, a patient diagnosed with social anxiety disorder is prone to fearing scrutiny of others and fearing acting in a humiliating way, their sense of self-worth (“DSM-5 Changes,” n.d.) In the case of people suffering from trauma, some bury their traumatic memories in their subconsciousness—it takes years of therapy for them to even acknowledge their trauma (Downey & Crummy, 2022). Yet their feelings of inferiority still linger. One study found that childhood trauma survivors are more likely to experience alcohol and drug issues, deny the negative influence of their adversities on their health, and construct false narratives of their experiences to cope (Downey & Crummy, 2022). Early onset trauma may foster low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, which can later surface due to feelings of inadequacy (Wang et al., 2025).

When feelings of inferiority are exacerbated to the point where they are persistent, an inferiority complex is established (Adler, 1907). To overcompensate, individuals strive for superiority by performing spectacular achievements to counteract their perceived inferiority. Another type of overcompensation manifests in extreme antisocial behavior. Sometimes, the two types of overcompensation are present simultaneously (Alwisol, 2019). However, despite their efforts to reduce their feeling of inferiority, all humans experience inferiority to some degree. This feeling is not a consensual choice but rather a natural and inevitable part of human development and embedded in our psyche.

Society and Culture

Finally, society and culture undeniably shape a person's sense of inferiority. We as humans engage in multiple types of social comparisons, which refer to the process of evaluating oneself in comparison to others either consciously or subconsciously, under the impact of extrinsic societal or cultural messages (Festinger, 1954). This includes lateral, downward, and upward comparison (Haidt, 2024). When individuals engage in upward comparison, they often develop feelings of inferiority.

For a mortifyingly long period of time in history women were perceived as inferior to men, and many women internalized these beliefs from early childhood without realizing that they are abnormal. This is a striking example of the stereotype threat, a social phenomenon in which exposure to negative social stereotypes can subconsciously influence a group's self-perception and performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In the late nineteenth-century, according to the Darwinian evolution theory, women were considered to be intellectually and physically inferior to men (Bergman, 2024). This doctrine permeated through Western society and imprinted into the minds of men and women alike. Little girls who grew up under this indoctrination were not responsible for feeling inferior because these beliefs were acquired, not self-made. As a result, women adhered to the principles of Cult of Domesticity, requiring them to act as obedient housewives to their husbands and responsible keepers of their families.

Another example of inferiority tied to early gender bias relates to how girls internalize the thin body-type ideal from societal cues. In a Barbie doll exposure experiment, 160 girls aged 5-8 were randomly assigned one of three Barbie exposure methods (physical engagement, physical observation, print observation) or to a control toy. Results showed that exposure to Barbie, irrespective of format, led to higher thin-ideal internalisation than exposure to the control toy (Rice et al., 2016).

The stereotype threat is also palpable in a distinct societal group: African Americans. From slavery to Jim Crow, African Americans have been depicted as innately deficient and deservedly bound to servitude. In The Clark Doll Experiment in 2010, it was found that black and white children alike ranging from age 5-10 tended to arrange dolls from light-skinned to dark-skinned, in a spectrum of perceived superiority to inferiority, when asked questions like “who is the nicer doll?” and “which doll would people like more?” (Billante and Haddad). This experiment demonstrates how even children at young ages understand and internalize the pervasive, negative racial messages in society.

Counterargument

Admittedly, Eleanor Roosevelt’s message that we get to control our perception of ourselves is empowering. This aligns with the self-determination theory, which states that a person’s perception of themselves is influenced by experiences, feedback, and internal beliefs (Rosenberg, 1965). However, though people do react to triggers based on their intrinsic identity, not even this intrinsic identity is not shaped by themselves. We get control over certain things that happen to us, such as choosing what to eat for breakfast; in contrast, we cannot choose many other things, such as how a teacher assesses our assignments. A person who experiences physical or emotional trauma has not consented to the brutalities of their abusers. A person who was born into a lower socioeconomic status and more underprivileged social group that is discriminated against has not consented to their societal plight.

Furthermore, it is more difficult to eliminate negative social influences now than it was during Eleanor Roosevelt’s era—almost a decade ago. In the twenty-first century, no generation can evade the ubiquitous presence of the internet. Emerging in the late 2000s, the internet revolutionized the way we think and access information. Social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok quickly captured our minds through addictive characteristics like infinite scrolling and personalized content. We are drowning in the fantasies of having perfect bodies, possessing tremendous wealth, and living dream lives, even though we might not allocate much attention to these social messages. It is, however, precisely in such passive and low-attention conditions that feelings of inferiority are most cultivated (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2024).

A striking example is how, when researchers exposed young women either to media photographs of very thin women or that of average-sized women, they found that the subjects exposed to images of thin women reported feeling more anxious about their own bodies—an indication of inferiority (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018). Intriguingly, these images were flashed on a screen solely for 20 milliseconds—too short for the subjects to become consciously aware of what they had seen (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018). This experiment proves that social comparison takes place outside awareness but affects explicit self-evaluations; it also raises questions about how technology has and will alter the scale and frequency of upward social comparison.

The advent of AI filters already amplified biases through reinforcing unrealistic expectations; additionally, AI-powered algorithms aggravated negative feelings through replacing authentic connections with curated content. In short, technology threatens to make individuals more vulnerable to inferiority.

II. Conclusion and Implications

Based on the evidence herein, feeling inferior is a natural, unavoidable process that we all experience. Yet there are ways in which we can intentionally prevent our innate sense of inferiority from further negatively impacting our lives. It is especially helpful to limit time spent on social media and be intentional about the content we watch, which allows for reduced exposure to filtered or distorted images that fuel self-doubt.

Nevertheless, feeling inferior is an inevitable process that occurs without our consent due to complex biopsychosocial factors: biological factors determine our predisposition to inferiority and control our emotional responses, psychological factors shape our self-perceptions, while sociocultural factors instigate exposure to inferiority triggers.

References

- [1]. Aguilar-Yamuza, B., Herruzo-Pino, C., Lucena-Jurado, V., Raya-Trenas, A. F., & María José Pino-Osuna. (2023). Internalizing Problems in Childhood and Adolescence: The Role of the Family. *ALPHA PSYCHIATRY*, 24(3), 87–92. <https://doi.org/10.5152/alphapsychiatry.2023.221086>
- [2]. Ahmad, R., Hassan, S., Ghazali, N. N., & Al-Mashadani, A. R. F. Shahatha. (2024). The Insta-Comparison Game: The Relationship between Social Media Use, Social Comparison, and Depression. *Procedia Computer Science*, 234, 1053–1060. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2024.03.099>
- [3]. Alberts, N. (2024, February 5). *All About Inferiority Complex: Definition, Health Effects, and How to Cope*. EverydayHealth.com. <https://www.everydayhealth.com/emotional-health/understanding-inferiority-complex/>

- [4]. Aron, E. (2009). *The Undervalued Self: Restore Your Love/Power Balance, Transform the Inner Voice That Holds You Back, and Find Your True Self-Worth*.
- [5]. Barrett, L. F., & Satpute, A. B. (2013). Large-scale brain networks in affective and social neuroscience: towards an integrative functional architecture of the brain. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, 23(3), 361–372. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2012.12.012>
- [6]. Bergman G. (2024). The history of the human female inferiority ideas in evolutionary biology. *Rivista Di Biologia*, 95(3). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12680306/>
- [7]. Billante, J., & Hadad, C. (2010, May 14). *Study: White and black children biased toward lighter skin* - CNN.com. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/05/13/doll.study/index.html>
- [8]. Cohen, J. D. (2001). Cognitive Control (Executive Functions): Role of Prefrontal Cortex. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2089–2094. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b0-08-043076-7/03505-1>
- [9]. Downey, C., & Crummy, A. (2021). The impact of childhood trauma on children's wellbeing and adult behavior. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 6(1), 100237–100237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2021.100237>
- [10]. DSM-5 Changes: Implications for Child Serious Emotional Disturbance. (n.d.). National Library of Medicine; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US). Retrieved July 6, 2025, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519712/table/ch3.t12/>
- [11]. Gilbert, P., Price, J., & Allan, S. (1995). Social comparison, social attractiveness and evolution: How might they be related? *New Ideas in Psychology*, 13(2), 149–165. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0732-118x\(95\)00002-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/0732-118x(95)00002-x)
- [12]. Hackman, R. (2015, June 27). *Are you beach body ready? Controversial weight loss ad sparks varied reactions*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/27/beach-body-ready-america-weight-loss-ad-instagram>
- [13]. Haidt, J., & Pratt, S. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Random House.
- [14]. Meltzoff, A. N., & Marshall, P. J. (2018). Human infant imitation as a social survival circuit. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 24, 130–136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2018.09.006>
- [15]. Kim, E. Y., Sul, S., Lee, M. W., Lim, K.-O., Shin, N. Y., Kim, S. N., Kwon, J. S., & Kim, H. (2021). Effects of Oxytocin on Social Comparisons in Intergroup Situations. *Brain Sciences*, 11(9), 1227. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11091227>
- [16]. Oosterwijk, S., Lindquist, K. A., Anderson, E., Dautoff, R., Moriguchi, Y., & Barrett, L. F. (2012). States of mind: Emotions, body feelings, and thoughts share distributed neural networks. *NeuroImage*, 62(3), 2110–2128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2012.05.079>
- [17]. Rasmussen, P. R., & Dover, G. J. (2006). The purposefulness of anxiety and depression: Adlerian and evolutionary views. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 62(4), 366–396.
- [18]. Ressler, K. J. (2010). Amygdala Activity, Fear, and Anxiety: Modulation by Stress. *Biological Psychiatry*, 67(12), 1117–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.04.027>
- [19]. Rice, K., Prichard, I., Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2016). Exposure to Barbie: Effects on thin-ideal internalisation, body esteem, and body dissatisfaction among young girls. *Body Image*, 19, 142–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.09.005>
- [20]. Saphire-Bernstein, S., Way, B. M., Kim, H. S., Sherman, D. K., & Taylor, S. E. (2011). Oxytocin receptor gene (OXTR) is related to psychological resources. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108(37), 15118–15122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1113137108>
- [21]. Transcription for Report by Helen Keller about her feelings of inferiority. (2025). American Foundation for the Blind. <https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=p&p=helenkellerdocumentdisplay&d=A-HK01-02-B032-F03-023&>
- [22]. Wang L, Keyworth C, O'Connor DB (2025). Effects of childhood trauma on mental health outcomes, suicide risk factors and stress appraisals in adulthood. *PLoS One*, 20(6), e0326120. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0326120>
- [23]. Winerman, L. (2004). *Social comparison happens subliminally, and automatically*. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov04/comparison>