

Individual Differences in Resilience to External Evaluation: Age, Gender, and Cognitive Factors in Inferiority Complex Formation

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Keywords: Inferiority complexes, Age, Gender, Inferiority complex source, Resilience

Abstract: Inferiority complexes are prevalent across diverse contemporary groups. This paper delves into the factors influencing the development of inferiority complexes in individuals. Through questionnaire surveys, the study collected 111 responses from participants of varying genders and age groups. Findings reveal that feelings of inferiority and their frequency vary across genders and age groups. Primary sources of inferiority differ among these demographic segments. Resilience to external pressures also exhibits distinct patterns across genders and age cohorts. This research offers multifaceted perspectives on the formation and resolution of inferiority complexes.

1. Introduction

Eleanor Roosevelt argues that “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” This seems to imply that whether an individual accepts negative evaluations ultimately depends on their willingness to embrace such criticism. Contrary to this view, reality paints a messier picture. Sure, individuals all love to believe they remain unaffected by others' judgments. However, whether individual can successfully overcome avoiding being inferior is a whole story of individuals' own conditions and different types of external impacts. From teens crumbling under Instagram perfection to adults buckling under workplace snubs, external voices seep into individuals' self-worth whether we “allow” it or not. Adler nailed it: inferiority festers in the gap between who we are and who we think we should be—a gap often dug by others' expectations. Thus, this paper starts with the mechanism of self-inferiority and stretches to why some people crumble under criticism while others shrug it off, and what actually helps.

2. Theoretical Review: From a normal sense of inferior to a pathological cycle

Generally, the feeling of inferiority stems from the distance between ideal self and actual reality[1]. When this distance becomes difficult to close because of continuous failures, social marginalization, and internalized unrealistic standards, short-term inferior might transfer into long-term inferior complex. This mental status was defined as “a stable tendency to perceive the global self as inadequate” by Izard [2]. Under prolonged deterioration, this status may develop into what Adlerian theory terms “inferiority complex” - a pathological persistence in one's perceived shortcomings. Which expresses as self-doubt and over focus on one's own disadvantages and negative experiences.

In this way, this paper explores the emergence of self-inferiorities by partly focus on the generation of the sense of “shame”.

The emergence of self-inferiority can be interpreted from two aspects: the transformation of external impacts and inner movements triggers certain reactions, which complete the cycle of continuously inferiority. External shocks primarily include external evaluations and comparisons. First, Human Emotions by Izard demonstrates that shame is usually triggered by public failure, criticism, or rejection. Individuals may internalize their suppressed feelings stemming from these external pressures into their subjective and permanent inferiority complexes. Additionally, humans instinctively require evaluate themselves through social comparison[3]. This means individuals are likely to perceive failure through social comparison, transforming frustration and anger into self-belittlement and self-criticism.

In terms of interior movements, Human Emotions by Izard demonstrates that frustrations and self-disputing can originate the emotions of shame, which is the core of self-inferiority. Once people have formed a sense of shame, their anterior cingulate cortex (self-monitoring) and prefrontal cortex (social norm processing) will become hyperactive, which makes them become super sensitive to external criticisms and amplify their negative self-comments. In such situations, they tend to “withdraw from social interaction” and “reduce opportunities for positive feedback”, which further enhance their sense of shame, trapping them into the cycle of inferiority complexes. Accordingly, people who have already got into the cycle of self-inferior can hardly get rid of this complex by their ordinary energy and force.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1. Data collection

Questionnaire surveys were employed to collect data exploring the correlation between individual characteristics and the development of inferiority complexes. The extent of inferiority, its frequency, and its sources (Academic/work achievements, appearance/charisma/stature, financial status, interests/talents, social skills/interpersonal relationships, family members, etc.) were the primary focus of the investigation. The questionnaire was distributed via Wenjuanxing in August 2025, with emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity. After excluding incomplete and invalid responses, 111 valid questionnaires were obtained. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants.

Table 1 Characteristics of participants

Dimensions	Item	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	28	25.23%
	Female	83	74.77%
Age	less than 15	3	3%
	15~20	30	27%
	21~25	2	2%
	26~30	8	7%
	31~40	38	34%
	41~50	21	19%
	51~60	8	7%
	60 or more	1	1%

3.2. Data analysis

Data show that 65.77% of participants feel self-inferior in life regardless of age. Adler stated that

self-inferiority is a normal reaction when people pursue status transcendence. Thus, the wide distribution of self-inferiority across age groups partly stems from self-pursuit. However, individuals vary significantly in resisting external negative comments and social comparison influences, mainly determined by factors like gender, age, social roles, and psychological maturity.

3.2.1. Inferiority complex

As shown in Table 2, the cross-analysis by gender reveals that 63.86% of female respondents reported feeling inferior, while this proportion reached 71.43% among male respondents. Although the absolute number of male respondents was lower, the relative proportion indicates that men are more prone to feelings of inferiority.

In the age group analysis, 80% of respondents aged 15–20 reported feeling inferior, while all respondents aged 21–25 expressed feelings of inferiority. This may indicate that younger individuals are more susceptible to the influence of others' words and actions, leading to feelings of inferiority.

Notably, despite their greater life experience, the majority of respondents aged 41–50 still reported feelings of inferiority. This suggests that susceptibility to external influences causing inferiority may not be significantly affected by age.

Table 2 Distribution of Feelings of Inferiority

		Yes	No
Gender	Male	71.43%	28.57%
	Female	63.86%	36.14%
Age	Less Than 15	66.67%	33.33%
	15~20	80.00%	20.00%
	21~25	100.00%	0.00%
	26~30	37.50%	62.50%
	31~40	60.53%	39.47%
	41~50	71.43%	28.57%
	51~60	50.00%	50.00%
	60 Or More	0.00%	100.00%

3.2.2. Inferiority frequency

Table 3 Distribution of Inferiority frequency

		Almost Every Day	Several Times A Week	Several Times A Month	Several Times A Year
Gender	Male	10.00%	35.00%	20.00%	35.00%
	Female	5.66%	20.75%	22.64%	50.94%
Age	Less Than 15	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%
	15~20	8.33%	58.33%	33.33%	0.00%
	21~25	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%
	26~30	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	31~40	0.00%	4.35%	21.74%	73.91%
	41~50	6.67%	13.33%	20.00%	60.00%
	51~60	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	75.00%
	60 Or More	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

As shown in Table 3, the gender cross-analysis reveals that females only surpass males in the

proportion reporting “several times a year,” indicating that males experience feelings of inferiority more frequently.

In the age group analysis, 58.33% of respondents aged 15-20 reported feeling inferior several times a week, while the respondents aged 26-60 exhibited lower and more concentrated frequencies of inferiority, demonstrating that younger individuals experience feelings of inferiority more significantly.

3.2.3. Sources of Inferiority Complex

As shown in Figure 1, academic/work achievements (69.86%), appearance/charisma/stature (63.01%), and social skills/interpersonal relationships (61.64%) are the three most common sources of inferiority among respondents, exerting the greatest impact on individual self-confidence.

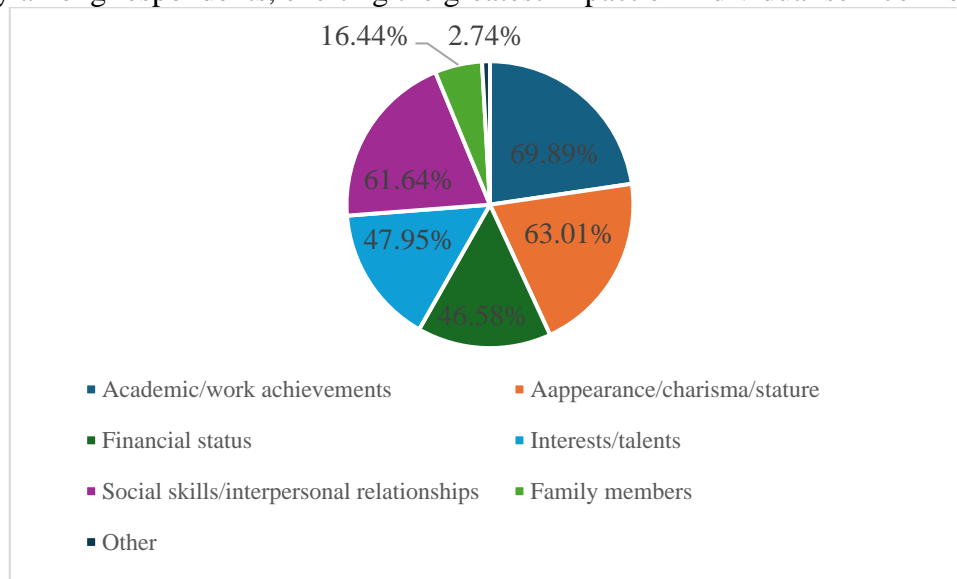


Figure 1 Distribution of Inferiority complex sources

Table 4 Distribution of Inferiority sources among individuals with inferiority feelings

		Academic/work achievements	Appearance/charisma/stature	Financial status	Interests/talents	Social skills/interpersonal relationships	Family members	Other
Gender	Male	80.00%	55.00%	35.00%	35.00%	60.00%	15.00%	0.00%
	Female	66.04%	66.04%	50.94%	52.83%	62.26%	16.98%	3.77%
Age	Less than 15	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	15~20	83.33%	75.00%	33.33%	54.17%	83.33%	8.33%	4.17%
	21~25	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%	50.00%	100.00%	50.00%	0.00%
	26~30	66.67%	100.00%	66.67%	33.33%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%
	31~40	69.57%	52.17%	43.48%	34.78%	39.13%	8.70%	0.00%
	41~50	60.00%	60.00%	60.00%	66.67%	60.00%	33.33%	6.67%
	51~60	50.00%	50.00%	75.00%	50.00%	50.00%	25.00%	0.00%

As shown in Table 4, among individuals experiencing inferiority, females exhibit a more balanced distribution of inferiority sources. Additionally, males report significantly higher proportions of inferiority stemming from academic/work achievements compared to females. Conversely, females report significantly higher proportions of inferiority related to financial status, appearance/charisma/stature, and interests/talents compared to males.

Cross-analysis by age group also reveals distinct primary sources of inferiority across different age brackets. Taking the age group experiencing the highest incidence of inferiority as an example: Among those aged 15-20, the predominant sources stem from academic performance and

interpersonal relationships. This correlates with the prevalent school environment typical of this age group. For those aged 31-40, work achievements emerge as the most significant factor, potentially linked to family responsibilities and career development.

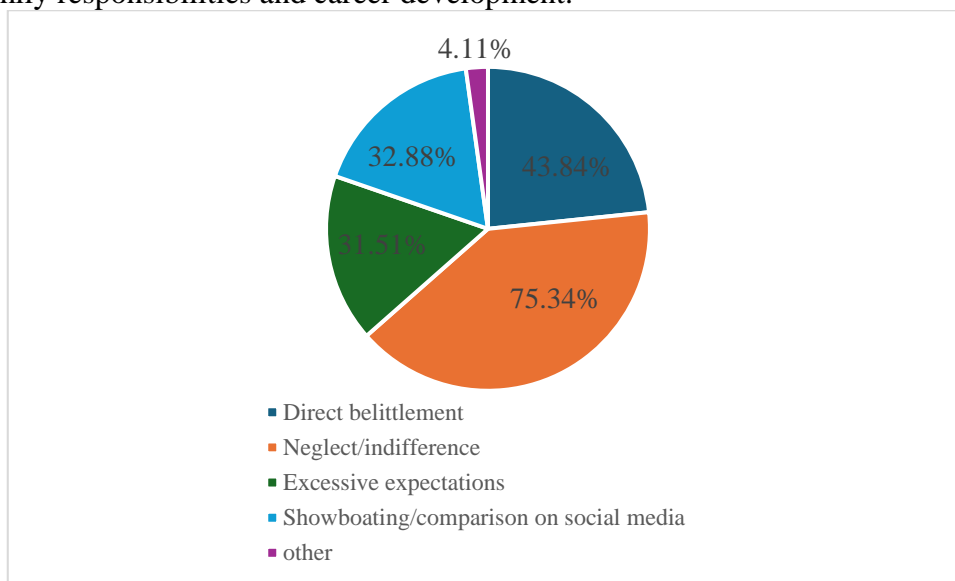


Figure 2 Impact of Others' attitudes on Inferiority

Table 5 Impact of Others' attitudes on Inferiority: Age and gender

		Direct belittlement	Neglect/indifference	Excessive expectations	Showboating/comparison on social media	other
Gender	Male	50.00%	70.00%	35.00%	25.00%	10.00%
	Female	41.51%	77.36%	30.19%	35.85%	1.89%
Age	Less than 15	50.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	15~20	33.33%	83.33%	37.50%	58.33%	4.17%
	21~25	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%
	26~30	33.33%	100.00%	66.67%	66.67%	0.00%
	31~40	47.83%	56.52%	39.13%	17.39%	6.67%
	41~50	60.00%	86.67%	13.33%	13.33%	25.00%
	51~60	50.00%	50.00%	25.00%	25.00%	0.00%
	60 or more	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Furthermore, the results regarding the impact of others' attitudes on feelings of inferiority are shown in Figure 2 and Table 5. Figure 2 indicates that being ignored or treated coldly by others has the most significant effect on an individual's mindset, even surpassing the impact of being belittled by others.

More specifically, beyond others' cold attitudes, the proportion of males experiencing inferiority due to being belittled by others is significantly higher than that of females. This suggests males are more prone to developing feelings of inferiority from direct social belittlement.

Analysis by age group reveals distinct primary sources of inferiority across different age brackets. For those aged 15-30, others' indifference most readily triggers feelings of inferiority, likely linked to an immature mindset requiring care and attention. Additionally, for respondents aged 15-20, showboating and comparisons on social media also undermine confidence, possibly tied to adolescent sensitivity.

For those aged 31-50, being belittled by others is the most damaging factor. This may stem from conflicts arising in both the workplace and family life.

Among respondents aged 51 and above, direct belittlement (50%) and being ignored (50%) coexist as significant sources of insecurity. This may be linked to the weakening of social roles associated with retirement and children becoming independent.

4. Discussion

4.1. Age and Inferiority Complex

Participants can be divided into two groups: a group in which people are not likely to be influenced by others, and a group in which people are likely to be influenced by others.

The first group partly consists of people over 31 years old. People in this group have a relatively low frequency of feeling self-inferior every year, and have a relatively weak sense of inferior. This phenomenon may matter for multiple reasons. According to one of the participants in the age group of 41-50 years old, her inferiority frequency has largely reduced with the expanded horizon of different lifestyles and others' various life experiences. Overall, self-identification of people over 30 years old tends to become stable, whose reliance of external certifications has been decreased. Instead, they realize self-worths by educating descendants or social contributions [4]. This shows that people over 30 years old focus more on real-life issues instead of unreal comparison, which corresponds to merely 13.33% of people influenced by social media in this age. Apart from that, people in this age group feel self-inferior mainly because of their financial states (60%) instead of working achievements or appearance. That might be because of their abilities to attribute their failure in social comparison to their external conditions instead of their own abilities. What is more, their family responsibilities and workplace experience accumulate self-affirmation, which helps them to lower their sensitivity to comments from others.

For 15-30-year-old group, they are more likely influenced by others. This group is prone to self-inferiority (58.33% of 15-20-year-olds feel inferior multiple times weekly). The top three inferiority sources are study achievements (83.33%), relationship neglect (83.33%), and social media comparison (58.33%). Unlike the former group, adolescents lack stable self-identification and depend heavily on external feedback. Social media's "elegant lives" amplify multi-faceted comparisons, triggering their inferiority complex.

4.2. Gender and Inferiority Complex

From the questionnaire, males perform a higher rate of self-inferior to females. That can be explained by Gender Role Conflict Theory that, if males perceive to be insufficient to their standard of the gender role of "succeed, power, and competition", they will experience substantial shame and self-doubt. Which consistent with males' major sources of inferior "academic or work achievements" (80%) and "directly belittle" (50%), males' inferior might be largely caused by social expectations.

4.3. Ways to Alleviate Feelings of Inferiority

In response to the widespread inferiority complex that exists among various groups, "improving oneself" and "broadening cognition" are two most high-scored for mitigating inferior complex. By improving themselves, people can successfully reduce the nervousness caused by lower status of oneself than others[1]. Broadening cognition can help establish more diverse standards for self-evaluation. Instead of only comparing oneself to those who are better off (upward social comparison) or worse off (downward social comparison), one can also consider horizontal comparisons, such as recognizing achievements across different professions, or temporal comparisons, like reflecting on one's own past behavior and growth. People who compare themselves to others on multiple

dimensions (e.g., intelligence, attractiveness, social skills) experience less extreme self-evaluations than those who focus on a single dimension[5]. When people define themselves from different aspects, they can transform comparative pressures into motivation for progress and reduce inferior complex[6].

Notably, “belittling others” and “confide in family and friends” cannot effectively alleviate inferiority complex. “Belittling others” is a kind of “downward comparison”. Although it can improve self-feeling, it will enhance negative self-feeling in the long run. As for expressing the complex to friends and families, if the confidants are not people who are capable of providing high-quality empathetic support or giving contribution feedback, their conforms might be useless for speaker.

4.4. Other findings

While, interestingly, we'd expect children from stable, two-parent homes to have stronger self-confidence, our findings tell a different story. Based on the open-ended interviews in the questionnaire, 20% respondents from these so-called “ideal” family backgrounds actually struggle with persistent feelings of inadequacy, they even suffer from weekly or even daily bouts of self-doubt. What’s particularly striking is that 70% of these individuals describe their home environments as warm and supportive. These respondents affected are overwhelmingly teenagers aged 15-20 who still live with their parents. This proves that internal development brought by people’s age groups matter more in their self-inferiority than family environments.

The numbers paint an entirely different picture for those from single-parent households. A clear majority (60%) demonstrate remarkable resilience against external judgments, and those who do experience occasional self-doubt report it as a rare occurrence, maybe once or twice a year. This group consists entirely of adults over 26 who’ve moved out from their childhood homes. That may be because single-parent families provide people with moderate adversity, which can promote the development of adaptations, especially for adults[7].

Besides, the friend factor emerges as particularly significant. Among participants describing themselves as having many close friends, 54% show strong immunity to issues with confidence triggered by others’ opinions - a rate substantially higher than their less-social peers. This suggests social bonds outside family may play a more crucial role in self-perception than traditional family structures. A broad friendship network provides diverse value feedback, offsetting negative evaluations from a single source such as family [8].

Based on the above analysis, this paper categorizes the surveyed population into two groups: Highly Resistant Individuals and Susceptible Individuals(Table 6).

Table 6 Distinguishing group characteristics between Highly resistant individuals and susceptible individuals

Dimensions	Highly resistant people	Susceptible people
Age group	Over 31 years old (Having diverse life experiences)	15-30 years old (Have not stepped into intricate societies or have just stepped into societies)
Gender	Female	Male
Mitigation methods	Upgrade one’s core	Rely on others’ comments
Social reliance	Low peer dependence	High peer dependence
Evaluation standard	various	monotonous

5. Recommended methods of mitigating self-inferiority

While Eleanor Roosevelt's famous quote suggests we hold ultimate control over our self-worth,

the reality is more nuanced. This paper shows that inferiority feelings stem from complex interactions between social expectations and personal vulnerabilities. Teenagers in supportive families still experience weekly self-doubt, while single-parent adults often demonstrate remarkable resilience. The results prove that age and life experience fundamentally reshape how we process criticism. The key to combating inferiority isn't to pretend external influences don't exist but developing psychological tools to filter and transform them.

First, seeking diverse feedback sources. This strategy can prevent overreliance on any single viewpoint[5]. Instead of eliminating social comparisons - an impossible task according to Festinger (1954), but schedule and redirect them, focusing on personal growth rather than unfavorable comparisons with others. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques provide a perspective for examining self-critical thoughts with the same objective attitude one would apply to a friend's situation[9]. Additionally, establishing multiple identity anchors can provide stability when certain aspects of life feel unstable[10]. As demonstrated by Lench et al. , even negative emotions like anger can become powerful motivators when channeled toward specific goals[11].

Ultimately, resilience comes from creating flexible psychological systems rather than trying to achieve complete immunity. The most confident individuals in this study weren't those who claimed indifference to others' opinions, but those who'd developed sophisticated filtering mechanisms. By consciously selecting which external standards to adopt, which to modify, and which to reject entirely, individuals who'd developed sophisticated filtering mechanisms can transform inferiority into growth fuel. Thus, true empowerment lies not in denying social nature, but in cultivating the discernment to navigate it wisely. For instance, building self-evaluation systems that acknowledge both our inherent worth and our capacity for improvement.

6. Conclusion

Does Eleanor Roosevelt's famous quote hold up? Only halfway. Yes, we ultimately control how much weight we give others' opinions—but pretending we can block them entirely ignores how human psychology works. The real “disallow” is not denying external influences exist. In fact, it's strategically choosing which ones get a VIP pass to your brain.

The most resilient people in our research weren't those who claimed immunity to judgment, but those who'd built a psychological immune system: diversified self-worth, controlled exposure to toxins, and the ability to metabolize criticism into fuel. Inferiority isn't a sign you're “allowing” others to hurt you—it's a signal to audit whose standards you've accidentally adopted. The real permission slip you need isn't to ignore the world, but to actively redesign your relationship with it.

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