

**ANDREA S. KRAMER
ALTON B. HARRIS**

IT'S NOT YOU,

It's the

WORKPLACE

**WOMEN'S CONFLICT
AT WORK AND THE
BIAS THAT BUILT IT**

Praise for
It's Not You, It's the Workplace

“Andie and Al touch on a topic that is a raw nerve to so many. With specific focus on the biases women encounter with each other in the workplace, Andie and Al have dissected the issue and its effects, providing an actionable roadmap for change. This book is a must for any executive looking to make real change and achieve gender equity in their organization.”
—**Julie M. Howard, CEO Navigant**

“After having way too many women tell me that their most difficult workplace negotiations are with other women, I’m now able to offer them new guidance—*It's Not You, It's The Workplace*. This well-researched book debunks the dangerous yet commonly held myth that day-to-day negotiations at work between women are destined to be played as a zero-sum game. Instead, Kramer and Harris offer women practical tips about how to negotiate good business decisions and manage inevitable workplace conflicts by adopting a mutual gains mindset. The result—a ‘win-win’ for women and for their organizations.”

—**Carol Frohlinger, President of Negotiating Women, Inc.
and co-author of *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to
Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success***

“Andie and Al call bullsh*t on the negative narrative we’ve been fed about women’s same-gendered conflict in the workplace. After clearing the deck by systematically demonstrating that the evolutionary, socialization and internalized misogynistic ‘reasons’ for this damaging narrative are false, Al and Andie get to work to show us all how we can make it better. A must read for every leader, every individual contributor, every woman, and every man in the workplace.”

—**Lee Caraher, CEO Double Forte and author of
*The Boomerang Principle and Millennials & Management***

“It is hard enough for women to advance in their careers without other women coming into conflict with them. Finally we have a clear explanation of why these conflicts occur and sensible, practical advice for overcoming them. This is an important and truly original book. It ought to be read by every woman pursuing a career, thinking about restarting a career, or a student getting ready to start her career—and, of course, by the leaders of their organizations. Andie and Al have written another terrific and groundbreaking book.”

—**Laurel G. Bellows, Managing Principal, The Bellows Law Group,
P.C. and past president, American Bar Association**

“In their usual candid and pragmatic way, Andie and Al build awareness for the causes of woman-to-woman conflict, re-frame the perspective of both men and women, and most importantly, offer specific action plans to create a critical mass of women senior leaders to dismantle the male stereotypes of our workplaces. The time for *It's Not You, It's the Workplace* is right now!”

—**Dr. Pat Buhler, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, Professor at
Goldey-Beacom College**

“Having managed businesses in the US and Europe I have had ample opportunity to observe the workplace relations between women on two continents. Kramer and Harris’s book sheds fascinating new light on a phenomenon that has long puzzled me. I had never considered the impact of male dominated workplaces on women’s relations with other women. I encourage any person interested in or involved with the management of ambitious women to read this first-rate book.”

—**Marshall I. Wais, Jr., Chairman, Board of
Governors, American Hospital of Paris**

“Andie and Al’s emphasis on the value and power of workplace sisterhoods is spot on. Women’s support for and advocacy of other women is contagious. As the co-founder of a successful network for women in intellectual property, I’ve seen sisterhood in action. This book is filled with insightful advice as to how to build and maintain workplace sisterhoods.”

—**Molly Keelan, Co-founder, Chicago Women
in Intellectual Property “ChiWIP”**

It's Not You, It's the Workplace is full of profound insights into the reasons women around the world so often have difficulties working with other women. As a Chinese woman, Andie and Al's discussion of Asian women being stereotyped as the 'model minority' was powerful. As a woman who spends half of her time out of the United States, I believe this book will be of great value to working women everywhere."

—**Yang Yang, Associate Professor, China University
of Political Science and Law**

"This very thought-provoking and well-researched book is a must-read for any executive who truly strives to create a culture of meritocracy."

—**Stephen P. Hills, Former President,
*The Washington Post***

"As one of the few female drivers racing in NASCAR, I believe it is important for women to support one another. Kramer and Harris persuasively demonstrate how women, and groups at large, can be even more effective when women work together to combat negative stereotypes and assumptions about women. This is an important book for everyone who wants to see equal representation of men and women in any field."

—**Julia Landauer, NASCAR Racer, Entrepreneur, Speaker**

"Andie and Al's insistence on the value of women's mutual support, advocacy, and sisterhood rang true to me. Too often we are told that women are naturally antagonistic to other women. Nonsense. This book is filled with great insights and practical tips for assuring women's workplace relationships with other women are positive and satisfying. This is a terrific book!"

—**Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky**

"The belief that women inherently do not work well together is one of our most unhelpful workplace narratives. Andie and Al tackle it head-on and set the record straight with pragmatism and optimism. This book is perfect not only for women looking to achieve successful and fulfilling careers, but also for the men and organizations that benefit equally when the most talented leaders rise to the top."

—**Heather Cabot, Co-Author, *Geek Girl Rising:
Inside the Sisterhood Shaking Up Tech***

“As CEO of a business run almost entirely by women, creating products for women, this book provides a fascinating insight into the systemic challenges we face as a result of decades of ‘gendered workplaces’. Andie and Al go beyond explaining how this impacts women’s relationships with each other and offers hugely valuable advice for women looking to smash stereotypes and change the way the world works.”

—**Maria Molland, CEO Thinx**

It's Not You, It's the Workplace

Women's Conflict at Work and the
Bias that Built It

ANDREA S. KRAMER
ALTON B. HARRIS



N I C H O L A S B R E A L E Y
P U B L I S H I N G

B O S T O N • L O N D O N

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*For Cynthia, again, and the brilliant, fulfilling,
and productive life she has ahead of her.*

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INTRODUCTION

We write, speak, and conduct workshops across the country about the adverse effects that implicit gender bias has on women's career advancement and satisfaction. Increasingly, over the past several years as we have been talking about these issues, women have come up to us and said things like, "You're absolutely right that gender stereotypes and biases are major obstacles to women's career advancement, but you don't mention an equally serious problem for women's career success—other women. You need to talk about why women are so mean to—'hard on,' 'bitchy to,' 'hostile toward,' or 'unsupportive of'—the women they work with and what can be done about it." Anne, a middle-aged bank executive whom we coach, made a typical comment recently: "I am sick and tired of women backstabbing and spreading hurtful rumors. My male managers have all been great. But most of the women I've worked for have been selfish bitches, interested only in themselves. They did nothing to help me, and some even tried to hold me back. I never trusted any of them. The women I work with now only care about getting ahead. They have no interest in supporting me or any other woman. I'd rather work for a man than a woman any day."

We have long been aware of the extensive literature about "mean girls," "queen bees," and women's competitiveness with other women (see chapter 1), but we had always assumed that these characterizations were gross exaggerations based on little more than ad hoc anecdotes. With so many women now telling us about their personal difficulties in working with other women, we decided we needed to look more closely at their experiences and understand why they were not working harmoniously with other women. So we conducted multiple surveys, undertook

extensive social science research, and interviewed hundreds of women in a variety of industries and professions across the United States. The result of our investigation is this book.

What we found confirmed our initial suspicions. First, there is no empirical evidence—none, nada, nil, zero, zilch—that women have more frequent conflicts in working with other women than men have in working with other men or than women and men have in working together. Second, there is also no empirical evidence that women are more mean-spirited, antagonistic, or untrustworthy in their dealings with other women than men are in their dealings with other men. Third, there is considerable, reliable empirical evidence that women actually spend more time supporting, counseling, and advocating for women than men do. In other words, more women than men are paying it forward to ensure the future advancement of the women (and men) who work for them (see chapter 2).

If these findings are correct—and we are confident they are—there is a major disconnect between the ways women often perceive their working relationships with other women and the reality of women’s efforts to help and advocate for other women. This book is our attempt to explain the reasons for this disconnect; why, despite the clear evidence that women do support other women, so many women prefer to work for men than women; think that the women they work for are selfish, hostile, and unsupportive; and why so many women are dissatisfied with or unhappy about their workplace relationships with other women.

Women’s Same-Gender Relationships

Women, far more than men, care about, value, and are affected by their same-gender workplace relationships. Women generally expect these relationships to be close, harmonious, and mutually supportive. Thus, women expect their work relationships with other women to be different from their relationships with the men with whom they work. What this often means is that when women behave toward other women in

precisely the same manner as many men do—in a formal, “all business” way without any apparent concern for the other women’s feelings or work/life conflicts—such women are often seen as cold, selfish, and unpleasant.

There is a fundamental asymmetry in women’s views of the appropriate nature of their workplace relations with women and of those with men. Women typically think their workplace relations with other women should be supportive, marked by understanding, and involve a degree of personal engagement. This means that women who do not relate to other women in an empathic way can be seen as having serious character defects that make them disagreeable and unlikable. Women do not, however, have the same expectations of the relationships with the men with whom they work (see chapter 5).

There is a second asymmetry between the ways in which women’s same-gender workplace conflicts are evaluated and how their conflicts with men and men’s conflicts with other men are evaluated. When women’s same-gender workplace relationships are marked by tension or conflict, other people are likely to view their difficulties as far more serious and disruptive than are men’s same-gender conflicts or women’s conflicts with men.¹ Men’s same-gender conflicts are generally seen as part of the normal rough and tumble of high-intensity workplaces, simple disagreements about how to accomplish a job, achieve an objective, or resolve an operational impasse. By contrast, women’s same-gender conflicts are often seen as personality clashes motivated by personal antagonism or petty jealousy. As a result, women’s conflicts with other women are frequently viewed as catfights, with negative consequences for organizational productivity and meriting serious concern by coworkers and managers.

A third asymmetry between women’s and men’s same-gender workplace conflicts is that these conflicts can have far more negative consequences for the women involved than for men. Because women’s same-gender workplace conflicts receive so much more attention than do men’s, women are far more likely to view their conflicts as more serious than they might otherwise.² In addition, because women’s same-gender

conflicts are likely to be seen as violating prescribed gender behavioral norms—women should care about, support, and be nice to other people—women can be penalized with poor evaluations, social exclusion, and coworker animosity in ways that men never experience.³

It's the Workplaces, Not the Women

Women have workplace conflicts—tensions, difficulties, and hostilities—with other women for all of the same reasons men have conflicts with other men: disagreements about how best to perform specific tasks, set strategic objectives, or handle personnel problems. But women also have conflicts with other women that are quite unlike men's same-gender conflicts. These distinctive conflicts are not due to women's inherent meanness, but to interpersonal dynamics created by gendered workplaces. In workplaces led and controlled by men with strong masculine norms, values, and expectations, women and men are not dealt with, evaluated, compensated, or promoted in the same ways. Women and men may have similar educational backgrounds and may start their careers with similar ambitions, abilities, and expectations. But because women are a distinct outgroup in gendered workplaces, they experience more formidable career advancement obstacles than do men. Their opportunities for career-enhancing assignments, projects, and responsibilities are far more limited than men's, and their ability to achieve a satisfactory balance between their careers and their personal lives is far more difficult than it is for men. These obstacles intensify for women with distinctive social identities that intersect with their gender, such as race, ethnicity, age, identification as LGBTQ, or parenting young children (see chapters 5 through 9).

The obstacles that make career advancement in gendered workplaces so much more difficult for women than men also make it much more difficult for women to achieve positive, supportive, conflict-free same-gender workplace relationships. In gendered workplaces, career advancement often depends on identification with the ingroup, which means that women's success can depend on distancing themselves from

other women so they can be seen as different. Moreover, women often internalize the biases in their gendered workplaces, behaving toward the women with whom they work in ways that strengthen their own identification with the ingroup. In the presence of racial or ethnic bias, white women often identify with their white male coworkers, not with diverse same-gender coworkers. When mothers are criticized for not being sufficiently devoted to their careers, women without young children often join in the criticism to show that they are committed to *their* careers. Straight and LGBTQ women can clash because of the different ways they perceive appropriate gender behavioral norms. And black, Asian, and Hispanic women can clash with white women and each other in their efforts to disprove the stereotypical characteristics ascribed to them.

Women's distinctive difficulties in dealing with other women, just like their difficulties in advancing in gendered workplaces, are driven by stereotypes and the biases those stereotypes foster. These difficulties are not because of women's fundamental nature, not because of the unique way they are socialized, nor because they are inherently jealous or envious of other women. Women's distinctive conflicts are about their workplaces, not their natures.

The Other Side of the Coin

It is important to keep in mind that women often have terrific working relationships with other women. These relationships might not constitute intimate friendships, but they are pleasant, supportive, and cooperative. When women have positive same-gender relationships, they are more efficient, productive, and satisfied with their careers.⁴ While we have seen numerous references to a purported 2011 American Management Association survey reporting that 95 percent of working women believe they have been undermined by another woman at some point in their career, we highly doubt the validity of this statistic. Moreover, neither CBS News⁵ nor we could confirm that such a survey actually exists.

Of course, some women are unpleasant and unsympathetic, while others are empathetic and inspiring; some are terrific managers, while

others are ineffective; some are nasty, selfish backstabbers, while others are pleasant and supportive. Our guess—because there is no empirical evidence available—is that women fall into these categories in about the same proportions as do men.

What we do know, however, is that women worry much more about their workplace relationships with other women than men worry about their workplace relationships with other men. Indeed, most women have a profound desire to have positive workplace relationships with other women, and when those relationships are marked by tension and unpleasantness they are deeply troubled. We hope that after reading this book women will stop blaming themselves and their women colleagues when their relationships go awry and start focusing on the structural features of their workplaces that make sisterhood so difficult.

Our Audience

Most often in this book, we address our comments and advice directly to women. This makes perfect sense, for our goal is to ensure that talented, ambitious women advance as far and as fast in their careers as their ability and hard work can take them without being sidetracked, held back, or disheartened by conflicts with other women. This book, however, is also addressed to men and the organizations they tend to run. We believe men—particularly senior men with leadership roles in business, the professions, academia, and government—need to be acutely aware of the underlying situational causes of women's difficulties in maintaining harmonious same-gender workplace relationships. As we have said, the fundamental driver of women's distinctive same-gender conflicts is the gendered nature of our workplaces. The ultimate solution to conflict, therefore, is primarily in the hands of those who lead, control, and model appropriate workplace behaviors. Women can do much to avoid or overcome the conflict-inducing forces inherent in their gendered workplaces. But, if the masculine norms, values, and expectations underlying these forces are to be eliminated, it will require the active participation of everyone involved.

What Follows

Women's workplace relationships with other women can and should be positive. That does not mean that they will always be conflict-free. But it does mean that when conflicts arise, they can be resolved productively and efficiently. To that end, most of the following chapters include a section we've called "Making Things Better," which provides ideas, take-aways, tips, suggestions, and techniques that women can use to avoid, work through, and resolve same-gender conflicts. Along the way and particularly in chapter 10, we offer suggestions as to how organizations, the men who so often run them, and women can eliminate the biases that foster women's same-gender conflicts.

Throughout the book, we have included anecdotes and personal stories taken from our own experiences, the comments of the hundreds of women we've coached and interviewed, and statements made to us in the course of our research. We promised all of these women that we would keep their identities confidential, so we have changed their names and identifying characteristics.

This book is divided into four parts. Part I, "Women's Workplace Relationships with Other Women," examines the myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions about the causes of women's workplace conflicts. This is where we present the various claims that women—whether because of nature or nurture—are intrinsically mean to, competitive with, and resentful of other women. We next explain why women seek other women's support, cooperation, and advocacy—sisterhood—and why sisterhood is important for women's career advancement. We then discuss why sisterhood is so often difficult to achieve in gendered workplaces, and why same-gender conflicts often seem inevitable in such workplaces. Because women have different social identities, values, and behaviors, we also look at how these differences can interfere with the achievement of sisterhood.

In Part II, "Gender in the Workplace," we discuss the realities of gendered workplaces for ambitious women and the difficult choices such

workplaces present to them. We also discuss the behavioral straitjackets into which stereotypes about gender and sexuality put women.

Part III, “Social Identity in the Workplace,” examines how gendered workplaces and the stereotypes that prevail in them affect women’s same-gender relationships with women who have social identities different from their own. We examine why gender isn’t the whole story by looking at the stereotypes and biases that result in unique workplace experiences for Asian, Hispanic, and black women. We then discuss the stereotype-driven conflicts between women of different ages and the peculiar workplace dynamics created when women have small children. Our discussion of these issues is informed by our own surveys and interviews, as well as current peer-reviewed social science research.

Part IV, “Going Forward,” presents a comprehensive perspective on how women’s distinctive difficulties with other women can and should be addressed. While we’ve offered many suggestions in the “Making Things Better” sections of individual chapters, Part IV provides a framework for how these specific suggestions can be comprehensively implemented. We provide steps and advice as to how women can overcome their identity conflicts with other women as well as how organizations can attack workplace bias.

Part IV is followed by a glossary, in which we provide definitions of key terms and phrases we use throughout the book. The glossary is for your convenience.

About Us

A brief comment is in order about our decision to write about the career perspectives and experiences of women whose social identities are fundamentally different from our own. As two straight, white, cisgendered people, we know our writing about the feelings and workplace experiences of women with races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities we do not share may be viewed as insensitive at best and presumptuous at worst. Indeed, we freely acknowledge that our personal

experiences, privileges, status, and power are likely to be very different from many of the women we write about. Nevertheless, we are convinced that unless all of us reach out beyond our unique social identities in an attempt to understand, relate to, and expose ourselves to the scrutiny of people who are not like us, little progress will be made in improving relations between and among the great diversity of people in our gendered workplaces and in society generally.

To ensure that we approached this crucial subject with the care and insight called for, we immersed ourselves in current social science research; we extensively read the available literature on racism, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity; we conducted many in-depth interviews; and—most importantly—we obtained comments on and reactions to various drafts of this book from several dozen women of color, women who identify as LGBTQ, and women with social identities different from our own. These women represent a wide range of backgrounds, professions, geographic locations, socioeconomic groups, and professional achievements. Not a single person told us that we had no business tackling these topics, all encouraged us to publish our research, and many commented that what we had written precisely captured their personal experiences. While the sole responsibility for everything in this book is ours, we have attempted to incorporate their comments, reflect their perspectives, and give voice to their concerns. The support and encouragement of so many women with social identities different from our own has led us to believe that our discussion will provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of the workplace relationships of women with women who are different from them. We certainly hope so.

PART I

Women's Workplace
Relationships with
Other Women

Chapter 1

Women Are Mean to Each Other—Or So We’re Told

THERE IS AN ACTIVE COTTAGE industry devoted to characterizing women’s workplace relationships with other women as fundamentally antagonistic. Women are said to bully other women, spread malicious rumors about them, behave in two-faced ways toward them, seek to undermine their self-confidence, and secretly plot to destroy their professional standing. Typical of such characterizations (almost always made without comprehensive empirical evidence) are the following:

- “Women are the focus of gossip and suffer humiliation, betrayal, or social exclusion at the hands of other women with surprising frequency.”¹
- “Female aggression tends to be mental and emotional like gossip and backstabbing [that is] designed to create shame, cause emotional distress and wreak havoc in a rival’s life.”²
- “Conflict among women in the workplace is out of control and has become an area of intensified research and concern.”³

The authors of the works from which these statements are drawn all view women’s same-gender workplace relationships as plagued by jealousy, envy, and competition. They think that because of evolution, socialization, or misogyny, women see other women as rivals, competitors, and

enemies. Behaviors such as manipulation, undermining, betrayal, backstabbing, trash talking, and one-upsmanship are said to be the modus operandi. These authors assert that these conflicts are intensely personal and specifically intended to hurt other women's positions, reputations, and status. Because they see these conflicts as driven by internally generated motivations, women are assumed to be in control of their conflicts and should be able to end them by simply understanding and ending their hurtful behaviors.

We have serious doubts that women's same-gender conflicts are the result of internally motivated envy, jealousy, or competitiveness. We also seriously doubt that these characteristics are part of women's nature. In fact, we believe this entire approach to women's relationships with other women is profoundly misguided. By assuming that there are unique, identifiable psychological differences between the sexes, these authors deflect attention from the substantial evidence that women and men are more alike than they are different. While there are differences in abilities and brain functions, the differences are very small—usually of the magnitude of a few percentage points across the entire population.⁴

Women and men do not have fixed feminine or masculine traits. Moreover, the workplace situations in which women and men find themselves are far more determinative of their behavior than inherent qualities or characteristics. When we view women and men as having unique, distinctive, and permanent psychological predispositions, personality traits, and task aptitudes, we ignore the importance of context. Context is not just people's immediate situations, but also the totality of their lives, including the environments within which they work, love, play, and struggle. If we are ever to get to the root of women's same-gender workplace conflicts, we need to focus on the situations in which these conflicts are created, not on women's internal characteristics.

There are most certainly differences in women's and men's predispositions, attitudes, bearings, communication techniques, language patterns, and so on. But we do not believe these are permanent, immutable differences. These differences are largely due to imbalances in the perceived power, status, and value that women and men grow up with. It is

external context, not internal characteristics, that reveals the causes of women’s same-gender workplace conflicts.

As we argue in the next chapter and throughout the remainder of this book, women often experience unique difficulties working positively with other women, not because of the way women are but because of the biased workplace situations women encounter. To paraphrase the title of this book, women’s conflicts with other women arise not because of their personal characteristics but because of the characteristics of their workplaces.

Representative Books

The titles of some of the books published over the past decade in the “women are antagonistic to other women” genre paint a very ugly picture of women’s same-gender relationships: *Tripping the Prom Queen*;⁵ *Mean Girls Grown Up*;⁶ *Mean Girls, Meaner Women*;⁷ *Catfight*;⁸ *Mean Girls at Work*;⁹ *Working with Bitches*;¹⁰ *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*;¹¹ *The Bitch in the House*;¹² and *The Stiletto in Your Back*.¹³ Let’s take a brief look at common claims made by books in this genre before we provide our critique as to why we disagree with the fundamental claims made by these books.

Common Claims

Virtually all of these books make two common claims. First, they claim that while most women are fully aware of women’s purported mutual antagonism, they are reluctant to acknowledge or discuss it. For example, in *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*, Phyllis Chesler writes,

When I began this work, most people, including feminist academics, were not talking about the ways in which women, like men, internalize sexist values or about the human female propensity to evil....[As one woman said to me,] “I think you

should be writing about how men oppress women not about what oppressed people do in order to survive.”¹⁴

In *Tripping the Prom Queen*, Susan Shapiro Barash echoes Chesler's experience:

No matter what other topics I was asking about, I found hints of a dark secret, a problem that everyone seemed to sense but no one was willing to talk about: women's rivalry.... I emerged from my research feeling as though [female rivalry] must be a theme in every woman's life. *We're just not allowed to talk about it.* We'll do anything rather than face up to female envy and jealousy.... [W]e sweep all evidence of a bleak picture [of women's relationships with other women] under the rug.¹⁵

In the introduction to *The Twisted Sisterhood*, Kelly Valen tells us,

It seems we've conditioned ourselves to deny, discount, and just plain swallow our intra-female hurts as something we shouldn't indulge or whine about.... Few of us are eager to acknowledge we've been burned by our "sisters." Fewer yet wish to admit that they feel unsafe with certain women or that the primary threat to their emotional security radiates not from the usual suspects like men, but from fellow females.¹⁶

And Michelle Villalobos confidently states in *The Stiletto in Your Back*,

Female rivalry is something people generally avoid discussing. Personally, I dislike the notion that I am competitive with other women, and I'd be willing to bet that most of us avoid admitting—even to ourselves—when we feel insecure or when we compare ourselves to our girlfriends, colleagues or sisters and find ourselves lacking. Not to mention, perhaps we feel like

we are betraying our sex by highlighting or acknowledging that sometimes *women play dirty*.¹⁷

The claim that women are reluctant to talk about same-gender rivalry, competitiveness, and antagonism is puzzling. If there really is such a reluctance, why are there so many books on the topic? Why does the popular press so regularly write about women’s difficulties in working with other women?¹⁸ And why are there so many websites and blogs devoted to the subject?¹⁹ Beyond the disconnect between the claim that women are reluctant to talk about women’s rivalry and the great flood of such talk, concern about the hurtful nature of women’s same-gender competitiveness has been a central theme of the modern women’s movement since its very beginning. For example, the first issue of *Ms.* magazine in 1972 carried an article by Letty Cottin Pogrebin entitled “Competing with Women.” In the article, Pogrebin urged women to stop seeking to raise themselves up “by standing on the crushed remains of [their] sisters.”²⁰

The second common claim these books make is that women’s same-gender antagonism is caused by some aspect of women’s own internal makeup—some fundamental characteristic of their nature, or some basic female need, desire, or deficiency. As a consequence, the authors each conclude that all it will take to improve women’s relationships with other women is for women to look inside themselves, recognize why they are antagonistic to other women, and just stop being that way. For example, in *Mean Girls Grown Up*, Cheryl Dellasega writes,

It is clear that RA [relational aggression] is internally motivated [and is] a behavioral dynamic that can be changed with effort.²¹

In *Mean Girls, Meaner Women*, Erika Holiday and Joan Rosenberg advise us,

The act of self-reflection leads to awareness and awareness can lead to change. . . . Regardless of age, if you desire changes in your

relationships with women, you can “start wherever you are”... If you are a woman who has treated other women in ways that betray, exclude, demean, or devalue them, please pause and reflect before you behave in hurtful ways in the future.²²

Katherine Crowley and Kathy Elster, the authors of *Mean Girls at Work*, go so far as to claim that by having read their book, you will have

gained greater knowledge and practical tools for working with and supporting other women at work—no matter how different they are from you. If we can acknowledge that the workplace is naturally competitive, we can also strive to compete with one another in fair, productive, and professional ways. Our hope is that if you’ve practiced mean behavior at work in the past, you can contain your inner “mean girl” and learn to get ahead without resorting to covert or indirect aggression toward other women.²³

And Valen confesses,

Ultimately...I’m happy to leave it to the experts to figure out what breeds our aggressions.... We can talk about the “reasons” ad nauseam, use them as crutches to excuse or explain away our interaction and complacency, and even feel sorry for ourselves. But at some point we really do have to look within ourselves, examine our role in it, and just “do” or stop doing certain things.²⁴

While we certainly agree that we should all strive to be nicer people, we seriously doubt that women’s individual efforts at self-improvement will do much to end women’s distinctive same-gender workplace conflicts. We believe that the only way to end these conflicts is awareness of the biases that are found in gendered workplaces. Before developing this argument further, let’s look more closely at why so many people who

write about the difficulty women have working with other women believe this difficulty is rooted in women’s fundamental natures.

Differences

While there is general agreement in the books we’ve discussed that women’s purported same-gender antagonism—what the authors identify as women’s meanness, hostility, bitchiness, competitiveness, treachery, untrustworthiness, bullying, and so forth—is due to motivations that are internally generated, there is no general agreement as to why women are supposedly programmed in this way. There are, however, three reasons that are most commonly given to explain this purported antagonism: evolution, socialization, and internalization of the dominant culture’s misogyny. Although we do not believe that women’s distinctive same-gender workplace conflicts are the result of the way women are, by examining each of these explanations we can begin to understand why so many people disagree with us.

Evolution

Proponents of the view that women are genetically predisposed to be antagonistic toward each other argue that natural selection operates to ensure that the genes of only the fittest individuals are passed on to the next generation. As a result, evolutionary processes have shaped women to be inherently competitive with other women in the hunt for superior mates. And, because competing for a desirable mate is directly connected to competing for the scarce resources needed to sustain their offspring, women are constantly competing with each other for everything they need or want. In other words, proponents of the evolutionary explanation of the origins of women’s same-gender antagonism assert that women are inherently competitive with other women because evolution has made them that way.

Among the books that argue that women are mean to other women, the evolutionary perspective is most clearly articulated in *The Stiletto in Your Back*. Villalobos argues, “Female competition and the roots of why

women 'play dirty' can be traced all the way back to our cave-dwelling, primate, pre-human and early human ancestors."²⁵ Women compete for the most desirable mates, primarily based on youth and beauty. And in this competition, emotions like jealousy and envy are extremely valuable. She continues, "Jealousy is 'I must protect what I have from you' and envy is 'I want what you have.'"²⁶ She goes on to claim that as women have become civilized and socialized, the areas of competition have significantly expanded beyond obtaining the fittest mates: "Upon entering the workforce, all of a sudden there were vastly more opportunities for self-comparison and measuring 'how we stack up' against other women."²⁷

According to Villalobos, the techniques women use to express their jealousy and envy—which Villalobos identifies as "teasing, threatening, maliciously gossiping, cruelty, mind games, cliques, hierarchies, exclusion, ostracism, sarcasm, and more"—probably originated in prehistory. Today she says,

they have now been honed, fine-tuned and sharpened to a dagger-like stiletto in the modern workplace. The capacity for envy and jealousy is passed from one generation to the next, [but] those emotions are often responses to stimuli that no longer mean what they once meant, in which case the jealous or envious behaviors—at the office, for example—can be maladaptive, rather than helpful.²⁸

Villalobos' stark view is that evolution has shaped women to be inherently competitive with other women, and that conflict among women would seem to be inevitable. Her belief is so stark, in fact, that it is hard to reconcile her evolutionary perspective with her concluding advice to women: "Turn... those envious feelings into incentives for change. Once your life is better, you won't be so wrapped up in [jealousy and envy]."²⁹

Villalobos is hardly alone in identifying evolution as the major cause of women's difficulties in achieving positive workplace relationships with

other women. For example, Chesler clearly thinks evolution plays a major part in the “human female propensity to evil.”³⁰ She is not, however, as certain as Villalobos that evolution is the sole factor at work in shaping women’s same-gender hostilities. Instead, she hedges her bets by writing, “Girls and women may have an evolutionary predisposition towards chronic, intra-gender aggression—which patriarchal civilization may further maximize.”³¹ Nevertheless, she is unambiguous in claiming that “women’s lifelong experience [is] of all other women as rivals and potential replacements.”³² And, she is equally unambiguous that women are highly aggressive, and that “the targets of such female aggression are not men—but other women.”³³ Yet she offers no empirical support for these conclusions.

Dellasega also thinks evolution plays a major role in women’s competitiveness with other women. She writes that aggression between women occurs “as a genetic protective drive to find the best circumstances to ensure the survival of children.” While she notes that the need for such aggression often is no longer necessary, she claims that “this instinct to compete for resources may still motivate many women. That is, women are driven by a deeply ingrained biological need to acquire protection for their offspring.”³⁴ According to her, this instinct is carried over to the workplace and manifested in the “drive to care for and protect your ‘children,’ whether they are real, potential, or metaphorical (for example, clients, projects, employees, new business).”³⁵

Socialization

Other authors argue that women’s antagonism toward other women is not due to evolution, but rather to how girls and women are socialized in contemporary society. According to their argument, women, unlike men, are strongly discouraged from openly expressing their negative or unpleasant feelings, such as anger and frustration. Instead, they are taught to inhibit and suppress these feelings. As a result, authors like Holiday and Rosenberg claim that women lack a healthy outlet for their negative emotions, which come out in unhealthy ways, leading women to “strike out at other [women] in covert ways such as excluding them,

gossiping, or damaging reputations.”³⁶ In other words, these authors believe that women are mean to other women because that is the only outlet they have for frustration and anger.

Holiday and Rosenberg strongly endorse this socialization paradigm:

Even though females have made tremendous progress when it comes to leveling the playing field in a variety of academic disciplines and work arenas, enormous pressures still remain on girls and women to be sweet, kind, and nurturing, as opposed to exhibiting competitiveness or toughness. As a result, girls quickly learn to suppress feelings of anger and hostility rather than express them outwardly.³⁷

In their view, women's suppression of these negative emotions comes at an enormous cost to themselves and their relationships with other women. Because women cannot openly direct their anger at the person or circumstance causing the hurt, “there is a tendency for girls and women to keep anger inside and then become self-destructive, or to turn on each other and hurt other girls or women.”³⁸ This hostility is reinforced by women's reluctance to take their anger out on men for fear of weakening or destroying their relationships with those holding social and organizational power.

Holiday and Rosenberg argue that socialization leads to women's same-gender antagonism in another way. Despite the countless career opportunities available to women, they “continue to be socialized into rigid gender roles,” and the gender roles deemed suitable for women are not considered by society to be as important, valuable, or desirable as men's gender roles. Although women are often not conscious of it, “this socialization process . . . acts as an oppressive force against women, and women come to accept these stereotypes as fact.”³⁹ As a result, the authors claim, “women hurt, betray, backstab, and trash talk other women, essentially on the basis of self-hatred—a self-hatred borne out of an experience of being considered inferior from birth.” In other words,

women are faced from birth “with the experience of either being seen as inferior or being made to feel as if they are inferior.”²⁴⁰

Barash also sees socialization as the root of women’s same-gender antagonism, but she believes it operates in a different way: “Despite [women’s] many gains, we’re still socialized to view ourselves in relational terms.”²⁴¹ This affects the way in which women compete. Men’s competition is typically about task performance and external achievements; as a result, men can go out for a beer with their rivals after the contest is over. But in Barash’s view, women’s competition is “about [their] identities—and, unlike men, [women] tend to expect total union and sympathy with [their] same-sex friends. [Women] have a much harder time setting boundaries to [their] competition, which makes it all the more destructive.”²⁴²

Like Holiday and Rosenberg, Barash believes this socialization process also forces women to conform to rigid gender norms, forbidding them from being openly angry or overly competitive. “Men tend to accept their competition as a natural, even healthy part of their lives.”²⁴³ Women, on the other hand, are far less comfortable with competition. As a result, their “ambition, . . . repressed desire for power, money, or success finds expression in all sorts of inappropriate places.”²⁴⁴

According to Barash, as another consequence of the limited gender roles that society views as appropriate for women, women often see ambitious women as selfish, self-aggrandizing, or manipulative. In addition, she believes women are frequently uncomfortable with their own desire for career success, status, and power. Therefore, they channel such dangerous desires into resentment of other women, competing with them “at every turn, judging them not only on their work performance but also on their looks, style of dress, marital/dating status, children’s success (or lack thereof), and general demeanor.”²⁴⁵

Internalized Misogyny

Some authors don’t claim that women’s socialization has caused them to suppress their negative emotions. Instead, they argue that women’s

socialization has caused them to internalize the dominant culture's misogynist ideology: women are fundamentally inferior to men. According to this claim, when women internalize this sexist view, they depreciate their own self-worth as well as the worth of all other women. As a result, Chesler notes that "women become hostile towards [other] women and do not like, trust, respect, or find their statements to be credible."⁴⁶ In other words, women are antagonistic toward other women because they don't like who *they* are, themselves, much less who other women are.

For example, Holiday and Rosenberg argue that women as a group are oppressed and that like members of all oppressed groups, women internalize aspects of their subjugation and "come to believe in their imposed inferiority. Though women frequently have a hard time admitting they experience themselves as being inferior to men, largely this appears to be true."⁴⁷

According to Tanenbaum, the author of *Catfight*, the most dangerous outcome of such a sense of inferiority "is self-hatred: girls and women disparage themselves and disassociate from other females."⁴⁸ When women hate themselves, they become angry and frustrated. Because there is no constructive outlet for these feelings, women either turn them inward (where they are corrosive of their self-confidence, sense of self-worth, and ambition) or they express them through indirect, hurtful attacks on other women. As Holiday and Rosenberg say, "Meanness thus becomes the strategy for increasing self-importance, popularity, or to achieve the desired goal."⁴⁹

Tanenbaum argues that although women have made so much progress in so many areas, they are still "expected to conform, more or less, to a narrow role."⁵⁰ This restrictive gender role means that women are forced to compete with each other if they are ever going to succeed. And, when women are forced to compete exclusively against other women, they "tend to be more underhanded and personal in [their] attacks than men are."⁵¹ According to Tanenbaum, because women feel powerless, they lash out at others who are in the same powerless position: other women. She explains that when a woman "belittles other women, she can prove her superiority among women—and is one step closer to the inner circle of men."⁵²

Critique

We believe the fundamental fallacy underlying all of these books is the assumption that women are inherently different from men. Researchers have concluded that “basic patterns of male and female brain asymmetry seem to be more similar than they are different.”⁵³ Consistent with the arguments we advance in this book, researchers have found that the behaviors that are so often linked to unique gender characteristics depend more on people’s actual situations—what they are doing, the conditions under which they are doing it, and the expectations of how they will perform while doing it—than on their gender.⁵⁴ For example, in a study of the personality traits of single fathers, single mothers, and married parents, researchers found that the traits of single men with childcare responsibilities were more like those of mothers (single or married) than like those of married fathers.⁵⁵

Of course, there is extensive literature arguing that women’s and men’s moral sensitivities and relational patterns are fundamentally different. Some authors, including feminist psychoanalysts Nancy Chodorou and Jean Baker Miller⁵⁶ and psychologist Carol Gilligan⁵⁷ claim that male gender identity is defined by separation, while female gender identity is defined by intimacy. They assert that these two styles of identity demonstrate that women’s and men’s natures are different, enduring, and unchangeable.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as Carol Tavris points out in *Mismeasure of Woman*, “research in recent years casts considerable doubt on the notion that men and women differ appreciably in their moral reasoning, or that women have a permanently different voice.”⁵⁹ With respect to the evolutionary explanation of women’s antagonisms toward other women, researchers have found no evidence that women have a greater desire for or concern with a secure, committed, sexually exclusive relationship than do men. Indeed, most men and women equally value these features of intimacy.⁶⁰

It's Not Nature, It's the Workplace

Perhaps most significantly, research confirms that the characteristics ascribed to women's nature, which supposedly set them apart from men, are characteristics that women and men both have when they lack power in their careers and interpersonal relationships. In other words, women's employment characteristics—not their unique gender characteristics—determine how they approach their jobs. Thus, researchers have found that *both* women and men in dead-end, unstimulating jobs tend to focus on the same pleasurable aspects of their jobs: their relationships with others. According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, the author of *Men and Women of the Corporation*,

[Men] *with low opportunity look more like the stereotype of women in their orientations toward work*... they limit their aspirations, seek satisfaction in activities outside of work, dream of escape, interrupt their careers, emphasize leisure and consumption, and create sociable peer groups in which interpersonal relationships take precedence over other aspects of work.⁶¹

But as Tavis argues, it is hard to kill the idea that women are fundamentally oriented to interpersonal relationships and are best suited for work with people, while men are fundamentally oriented to independent task performance and are best suited to work with money. In any form, however, the claims that women have a “caring nature,” a “feminine love of gossip,” or a “different voice” is a view that continues to justify keeping things the way they are. Tavis explains,

Thinking in opposites [that is, women are this way, men are that way] may be a comfortable habit, but the results are often hazardous to our relationships, social policies, and private lives. For one thing, it twists our way of thinking about the differences that do exist between men and women into stable permanent qualities... People develop, learn, have adventures and new

experiences; and as they do, their notions of masculinity and femininity change too. Thinking in opposites frames the possibility for change in [far too] limited ways.⁶²

We do not mean to suggest that all of the books we have been discussing are without valuable insights. Quite the contrary, the authors’ discussions of the counterproductive characteristics of women’s same-gender competition, the hurtful nature of women’s envy and jealousy of other women, and the self-destructive nature of internalized misogyny provide highly valuable information about women’s same-gender workplace conflicts. Our objections to these books stem from their tendency to blame the women for their workplace difficulties, rather than to blame the situations that gendered workplaces put women into.

MAKING THINGS BETTER

- There is no evidence to support the view that same-gender tension, conflict, and obstructionist behavior are uniquely female problems. There is solid evidence, however, that similar workplace conflict is viewed more negatively when it involves two women than when it involves two men or a woman and a man.⁶³
- Don’t get sucked into believing the narrative that same-gender conflict is a problem for women but not for men. These views can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, playing directly into prevailing gender stereotypes that men are cut out for leadership but women are not—blaming the source of gender inequality on women’s own behavior, rather than on systemic gender bias.