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How Our Childhood Chose Inferiority for Us

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Abstract:

This article examines the origins of inferiority feelings, arguing that they are deeply rooted in childhood experiences rather than conscious choice, refuting Eleanor Roosevelt's claim. Drawing on Alfred Adler's birth order theory and contemporary developmental research, the paper explores how familial relationships—particularly the role of the father—early trauma, and adverse childhood experiences shape self-perception and contribute to lasting feelings of inadequacy. It discusses the neurological impact of childhood stress on brain regions associated with memory, emotion, and self-worth. The article also proposes potential therapeutic interventions such as Adlerian Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to reprocess early experiences and foster a growth-oriented mindset, ultimately advocating for a compassionate understanding of inferiority beyond individualistic maxims.

Keywords: Inferiority complex, childhood experiences, birth order, father-child relationship, cognitive behavioral therapy

I watch her chatting with an old friend, their familiarity stretching far beyond my own—as ifI hadn't been the one to introduce them. I watch her send the volleyball arcing across the net in a flawless parabola, moments after I miss a shot. I watch her receive a grade above mine, though she'd just complained to me about being unprepared. I feel my throat tighten as I suffocate, from something stronger than anger and fear—it's a raw, nauseating sense of inadequacy: "I'm a failure. I'm nothing compared to people like her." Inferiority. My worst ghost, poisoning admiration with envy, turning every connection into comparison. Eleanor Roosevelt apocryphally said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Even if she had said this, the maxim's primary purpose would have been to encourage its audience during the Great Depression rather than offering a psychological framework for understanding inferiority. The reality is far more nuanced: like most psychological phenomena, feelings of inferiority stem not simply from a matter of conscious permission. Rather, self-perception and self-worth emerge from an intricate interplay of past experiences. To properly delve into the discussion of how and where inferiority emerges, we must look at how these feelings are woven into us through childhood experiences, relationships, and neurology (Amani et al., 2024). In light of these connections, it may be possible to mitigate the long-term effects of adverse experiences.

In 1927, Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler pub-

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lished his book Understanding Human Nature, proposing his celebrated theory of birth order. He argued that the order in which a child is born within a family significantly shapes personality formation, including a sense of inferiority (Adler, 1927). Adler's broader work emphasised that psychological well-being stems from feelings of encouragement and social connectedness. When individuals feel capable and valued, they act cooperatively; when discouraged, they may withdraw or compete—dynamics often rooted in early family dynamics (Adler Graduate School, 2021). This interplay is evident in birth order effects: a comparative study by Lementillo revealed that older children, usually afforded higher value and taking more responsibility from parents, often develop a heightened sense of superiority; while younger siblings, often experiencing reduced expectations and receiving less authority, grapple with inferiority. Middle-born children oscillate between siblings, demonstrating adaptive responses depending on the sides they pick (Lacson et al., 2023).

The implications of birth order are far-reaching. As of China's latest census, the average family has 2.62 children—yet even this number is a historic low—while in Europe, 50.6% of families have multiple children (Song, 2021; Newman, 2024). With such prevalence, birth order's role in shaping competence, rivalry, or resilience cannot be overlooked, particularly among older generations where family hierarchies were more rigid. Adler's framework thus remains a vital lens for understanding how early positional roles forge lifelong behavioural tendencies. Beyond birth order, familial relationships—particularly the role of the father—also shape personality through attachment styles. Research has shown the pivotal role of fatherhood, noting that a strong father figure (or the lack thereof) substantially affects a child's vulnerability to inferiority complexes throughout developmental periods (Rollè et al., 2019). The U.S. Census Bureau published in its report that roughly 1 in 4 children in America lives without a father figure in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to a 2015 Report on family development in China, the primary caregiver and educator for children aged 0 to 5 in their daily lives is the mother. Only 7.5% of children receive co-care from both parents (Chinese Population and Development Research Center, 2015). Studies suggest that though mothers are predominant as primary caregivers, the father-child relationship has a greater impact on the mental health of adolescents than the mother-child relationship. The father figure in a household generally has five responsibilities: providing, protecting,disciplining, mentoring, and achieving. When the father fails to provide unconditional love, he hinders the child's development of sociability, self-confidence and self-concept. This is
most evident among girls as they subconsciously project their father's image onto future romantic partners. Among the various importance of father-daughter relationships is the development of a sense of self-worth. Chinese psychologist Shenzhi Hu (2021) writes in his book, IfFatherhood is Absent: "a father's love for his daughter affects not only her gender relations, but also the formation of her character and the basic patterns of her relationships." A girl who grows up without intimate and unconditional love from her father will feel unworthy of love in future relationships throughout life. These girls constantly test their relationships and feel the need to prove their value and status in those relationships. Lin, a 56- year-old divorced woman whose father was absent throughout her childhood, reflected on her marriage bitterly:

I divorced my ex-husband when our daughter was in high school ...I kept testing my ex, demanding proof he'd never stop loving me ...I even grew jealous of my daughter, feeling that they were the real family. Now she's an adult, and we're strangers.

Sometimes, I see my whole life as a failure: alone in childhood, alone in old age.

(Meiya, 2018).Lin's confession aligns with clinical findings that father-deprived girls often seek—yet sabotage—validation in relationships, trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy of inferiority that drives abandonment. Throughout childhood, our developing brains are highly vulnerable to traumatic and adverse experiences. Preclinical studies in recent years are starting to reveal the long-term biological impact of trauma, neglect, abuse and other forms of adverse childhood experience (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014). According to the National Children's Alliance (2022), approximately 8 in every thousand children were victims of abuse and neglect in the U.S. in
2022; another 1 billion children are estimated to experience sexual violence globally. These numbers only reflect the most severe circumstances. Parents cannot refrain entirely from creating adverse childhood experiences for their children, even the seemingly most subtle ones count. When children experience a sudden change in their environment, such as seeing their mother suddenly start punishing them or yell in scenarios they wouldn't before, they initiate their defence mechanism—self-blame. By internalising the fault, children maintain the belief that the world they live in is safe and good (Kennedy, 2023). The criticism and guilt children bear will morph into feelings of inferiority (Alexander, 1938). Recurring stressful events, for example, target critical brain regions, including the hippocampus (responsible for long-term memory), the prefrontal cortex (essential for logical thinking), and the amygdala (which regulates emotional processing) (van der Kolk, 2003). Exposure of these brain areas to prolonged fearful stimuli narrows the child's brain capacity to integrate sensory input, impeding the child's ability to foster a healthy mindset. This increases the likelihood a child may

experience frequent feelings of inferiority as they fail to recognize their ability to improve. They feel trapped in the current inferior position,
unmotivated to grow out of it. Eleanor's perspective reflects her rejection of the idea that emotions are intricately fabricated by our childhood experience, but instead only by conscious decisions. Psychologist Carol Dweck told a story about the power of "yet" in a speech: a group of high school students who were informed that intelligence was malleable if they pushed themselves
exhibited a significant improvement in their math grades, compared to those who were not told this, as shown in Figure 1 (Blackwell et al., 2007). Exemplifying that yes, we do have some control over feelings of inferiority. But consent to our emotions is not a yes-or-no decision; instead, it is a constant process of mind training.
Interaction Between Theory of Intelligence and Time on Math Achievement

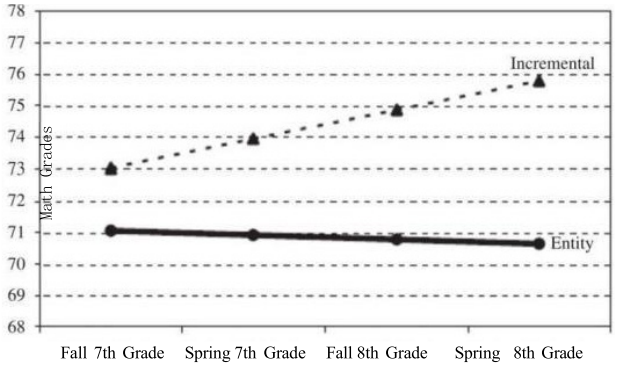

Figure 1

Note.Growth curves of predicted mathematics grades over 2 years of junior high school for students with incremental(+1 SD above the mean)and entity(-1 SD below the mean)
theories of intelligence.
There is a fundamental relationship between the formation of inferior emotions and a fixed mindset,as inferior mindsets are rooted in the belief that we are less capable in some ways than others. Aspects including wealth,academic performance,likability,and health status are all subject to comparison with others. A person with a growth mindset is more likely to feel motivated to improve instead of accepting inferiority,while a person with a fixed mindset may neglect their potential to grow out of feeling inferior. Eleanor Roosevelt's belief—that we choose whether to feel inferior—does not account for the invisible weights of our childhood experiences.In believing this claim,we may ignore our true feelings and deny the need to acknowledge the causes of inferiority.This limitation underscores the importance of viewing beyond the philosophical maxims to evidence-based solutions.Expanding on Dweck's perspective,researchers have searched for ways to combat adverse childhood experiences. The Adlerian Therapy, a counselling technique developed by Alfred Adler,is a constructivist approach that emphasises prevention rather than remediation(Cedeno &Torrico, 2024). Through revisiting and reinterpreting childhood memories, patients can internalize new understandings and feelings about these memories, allowing them to exhibit healthier perceptions in their daily lives (Ibrahim-Dwairy & Shifron, 2025). The goal is to counteract feelings of inferiority by fostering a sense of social connection and reorienting life goals. It focuses on individuals' efforts to compensate for their perceived inferiority. The therapist evaluates the patient's baseline characteristics, such as family history, birth order, which are the root causes of the patient's feelings of inferiority, and attitudes toward life, before guiding the patient to focus on future lifestyle goals. Another therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), arguably the gold standard of the psychotherapy world, is a commonly used process that restructures cognition by challenging traumatising memories through identifying thought patterns and altering self- explanation (David et al., 2018). For example, a psychologist may guide their patient to revise their traumatic experience and encourage them to believe that what happened to them was not their fault. Based on a systematic review of 13 studies, scanned images ofpost-CBT brain regions that are closely connected with feelings of inferiority, including the PFC and amygdala, showed decreased activation, suggesting a normalisation of cerebral function. Moreover, brain networks, including the Default Mode Network (DMN) and Executive Control Network (ECN), also appeared to have lowered activation, indicating less self-critical judgments and low self-worth symptoms, coupled with more positive and introspective thoughts (Yuan et al., 2022). Ultimately, nothing eclipses the importance of a healthy childhood. Good parenting styles, especially the fostering of a close father-child relationship, can be fundamental to shaping a healthy mindset. Recent studies in the field include conceptualised models of father figures, showing that high-quality father-parenting includes providing security and showing sensitivity. Specifically, those who engage in not only activities with their child, but also emotional guidance, discipline and support exhibited higher quality parenting than those who provided simply their company (Cabrera, 2019). Author and clinical psychologist, Becky Kennedy, said that repair is the most important strategy in parenting. She shares her story of repairing her relationship with her son after yelling at him over a small mistake: Kennedy paused to take responsibility for her overreaction, acknowledged the impact it had on her son and reconstructed this experience by directly confessing her overreaction, relieving her son's self-blame. Eleanor Roosevelt's maxim reflects more of a

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stoic individualism-based political perspective. Psychology tells us otherwise: we should not hold on to the illusion of total control over emotions, but instead the agency to rewire our brains through therapies and the steps we can take to reshape our mindset, as well as repairing adverse childhood experiences to end generational cycles of guilt. The healing begins when we replace the question of 'Why am I broken?' with 'How can I grow? ' With these actionable remedies, childhood experiences need not define us, but instead become the steps we can take to reclaim the agency of our experiences.

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