Eleanor Roosevelt declared, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Is she right?

Inferiority is defined as a deep-rooted feeling of inadequacy and insecurity that stems from observable or imagined limitations and flaws (APA, 2018a). This negative emotion often arises not solely from sudden, overt abasement but rather from perpetuating subtle critiques that are embedded in society and everyday interactions. These experiences shape how an individual perceives their worth and, by doing so, gradually lay the basis for internalised feelings of inferiority.

Roosevelt's use of consent implies that all individuals possess the psychological agency to accept or reject feelings of inferiority. Consent is the conscious act of permitting or agreeing to something, and it requires autonomy, awareness, and authority (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019; King, 2025). These conditions are rarely all met when systemic biases and cultural narratives taint one's self-image. Hence, Roosevelt undermines the complexity of this concept by suggesting that one can consent to feeling inferior, thereby overlooking the universal influences of social forces on self-perception.

In today's multidimensional world, these subtle critiques are no longer confined to a select few personal interactions or an intimate social circle. Rather, our self-worth is continually shaped by standards we cannot control nor necessarily change - norms that are socially constructed and internalised through persistent exposure and reinforcement, until they ultimately influence our sense of self at a subconscious level. This raises the question: In a world where validation and self-worth are increasingly influenced by the opinions of not just those known to us but also by strangers online, is it time to rephrase Eleanor Roosevelt's statement?

While Roosevelt's statement contains truth in its emphasis on personal agency, it inherently oversimplifies the complex interplay between internal resilience and external pressures. This essay will argue that identifying this so-called, perhaps subjective 'consent point' is far more difficult and obscure than it appears to be. Ultimately, inferiority is shaped not solely by an individual's will but by layered cognitive, emotional, and social processes that operate independently from conscious consent.

Supporting Roosevelt's Claim Through Psychological Theories

Roosevelt's claim hinges on the key psychological principle that all individuals have the ability to actively shape their responses to external stimuli by consciously interpreting them in ways that alter their self-perception. This refers to personal agency, which is "the sense that I am the one who is causing or generating an action" (Gallagher, 2000). When applied to the context of Roosevelt's assertion, this posits that inferiority is not necessarily an inevitable reaction to a remark, criticism, or certain treatment. Rather, subjective interpretations are based on an individual's belief in their own abilities and whether or not they can act independently of external forces (Alper, 2020). Thus, the emotional feeling of inferiority is not something that can be imposed on others, but it is constructed internally and rests on an individual's personal consent, which the concept of personal agency elucidates is, in fact, under the individual's control.

The question that then comes to mind is: If inferiority is contingent on an individual's consent, what then determines if and how this consent is given?

Essentially, to understand how personal agency is operationalised, we must examine the cognitive structures that control one's perceived power in deciding how to act and, more specifically, how to respond. Albert Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy delves into this by equating self-efficacy with an individual's belief in their potential to influence behaviours to achieve expected outcomes, a concept termed as efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is built through four mechanisms: mastery experiences, social modelling, social persuasion, and physiological states. These mechanisms enable individuals to reformulate setbacks as opportunities rather than as threats, thereby building resistance to feelings of inadequacy and preserving their self-worth (Cherry, 2024c; Moore, 2016). While Bandura himself proposes that self-efficacy is unevenly developed as it is conditional on context, by viewing Roosevelt's claim through its basis on self-efficacy, one observes that her assertion does hold merit. Inferiority requiring one's consent aligns with faith in one's ability to cope, as it suggests that high self-efficacy restricts negative emotions from being internalised.

This notion corresponds closely with Julian Rotter's theory of Locus of Control which, through a scale, distinguishes between individuals who believe that their life outcomes stem from personal

actions (internal locus of control) and those who wholly attribute these events as uncontrollable and influenced by external forces such as luck or fate (external locus of control) (Cherry, 2024). Individuals with an internal locus tend to persist through difficulties by reframing negative situations of adversity constructively and exhibiting high self-efficacy (Psychology Today, 2025). These traits align with Roosevelt's view as they empower individuals to reject demeaning narratives, preserve their self-worth, and refrain from developing feelings of inferiority. While fostering resilience and becoming less likely to be destabilised by challenges, the narrative of an internal locus of control raises a concern: if unique factors shape environments, beliefs, and experiences, does Roosevelt's claim rest on the assumption that all individuals are equally positioned and empowered to give their consent?

Martin Seligman's theory of learned optimism offers further support to Roosevelt's assertion by illustrating that this phenomenon acts as a powerful cognitive defence, allowing individuals to resist internalising feelings of inferiority and thus withhold the consent such feelings require to take root (Moore, 2019). Optimism is not merely a temperament, but rather a skill that can be cultivated by challenging negativity and reconstructing unhelpful thoughts. Learned optimists reinterpret hardship as externally caused and temporary, therefore preserving their self-image and denying feelings of inferiority (Rose, 2022). This cognitive ability of learned optimism cannot prevent difficulty, but it equips individuals who have mastered this mental framework to build resistance to rejection, failure, or despondency (Moore, 2019). Roosevelt's claim finds psychological validity in this concept, as it emphasises that while obstacles may be inevitable, internalisation of inferiority is not.

Even cognitive-behavioural frameworks substantiate Roosevelt's premise by proposing that individuals can reassemble negative feedback to ultimately build a defence against internalising inferiority. A person criticised for their work, for instance, may choose to view the feedback constructively rather than as a sign of inadequacy. Malala Yousafzai, for example, exemplifies this cognitive resilience. She outwardly resists oppression and, despite unimaginable hardships, she continues to transform adversity into activism for education. Her unwavering commitment is a testimony to her profound psychological fortitude (Rabbani, 2024). However, this remains an interpretive perspective, as the internal experience of inferiority remains psychologically elusive.

Challenging Roosevelt: Psychological Critiques and Modern Implications

For Roosevelt to suggest that inferiority only arises if and when one consents, she presupposes and perhaps assumes a standard level of personal agency that many individuals simply may not possess. Roosevelt's assertion, therefore, may hold theoretical appeal, but the practical psychological and social applicability of this statement is far from universal. The formation of feelings of inferiority does not always occur at a conscious, volitional level. Hence, to locate consent in processes governed by factors beyond conscious awareness, like persistent environmental fluctuations, entrenched systemic hierarchies, and implicit comparisons, is presuming that this complex interplay of internal vulnerability and external imposition is non-existent.

Expanding on the aforementioned critique, social comparison theory offers a compelling psychological framework to invalidate Roosevelt's claim further in that it explicates that the tendency to evaluate one's self-worth by comparing oneself to others is a critical component of any self-evaluation process. Initially described by Leon Festinger, the appraisal of one's abilities and potential in relation to those of others makes a fascinating contribution to one's self-image and, in extension, one's psychological well-being (APA, 2018b). Festinger first hypothesised that this arises from the need to analyse their skills and validate their analysis through the observation of others. The second hypothesis elucidated that regardless of specific personal contexts, people will evaluate their opinions based on their comparison with others. Particularly among adolescents and young adults, this evaluation, especially upward comparison, promotes a sense of inferiority by building negative associations in self-concept (Butts, 2024).

What Roosevelt's claim neglects is the contemporary psychological context, where comparison stems from algorithmically engineered devices that render this act of self-evaluation in relation to others omnipresent. This is in stark contrast to the comparison at Roosevelt's time, which rose from tangible, close-knit interactions bound by one's physical community. Today, relentless and unending exposure to idealised images, lifestyles, and expectations heightens discouragement and feelings of inadequacy (Cherry, 2024b). Our digital age has transformed fleeting comparisons into constant psychological burdens that subtly shape self-worth, long before consent can even be considered. Empirical evidence corroborates this: a study by Moningka and

Ratih Eminiar (2020) of 221 adolescents found a significant negative correlation between social media comparison and self-esteem ($r = –0.544$, $p < 0.05$), with self-comparison predicting 29.6% of the variance in self-esteem. This underscores how frequent, repetitive comparisons are strongly linked with diminished self-regard. Consequently, to suggest that inferiority is solely a matter of consent is not only highly reductive but also lacks temporal validity.

Moreover, it cannot be overlooked that Roosevelt's assertion overgeneralises the ability to build resistance against feelings of inferiority by assuming that under all circumstances, every single individual possesses the necessary and equal agency required to resist negativity. This assumption fails to take into consideration the psychological issues that can arise from persistent situational factors such as systemic inequalities that often manifest as daily reminders of inferiority. External treatment and internal perception are shaped when one's value in society is undermined by realities such as microaggression, discriminatory hiring practices, underrepresentation, and inaccessibility. This chronic exposure creates implicit biases that serve as strong indications of not being enough. Such feelings build over time, and often cannot be ignored or even consented to. For people with disabilities, for example, the very design of public, professional, and academic spaces can convey exclusion. When basic access is restricted, factors that impact psychological well-being, such as autonomy and a sense of belonging, are compromised. To maintain self-perception, resilience is required from those individuals while societal systems are absolved of responsibility.

This sustained pressure to disregard interminable exposure to pessimism and a lack of support need not be momentary; rather, it can culminate in a cognitive complex that, whether triggered by online social media comparisons or offline marginalisation, feeds into a deep, conditioned belief in one's inadequacy. Over time, this may trigger a phenomenon known as learned helplessness - a state in which individuals, despite potentially being able to control their behaviour, develop automatic, reactionary responses due to internalised exposure to uncontrollable stressors and a belief that change is futile. This impairs emotional regulation, with neural patterns of self-doubt being regularly reinforced, and cortisol levels increasing (APA, 2014).

It is crucial to note that if consent alone determines one's feelings of inferiority, the very existence of learned helplessness alongside learned optimism is inherently paradoxical. Their coexistence reveals that agency and consent alone do not merely govern inferiority, because if that were the case, then helplessness would not develop, and optimism would not require deliberate cultivation.

Conclusion

Indeed, Roosevelt's claim underscores the empowering ideal of personal agency and an internal locus of control; yet, it is unable to account for contemporary psychological behaviour and the sociocultural complexity of our world today. Feelings of inferiority are not simply consented to or chosen; rather, they are subconsciously constructed through unwavering societal inequality and the resultant cognitive conditioning and neural adaptations that arise from being continually devalued. In a world where digital platforms and connectivity magnify ongoing comparisons and systemic structures perpetuate inadequacy, agency fails to be the sole determinant of self-worth. Ergo, to suggest that consent alone governs this negative feeling of inferiority is to overlook the multilayered and often implicit forces that shape the human mind.

As you reflect on Roosevelt's claim, ask yourself: When have you truly chosen to feel inferior, and when has the choice involuntarily been made for you? In those contradictory moments, was resisting inevitable feelings ever truly your own choice?

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