

Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls

Rachel Simmons, 2002

Project Prevent and Address Bullying (PPAB)

for students with disabilities

BOOK
REVIEW

Northern Illinois University | School Psychology Program

In *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, author and teacher Rachel Simmons describes the social dynamics of young women and exposes the “hidden normalcy” of aggression in adolescent girls’ relationships.

COST: Approximately \$10

PUBLISHER: Mariner Books
(2002, updated in 2010)

Description of content:

Simmons covers a range of topics revolving around girls’ experiences of relational bullying, or what Simmons terms “alternative aggressions.” Girls’ anecdotes populate each chapter, illustrating Simmons’ main points through the lens of young girls who have been victimized, have engaged in bullying behaviors or a combination of both. Chapters describe bullying among friends and volatile friendship patterns, bystander behavior and the relevance of peer acceptance and popularity. Additionally, two chapters provided information on girls’ online activity, including the differences observed in cyberbullying as compared to traditional bullying (e.g., anonymity, reduced empathy, public nature). Practical advice for online safety and digital citizenship was also provided to parents. Simmons offers recommendations and action steps for parents and educators (e.g., teachers, school counselors, administrators), including scripted conversations and recommendations for *what to say* and also *what not to say* when talking with girls, other parents and educators about bullying scenarios.

Strengths:

Simmons reiterates her claims of girls’ alternative aggression with real-life examples via short vignettes from girls and parents. These brief glimpses into girls’ experiences expose the pain and devastation of victims and the intricacy involved in inter-relational aggression, while solidifying Simmons’ position that Western culture holds girls and boys to different social standards around interpersonal behaviors. The direct and explicit tone that Simmons uses to argue that it is *not* in girls’ best interests to be socialized that “girls should be nice” or “girls should be nurturing.” A strength of this book is its potential to inspire young women to speak out openly and honestly about their beliefs without fear of negative social consequences, and gain confidence to address social conflict directly rather than indirectly through aggression.

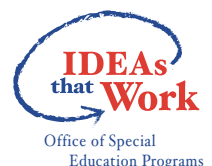
Simmons also recommends several strategies for combatting relational bullying in adolescent girls that have been supported empirically (e.g., Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). For example, the need for consistent schoolwide policies for addressing bullying, as well as adult concern and empathy for victims was highlighted in *Odd Girl Out*. Parents and educators were advised to take these situations seriously and aid girls in the resolution of peer conflict and enhance social skills to increase social competence through intervention. Simmons particularly emphasized the need for teachers to stay vigilant in observing students’ interpersonal behaviors for signs of bullying, as well as establishing a positive classroom climate where all students feel safe and where bullying is considered unacceptable.



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Limitations:

At times, Simmons employed language that some may perceive as stereotyping girls. Although she outwardly stated that boys also engage in relational aggression, the book used a tone that this behavior is atypical for boys and commonplace for girls. For those less familiar with empirical research on this topic, her statements could be misconstrued and relational aggression in boys or gender-nonconforming individuals could be neglected. Some may also perceive that Simmons painted a picture of girls as being superficial (e.g., “bullies” wore “makeup and miniskirts,” and “their favorite hobby was having a boyfriend”; page 26) and her language may be considered hyperbolic (e.g., “Since the dawn of time, women and girls have been portrayed as jealous and underhanded”; page 16). The wealth of rich scientific findings on relational aggression may have been understated. In fact, Simmons claimed relational aggression is “rarely the object of research or critical thought” (p. 16). However, Simmons also highlighted how research on bullying may be less accessible to those not following academic journals.

Audience:

Educators and parents may find this book an interesting read, and it is possible that some may shift their perspectives toward the recognition that bullying is *not* a normal “part of growing up” and complete admonishment of the behavior (i.e., if they had previously contended bullying was normative). However, there are only broad recommendations for teachers to address bullying, and therefore, it was not apparent how educators’ daily practices may change as a result of reading this text. This book may be appropriate for parents seeking to learn more about relational aggression. Parents may feel better prepared to talk to their children about bullying, and they may gain some perspective about how our culture has shaped youth aggression and gender norms. Adolescent girls may also find this book helpful, as they may find solace in knowing they are not alone if they have been victimized or have victimized another. Girls may be inspired to defend others when they observe relational aggression and engage in prosocial acts toward peers.

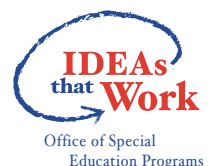
This book may be less suitable for individuals knowledgeable of the empirical literature on bullying. *Odd Girl Out* emphasizes a nonscientific approach to describing bullying, grounded primarily in anecdotal evidence of girls’ experiences elicited through Simmons’ semistructured and unstructured interview techniques over a three-year period. *Odd Girl Out* also may not be suitable for boys or gender-nonconforming individuals, as they may feel neglected by this book’s focus on relational aggression among girls and possibly offended by what may be considered stereotypical language.



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