

[Rachel Legg was a senior psychology major at Kalamazoo College when she reviewed this book in May 2002.]

A Review of *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*  
Rachel Legg

Recent occurrences of bullying have been given increasing amounts of attention due to the surprising and sometimes violent results. The most notable of these have been school shootings, in which victims of bullying have taken vengeance on their tormentors using their own means. These tragedies have impelled researchers in the fields of psychology and education to conduct studies on both the victims and the perpetrators of bullying. However, little research has been directed toward what has been named "relational aggression," a type of covert bullying that is found predominantly among girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). While researching *Odd Girl Out*, Rachel Simmons interviewed girls at junior high and high schools across the country and recorded their stories and insights on their experiences with relational aggression. The book discusses patterns in the origins of relational aggression, the societal pressures that girls feel drives them to use this form of bullying, and the characteristics of both victims and perpetrators.

Relational aggression is difficult to study partially because it is covert in nature and because relationally aggressive acts are difficult to distinguish from other types of social interactions. Bjoerkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukianen (1992) define relational aggression as acts that damage or threaten to damage an individual's self-esteem and social contacts. Unlike overt bullying, in which acts such as kicking and hitting are visually observable, acts of relational aggression may be as subtle as a look followed by giggling, or ignoring the intended victim.

While discussing relational aggression, Simmons also investigates why girls tend to use covert techniques, such as those described above, instead of physical aggression. Research in the field of social psychology suggests that girls are socialized to be nurturing caretakers, while boys are socialized to be the more aggressive bread-winners of the family (Burn, 1996). Simmons quotes Ann Campbell, a sociologist who states, "The remarkable thing about the socialization of aggression of girls is its absence...they simply learn not to express [aggression]" (2002, p. 263). Simmons argues that it is this lack of guidance in learning to deal with aggression and conflict that lead to complex and sophisticated forms of covert relational aggression. She contends that relational aggression is common amongst girls because relationships play an important role in girls' lives. Additionally, Gilligan (1982) found that girls also tend to fear social isolation. Simmons believes that it is this need and dependency upon relationships that has motivated girls to use methods that threaten a victim's social status. She states that "the lifeblood of relational aggression is relationship" (Simmons, 2002, p. 43). Most girls understand the importance of social contacts, and when they feel the need to increase their own status within a group, they use that knowledge to their advantage and attempt to damage the relationships of their chosen victim.

Odd Girl Out also includes interviews conducted by Simmons with women who had been the victims of relational aggression during their adolescent years. She found that the effects of relational aggression can sometimes be long-lasting and detrimental to the victim's social development. Some victims felt a sense of self-blame, which could be explained by a poor understanding of what constitutes emotional abuse and violations of relationship boundaries. Subsequently, girls may feel that they are to blame for their peer's abuse (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). One interviewee told Simmons that she tends to be friends with only men, saying, "I think in a way it's because I don't trust women...I don't trust them with my fears." (Simmons, 2002, p. 55).

It is important to note that Odd Girl Out is not based on a scientific study or experiment. In that respect, it is not as reliable as a controlled study in a lab setting. While the stories told in the book are surprising and sometimes disturbing, the reader should keep in mind that it does not report, and does not claim to report actual statistics on relational aggression. The topic of relational aggression is relatively new in the field of psychology, and it is still difficult to measure and record acts of relational aggression without intruding on the privacy of girls' lives.

However, Rachel Simmons' Odd Girl Out provides both teachers and parents with a good introduction to the phenomenon of relational aggression. Parents of girls may receive insight into their daughter's social lives, and the book could also be used as a way to begin discussion between parents and daughters about the topic of relational aggression and how it has affected their lives. Rachel Simmons has been able to give girls the chance to reveal what is occurring in their lives and to discuss how societal pressures and relational aggression has affected them. In this manner, it serves as an important eye-opener for anyone involved in the lives of pre-teenage and teenage girls.

## References

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