

Review of *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* by Rachel Simmons

Katherine J. Follett

More than any other time in development, the secret life belongs to adolescents. Their cognitive development opens new vistas of egocentrism, the imaginary audience, and the personal fable. Conclusions from decades of research confirm that adolescents believe that they are the object of everyone's attention, and no one has ever experienced what they feel. Their emotional life is new, raw, and passionate. Their most important socializing agents are their peers. For girls in America, there is another important aspect to social life. Being nice, not showing anger or aggression, being well-liked and accepted is crucial. Think of the school-yard bully and we tend to think of the tough, mean boy. Rachel Simmons, in her book *Odd Girl Out*, shows us in great detail the hidden culture of girls' aggression --- the other face of the bully.

Interestingly, many women remember being the victim of rumors, being left out, being purposely and perhaps viciously singled out for cruel treatment. However, it happened when we were deep in adolescent egocentrism. We felt alienated in our pain and did not share it. For many of us women, these painful experiences continue to influence our adult interactions, our feelings of self-efficacy, and our feelings of self-worth. As adults, we choose not to bring up the once horrendous experiences of adolescent bullying so that we may trivialize them and put them behind us. How can a 40-year-old reasonably mourn not being invited to the big party in the ninth grade or being victimized by eye-rolling, deeply sighing peers? Thus, the pain we kept secret from our parents remains a secret pain, perhaps one we try to dismiss, blinding us to the pain our daughters experience as well.

Rachel Simmons has thoroughly researched the bullying of girls across regional, social, economic, cohort, and racial lines. She was overwhelmed by what she discovered in the hidden culture of girls' aggression. Simmons devotes the major portion of her book to reporting on bullying in all forms. She shares extensive interviews, lets us hear the girls' own voices, both the bullied and the bullies. Her book is a practical and informative tool for parents, educators, and administrators. Because girls' aggression is most often covert and because girls understand how

to attack without leaving a mark or a trace, we need to be sensitive to moods and acting out as possible evidence that girls are being bullied.

The most valuable aspect of this book is Simmons' advice on how to deal with bullying. She offers "strategies to combat alternative aggressions, including new directions for policy making and teaching" (p. 231). Simmons details situations, explains inappropriate methods of dealing with the problem, and explains the flaws in these approaches. She then offers better methods of dealing with problems and, in some cases, possible strategies parents can adopt in trying to ameliorate difficulties their daughters may face.

Simmons also has proposals for schools. Some have already instituted assertiveness training programs for girls in hopes of reversing "the toxic elements in girls' socialization" (p. 248). One proposal includes changing the rules so that schools' proscriptions against bullying have more all-inclusive language, revising policies and handbooks to reflect current research on alternative aggressions, and changing state laws to include "nonverbal and relational aggression that is so prevalent in girls aggression" (p. 249). A second proposal deals with education. Simmons points to the Ophelia Project, named for the very important book written by Mary Pipher. Simmons is a national trainer for this project. The Ophelia Project has been set up to develop anti-bullying curricula that is based on research in the domain of relational aggression. The program uses trained mentors and works directly with the students, their teachers, and the schools' administrators.

Simmons wants even more. She wants to inspire individuals --- parents and teens --- to begin a dialogue on the local level. She has specific suggestions on how girls can begin to talk to each other, be honest about the times they have been angry, competitive, and even mean or jealous. Just as with adults, girls need community, a community where empathy and compassion are taught through role-playing and where girls are encouraged to be honest about who they really are and what their true feelings are.

In summary, the last two chapters of this book are a must for anyone who deals with or is interested in adolescent girls. The case history format of the major portion of the book is useful for those who are truly naïve about girls' aggression. For the working professional, who already has a solid background in this domain, I would recommend skimming the first seven chapters and paying close attention to the last two.

Contact information:

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The opinions stated in this review are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the individuals and organizations who support *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*.

Reviewed by: Katherine Follett, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology, Elon University, Elon, North Carolina.

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