

Book Review

*Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* by Rachel Simmons. Harcourt Trade Publishing 2003.

Reviewed by Mark Daims

*Odd Girl Out* evolved out of the author's personal search into what was behind her own experience of being bullied as a child. She first turned to the literature to answer her questions about aggression in girls but found very little published research. Rachel Simmons then sets out to find what she can by interviewing girls from 10 middle and high schools from different areas and different economic circumstances. In her interviews she borrows a technique, a "listening guide," from the psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan wherein interviews do not follow a protocol but rather flex and adapt to the girls. The author felt that the girls would not respond to a format that had any agenda.

The resultant interviews the author relays to us are not subject to statistical analysis but are certainly affecting. Beginning with interviews from white, middle-class schools, the girls describe psychological campaigns waged against them sometimes by a clique and sometimes with the entire school involved. As described by one junior, "You use people to advance up the hierarchy," or as the author describes the situation, "... here is the truth about girls and popularity. It is a cutthroat contest into which girls pour boundless energy and anxiety." In this world, victims live day to day at school wherein other girls talk about them and laugh amongst themselves about them in front of them, where they knock them down as they are passed in the hall, and where they suffer from a host of subterfuges as the bullies tell the teacher the victim cheats or place orders at weight-loss establishments that later call the victim's home. Understandably the victims go home and cry every day. The ring-leader or mastermind of their torment is usually a close friend, even a best friend, who may provide just enough occasional recognition of the victim to keep her hopeful and coming back for more abuse. Teachers are unaware, unsure, or deceived. The bullies in these stories are "A" students who might even be the teacher's pet. The looks and aggression are covert, covered in sugar and spice. Some teachers cannot believe their favorite girls would act in such a manner. Other teachers may be pretty sure something's going

on but as the actions are subtle and not overt, as perhaps the actions of boys are, it's hard to be sure and act. This is something that adds more pain to the victimized girls. Their every sense tells them they're being isolated yet when they question their supposed friend they hear back that nothing's wrong or that they were just kidding when they said a certain hurtful thing. The victim has their entire culture emotionally punishing them while having those same people saying that nothing's wrong. The victim begins to doubt their own sensitivities; they begin to feel crazy. They blame themselves. They lose self-esteem.

If the girls had the ability to work out conflicts, the author asserts, such situations could be avoided. The girls she interviews avoid all conflict. Relationship is everything. A bad relationship is better than no relationship and any conflict, any problem one girl has with another, is merely a threat to the relationship. There's too much risk in expressing issues and they continually bury those issues until they all come out at once in a swell of hostility. Feuding girls often use other girls as go-betweens or as the author calls them, "middle-girls," to help settle issues. Some of these middle-girls, as they may have their own ambitions to be in a popular clique, may distort the information passed to them as they relay it to the other girl(s). Here are some 7th graders talking with the author:

"Why do girls get involved in a person's fight?" I [the author] asked

"She gets to watch it," Beth said

"They'll be able to tell other people what happened. 'Oh I know what happened!'" Andrea sneered

"You might want to be somebody's best friend so you make the fight worse than it is," Angela added

The girls can never relax as relationships need to be maintained among shifting alliances and strategies. These alliances are a cornerstone in alternative aggression. Cultural norms prescribe a "good girl" model for girls while demanding they be aggressive career-oriented citizens as well. Alliances assist girls in overcoming societal expectations and sanctify actions that were they to be performed by an individual girl would seem just mean. The author also finds that excluding a girl carries some of the same pleasure as does closeness in relationships. "Indeed, some girls describe a kind of exhilaration derived from excluding one of their own, which bears a disturbing similarity to the joy of close relationship." Victims, according to some research, are more likely to later become bullies. All girls must beware of appearing to be "all that." The appearance of conceit carries swift retribution and popular girls must be cautious so that admiration does not turn to jealousy among her followers. Still their power is enormous. One girl held a weekly ritual wherein she gave each of the girls in her clique a grade between one and one hundred.

The situation is different in poorer, predominantly African-American schools. Issues are freely and directly expressed and the violence more physical. An appearance of weakness only invites further wrongs and many parents threaten that they'll hit their girls if their girls do not fight back. These girls, unlike the white girls, avoid relationships where there's behind-the-back intrigue involved. Their mothers, say these girls, raised them to do so. The physical fights among these girls do involve some alliance building as in the alliances among white girls in their alternative aggression. There's some strength in numbers. When an African-American girl gets involved in a fight it's considered deviant behavior. When a boy of either race gets in a fight, he may be punished, but it is not felt to be deviant behavior.

Although the particulars of aggression may vary between sets of schools there's indications that all girls suffer from a sense of powerlessness. The author wants this and other things to change. Girls are not all good; they're human and can feel anger. The larger society needs to recognize this and stopped acting as if it doesn't happen. Alternative aggression is not a stage or something that can be ignored. In her interviews with grown women who were the victims of alternative aggression, the author found women who felt that they were permanently affected with many being unable to trust others as they could before, especially other women. "Elizabeth felt safer around guys because, as she put it-- echoing countless women I spoke with--'...there was no cattiness, there was no competitiveness.'" Parents and teachers, usually left out of the equation, must recognize and address the problem. Most girls have to face their victimization alone. Indeed, many parents made things worse by becoming yet another critical voice among many. *Odd Girl Out*, however, ends with a chapter entitled *The Road Ahead*, wherein the author outlines many strategies, for both parent and schools, to change things. "We must encourage girls to embrace respectful acts of assertion and provide them with representations of female aggression that are neither sensationalized nor the stuff of fantasy. The responsibility begins at the moment of socialization, and it belongs to all of us--parents, teachers, and girls.

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