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Indirect Aggression in Girls

In the introduction and first chapter of the book *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, the author, Rachel Simmons, begins to analyze her research on the kind of relationship girls have with each other. Simmons graduated with a degree in Women's Studies and Political Science from Vassar College and continues to study female aggression. Her study suggests that girls show aggression much differently than boys. Throughout Simmons' research, she talked with many school-aged girls about their experiences with other girls, and how their relationships are different with girls than boys. She explains that girls display indirect aggression, which is very different from the stereotypical physical aggression seen in boys. Indirect aggression is when someone is targeted, but the perpetrator does not directly confront the targeted person. Simmons explained that a few reasons for these differences in relationships are cultural norms, lack of self-esteem, and need for intimacy.

As I was reading, I found myself relating to many of the situations the girls went through or I saw those situations play out first hand. I enjoyed how Simmons actually got to know and formed relationships with the girls she interviewed, so she was able to see them as whole people instead of just research subjects. Because of that, I felt like I understood each of the stories well enough to be any one of those girls, which made Simmons' arguments about girl on girl aggression very convincing.

Even though readers of this book may have different backgrounds, I think it is still a valuable resource for understanding the psyche of females, specifically young girls. Throughout Stephen King's *Carrie*, one of the most obvious themes is the harshness of girls towards each other. Simmons highlights various factors that could contribute to the indirect aggression girls have, and the effects it has on the victims. Throughout this section of her book, I understood better why the treatment Carrie faced was terrible and how detrimental it was on her mental state. It was easy for me to understand Simmons' explanations, because she always referenced a conversation or sometimes a scene from a popular book to help the explanation. Because it was easy to understand and further explained the minds and motivations of young girls, I would give this section of the book a 4.5 out of 5 as a resource for readers of *Carrie* who are interested in diving deeper into the minds of young girls.

The first idea Simmons highlighted was that girls tend towards indirectly aggressive behaviors because of cultural norms. Girls are being held to a double standard, in which independent, strong females are powerful, yet those females are punished, because they don't fit society's expectations. As infuriating as this is, girls in school face this punishment from school staff. Simmons references a University of Michigan study that found that girls were 3 times more likely than boys to be told to be quiet, speak softly, or use a nicer voice. She also mentioned that when boys were acting in similar ways, their actions were shrugged off by adults (Simmons 18). This routine enforcement that girls must behave properly could lead to girls having to find covert ways to express their aggression, like passing notes, purposely excluding, and starting rumors. When Simmons asked a group of girls if they always felt nice, many of them said "No!" This

goes to show that all humans have natural aggressive impulses; however, girls are not expected to express them.

This fact explains why Carrie was bullied relentlessly by other girls, but nothing was done about it. It was likely the case that adults would never expect the girls to do something mean, because society believes girls are nice all the time. It is also very difficult to get evidence that indirect aggression occurs, because there is no physical proof. Because the girls never got caught, they were able to keep tormenting Carrie for years, which only worsened the effect of the bullying on Carrie.

Another idea Simmons brings up is that it is hard for girls to admit they are being bullied, because of low self-esteem, so bullying continues to happen. Even when girls know they are being treated wrongly, it is hard for them to stand up for themselves, because the victim believes there is something wrong with them that makes them a target. Simmons explained that the targets of bullying are usually people who have social skills issues. This leads to the target being blamed for the bullying, because they are “failing to read the feelings and attitudes of others correctly” (Simmons 35). When Simmons talked to a girl who was a victim of bullying, the girl said “there would be no end to her torture” (Simmons 27). In that girl’s mind, there was no reason to tell someone about the bullying, because she believed that was the kind of treatment she deserved in life.

This helps to explain why the bullying towards Carrie never ended. Everyone thought that Carrie “set herself up” to be victimized, because she had an unusual upbringing, was overweight, had severe acne, and was socially awkward. Carrie could never get away from the bullying, because everyone, from young children to adults, saw her as a target. The underlying anger Carrie had throughout her life kept building, until she didn’t want to be seen as a victim anymore. That could explain why Carrie exploded at prom.

One last reason Simmons explains why aggression is different in girls is that intimacy and relationships are extremely important to females. Girls fear being isolated, because they spend their childhood practicing caring for and forming close relationships with each other. In their childhood, girls learn that aggression equals a bad relationship, so females don’t know how to handle conflict when they are adults. That can lead to a woman fearing a simple argument, because they don’t want it to lead to a breakup (Simmons 30-31). Therefore, females may avoid conflict all together. Additionally, as Simmons talked with the girls, many said that being isolated was the worst part of being bullied. Again, this fear of isolation could be the reason females will remain in abusive relationships, even when she knows it is not healthy.

This need for relationships helps explain the actions of Sue Snell in *Carrie*. Sue is known as being the “good girl”, so it did not make much sense as to why she was taunting Carrie with the other girls in the locker room. However, I think Sue feared being isolated like Carrie, and Sue felt the only option was to join in the bullying. This can also explain why Carrie agreed to go to prom with Tommy, even though she had a bad feeling about it. Carrie craved to feel included in something, and she risked everything to go with him.

All in all, I think the beginning section of the book *Odd Girl Out* is a great source for understanding the motivations and the minds of young girls, as well as why their aggression is different from boys’. These sections were easily understandable and convincing because of the interviews Simmons did with the young girls, so all readers of *Carrie* should be able to gain some insight from it. *Odd Girl Out* brought up ideas that helped to explain the relationship between the character Carrie and her bulliers, which can be applied to real relationships today.

Works Cited

Simmons, Rachel. "Introduction and Chapter One." *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Piatkus, 2012, pp. 1-37.