

Book Review



Assigned: Life with Gender

Edited by Lisa Wade with Douglas Hartmann and Christopher Uggen

Reviewed by William T. Cockrell

Wade, Lisa (Editor) with Douglas Hartmann and Christopher Uggen (Series Editors). *Assigned: Life with Gender (The Society Pages)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017. 272 pp. \$15.00 paper.

Assigned: Life With Gender is a collection of essays and opinion editorial pieces related to how we do not necessarily choose the gendered behaviors we feel compelled to perform. Edited by Lisa Wade, Douglas Hartmann, and Christopher Uggen, *Assigned* could be a powerful, initial exposure to the study of gender roles. The assortment of writings is separated into five different sections: ideas, performances, inequalities, institutions, and the future of gender. What starts as a solid, organized book becomes a scattered, jumble of short stories. As previously mentioned, this book would be excellent for an undergraduate Gender Roles class. Unfortunately, longtime researchers of the field are going to find little of new interest.

Primary author and editor Lisa Wade opens the book with the Introduction. The writing in the introduction is superb. Wade effectively gets the common point across that men and women are more similar than we tend to believe. The one aspect of critique for the introduction follows throughout the totality of the book, issues with citation. All of the research discussed should be cited for academic reasons as well as giving first-hand readers access to classic publications.

The first section of the book is classified as "Ideas". The primary goal in this segment of *Assigned* is to educate the reader on numerous aspects of gender and sex that we are exposed to on a daily basis. In the first chapter, "On Queering Parenting and Gender-Neutrality", we see the authors discussing how to approach raising a young child without the strict gendered descriptors of "boy/girl". Referencing Dr. Fausto-Sterling in the second paragraph is an excellent way to establish credibility, but most of the student readers will not be aware of this important mention. Further, using terms such as "heteronormativity" without explicitly stating the meaning may also not be entirely beneficial for readers without a gender studies background.

The strength of *Assigned* rests in the center of the collection. The section relating to gender performances accomplishes exposing readers to these highly complex topics with the assistance of actual research. Admittedly, the measurement of “uptalk” in Jeopardy episodes has a highly restrictive population, but it does present the student readers with quantitative measurements. To contrast the numerical assessments, the book presents an in-depth qualitative analysis of the ever-popular love triangle present in *The Hunger Games* series. This example humorously and effectively challenges the sexual double standard by encouraging female characters not to be defined by their romantic choices.

A powerful experience of being educated on differential treatment is ever present in the “Inequalities” portion of the book. Covering the bases of feminist research, the introduction and heavy emphasis on intersectionality further illustrates the strengths of this book. When focused on classic research and academic knowledge related to gender and sexuality, *Assigned* shines as an introductory level reader. To illustrate this comment, one could look at the strongest chapter in the third section. The “Violence and Masculinity Threat” chapter is an impeccable literature review of current sociological research related to the discussion of male-dominated violence in American society. The potency of the chapter is related to how each argument is presented and then addressed by various findings from published papers. What is equally important to acknowledge is that when the book does not follow this formula one notices the lack of organization.

From a critical perspective, the Institution segment of the book is the weakest part. The primary criticism against this section is the failure in acknowledging the target audience. Undergraduates are going to be less interested in topics such as cardiovascular disease and temporary work. These topics are absolutely related to gender studies, but the modern student is not going to be as concerned about these issues. Further focus placed on inequalities in academia and entry-level work positions would have been more effective for the current target audience. The additional issue in this section is that readers are not explicitly informed and educated on the definite, structured power of an institution. Further elaboration of this point is the chapter on birth control. Without a proper understanding of how institutions are not created equally for everybody, a young reader will not understand the absurdity of a male-dominated Supreme Court making reproductive decisions for American women. What should have been a pivotal discussion of a historical feminist moment is reduced to a brief, four-page synopsis. A more appropriate use of space would have been to discuss research from Guttmacher or the World Health Organization (i.e., social science data) instead of the legal proceedings related to Hobby Lobby.

Readers already present in the field of academia are going to largely overlook this publication, and that is understandably justified. *Assigned* is explicitly catered to undergraduate gender theorists who will best understand these concepts with real-life,

modern examples. That being said, one will notice that the target audience seems to be forgotten throughout the collection of readings. When jumping between readings about Miley Cyrus and then the labor market one must acknowledge that constancy and organization are not going to be found in this book. Future editions of the publication should focus less on a final section devoted to instructor resources and spend more time crafting relevant pop culture examples for the upcoming, academic feminist.