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Publishers Weekly Book Review

It's Not You, It's the Workplace: Women's Conflict at Work and the Bias That Built It

Andrea S. Kramer and Alton B. Harris. Nicholas Brealey, $27.95 (300p)
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A badly needed rejoinder to a tired stereotype arrives from married couple and attorneys Kramer and Harris. A persistent cultural meme insists that the greatest threat to professional women is other women—backstabbing, conniving "queen bees" and "mean girls." Hogwash, say the coauthors, who investigated these stereotypes using surveys, social science research, and interviews. Conclusion: there's no evidence that there's more conflict at the office between women than there is between men or between different genders. To address this misconception, Harris and Kramer reframe the issue, showing that it's not about how women behave, but about the structure of workplaces, which tend to make female employees feel like outliers. In fact, the authors report, women tend to be much more concerned about their intragender workplace relationships, and thus, more distressed when conflict occurs. Bringing in relevant insights from intersectionality theory, Harris and Kramer discuss how to have better conversations about "identity biases," such as those that might involve race or sexual orientation, with one tip being to remember that "your aim should be to understand, not to demonstrate you are a good person." The cumulative result of their work is a refreshing, well-timed rebuttal to a hackneyed old fiction that blames individual women for the institutional biases they face. *(Sept.)*

Against the 'Mean Girl' Myth: PW Talks with Andrea S. Kramer and Alton B. Harris

By Liz Scheier | Jul 05, 2019

Why have books about workplace "mean girls" and "queen bees" been so popular?

In *It's Not You, It's the Workplace* (Nicholas Brealey, Sept.), Kramer and Harris debunk misconceptions about female competition in the workplace.

Kramer: Women are very concerned about their relationships with other women. These books are ready-tailored explanations for why readers have difficulties relating to other women at work.

Harris: It's a simple, shorthand way of saying, "There's something inherently amiss with women, and women can correct it themselves by just being conscious of it." It's wrong, and it's a cop-out.

Why are these stereotypes so pervasive?

Kramer: Girls are expected to be kind and sweet, and are punished if they're not; boys are assumed to be strong, independent go-getters, and are punished if they're not. So as adults, when a woman in a position of authority in the workforce says "I need this by 5 p.m.," everyone says, "who does she think she is?". After writing [previous title] *Breaking Through Bias*, we were approached

all the time by women who said, "I get along fine with men, but I have trouble working with women"—but when pressed, they couldn't articulate a difference between the way they were treated by women and men. They bought into the assumption that women are nasty when they're just doing great work.

What's the most effective change that can be made to make workplaces better for women?

Kramer: Get more women into senior leadership. When women are a critical mass in the decision-making apparatus of an organization, the culture changes. The biggest hurdle to overcome is that men in most organizations don't believe that women have it harder to advance in their careers than men. Our studies showed that 70% of men believe that their organizations are pure meritocracies. Men have to be convinced that this isn't true.

How can male allies help?

Harris: Stick up for women. Mentor women. Make certain that women's voices are heard. Ensure that the teams you assemble have as many women as men. Make sure women are not pushed to the side. This involves a conscious effort on men's parts, and also techniques to ensure that you don't allow implicit bias to influence your career-affecting decision.

What does a good workplace for women look like?

Harris: When Andie started the gender diversity committee at her law firm, there were very few women partners; the division is now about 50%. And it took 15–20 years to make that happen.

Kramer: A key action was working to take subjectivity out of the evaluation process. They forced people to evaluate based on core competencies, and worked to ensure that women and people of color were given the same opportunities as white men.