An explosion of research in psychology over the last decade has centered around the topic of relational, or "alternative" aggression. While much work has been done on the effects and causes of bullying and much insight has been gained (e.g., Smith, Bowers, Binney, & Cowie, 1999), this research has focused mostly on overt, physical bullying. Not surprisingly, it has found boys to be main participants. In her book Odd Girl Out, Rachel Simmons describes the culture of indirect aggression among girls that differs from the physical aggression prevalent among boys as "acts that harm others through damage to relationships or feeling of acquaintanceship, friendship, or group inclusion" (21). That girls were believed not to be associated with bullying behaviors has perpetuated a stereotype and promoted a silence surrounding relational aggression, the covert bullying of betrayal, social out-casting, and exclusion.

Rachel Simmons explores the flexibility of bully/victims roles in adolescent girls, demonstrating the common scenario that girls will experience the role of both. In fact, research has shown that girls who are victimized are significantly more likely to become bullies themselves (Crick, et al., cited in Simmons). This trend is linked to popularity, as girls reported being likely to hurt anyone if it means becoming popular. This might come from the tendency of girls to value relationships and understand themselves in context of relationships. The link between popularity and the relationship oriented nature of girls, to Simmons, is inseparable: "at its core, popularity is a mean and merciless competition for relationships" (156). For many, alienation is the biggest fear, and while it may seem that girls are obsessed with being popular, this desire might actually be secondary to an intense fear of isolation.

From a victim's perspective, the effects are multilayered, as she not only loses companionship, but also self-esteem she also gains a dangerous understanding of relationships as a tool. When popularity and the need for social success are thrown in the mix, girls not only get hurt, they also get a skewed notion of friendship, and learn to distrust as a rule of thumb.

The predictors and forms of resistance are also examined. Simmons notes the finding that marginalized girls ( racially and socioeconomically) are more likely to have more genuine friendships and higher self esteem. They are more likely to speak their minds and be resistant. This truthfulness goes hand in hand with comfort with one's own negative emotions. Simmons frames such truth telling as a way of resisting silence, though warns us not to conflate the circumstances that give rise to such behavior with a romanticized stereotype of the truthful, assertive African American woman. Many women in oppressed subcultures talked about valuing even overt aggression. Others described it as a norm of
the environment they grew up in, such as a project, where physical and verbal aggression are central to survival.

Many women and girls talked about the influences of their mothers and sisters, and the message to stand up for and protect oneself that they received from these older women. While this may sound like bad parenting, Simmons explains how it may actually be more developmentally healthy for girls, as parents who do not encourage girls to express their negative emotions or stand up for themselves in friendships raise daughters who do not learn what an authentic relationship is and are constantly putting friendships (no matter how unstable or mean) ahead of themselves. In Simmons' interviews, this trend was seen in the language girls used in talking about friendships. The differences in self-esteem seen in African American girls especially may be due to this difference in message they receive about valuing their own feelings and saying what they feel. When a girl is encouraged to be silent, she is also taught to distrust and devalue her own feelings. It may also be, Simmons notes, that in cases of real oppression, it is unsafe to put relationships ahead of the self. Although no firm conclusions are drawn, it is important to acknowledge differences across subcultures of girls so that the silent middle class girl model is not universally applied.

In the final chapters of her book, Simmons explores solutions to the problem of relational aggression. The overall message is that it is vital to value adolescents' experience, and not to frame their emotions or pain as "just a part of growing up" or undermine the severity of relational aggression. Simmons notes the immobility of teachers and parents to approach this topic and attributes this to the silence surrounding it. She calls for a new vocabulary to derail the stereotype that girls are not aggressive, or are "just catty." Likewise, support resources and disciplinary structures within the school are needed. In the classroom and at home, teachers and parents should encouraged girls to feel and express a wide range of emotions, including negative emotions. One of the gravest implications of the tangle of relational aggression and popularity is the loss of girls' authentic sense of selves and the skewed view of relationships as manipulative and communication as lies. This sets up a pattern for girls to expect these things, to see themselves as "disposable," and loved conditionally, characteristics associated with future relationship violence and other internalizing disorders.

Rachel Simmons has used the research of others, along with her own observations, and information from multiple outside disciplines in her rich, description and warning about relational aggression. Her account is both intuitive and scholarly, humanistic and scientific, and provides, in my opinion, a much needed and enriched perspective to the field, as she continually pulls from other fields such as feminism, sociology, economics and even literature and film, and connects her findings to other adolescent girl culture phenomenon. She does not purport to provide hard data or quantifiable answers, but rather, seeks to break the silence surrounding relational aggression and highlight its dire ramifications. Thus an enriched perspective, one that would not be found in journals, is provided. While the scholarly reader might find the numerous anecdotes a bit cluttering at times, this book is a valuable edition to the cannon of psychology, and perhaps more importantly, to adolescent girls and their parents.
References

