

## **Kendall Petersen**

Department of Afrikaans and Theory of Literature  
University of South Africa  
peterkkw@unisa.ac.za

Hilary M. Lips. 2014. *Gender: The basics*. UK, USA: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-68950-2 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-415-68954-0 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-315-88317-5 (ebk). Available from Book Promotions – a division of Jonathan Ball Publishers.

In *Gender: The basics*, Hilary M. Lips explores the influence of cultural, historical, biological, psychological and economic factors on the construction of gender. Locating her research in the widely held perspective that gender is dependent on and determined by more than merely biological sex, Lips considers the interaction between gender and a variety of concepts or areas, including

- relationships, intimacy and concepts of sexuality
- the workplace and labour markets
- gender-related violence and war
- public health, poverty and development
- the aging process.

From the onset it is clear that the work indeed explores the basics of gender studies, starting with an explanation as to why gender categories exist. Lips offers an introductory distinction between the concepts of sex and gender, identifying the principal components of gender as those of gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation (p. 3).

In a very detailed breakdown of the processes involved in the construction of gender identity, Lips establishes that the gendered division of labour stems from stereotypes associated with the categories of masculine and feminine respectively, and which facilitate or enable the assumption that certain tasks, roles and jobs are suited to, or even meant for, specific genders. In other words, certain jobs are meant for men, while others are meant for women.

Lips suggests that gender stereotypes ultimately reproduce themselves (p. 14). The script has been in place for a while and manifests itself in a cycle of repetition: Men and women are, respectively, believed to be better suited to certain tasks, and so they perform these tasks because it is believed they are better suited to them. The process of perpetuating gender stereotypes and the gendered division of labour also perpetuates cycles and patterns of gender hierarchy. The author elaborates on the prescriptive role or function of gender stereotypes in terms of serving as the unspoken but powerful rules that determine ‘what women and men *should* be like’ in order to conform to society’s expectations concerning the categories of masculine and feminine, and ultimately masculinity and femininity (p. 25). She distinguishes between several categories of gender prescription:

- Intensified prescriptions
- Relaxed prescriptions
- Intensified proscriptions
- Relaxed proscriptions. (p. 25)

These categories are explored within several contexts, including, for example, the intersection of gender, body image and body politics in the workplace, and the extent to which this informs the gendered distribution of labour. The exploration of these stereotypes ultimately confirms the belief that ‘if gender is a social construction, ... then gender stereotypes are social constructions too’ (p. 27).

A discussion of gender stereotypes necessitates a discussion of gender prejudices, by extension. The interrogation of factors such as gender bias and sexism, for example, is then located in the exploration of the intricate and largely uneven distribution of power between people across a multitude of contexts. This then enables the discussion of the intersection of gender with relationships and sexualities, the workplace, leadership and public life, health and aging. By providing the reader with such a thorough investigation of the multiple factors involved in the construction of gender, the author is also able to indicate the manner in which these constructions may inform power dynamics between people.

The research elaborates on these points of intersection by using a variety of case studies and by referring to literature from a vast range of disciplines. At the core of these examinations is the continual pervasiveness of gender inequality. This is evidenced, for example, in the fact that women still (in most areas) earn less money than their male counterparts, have different (lower) education levels, as well as reduced healthcare and social benefits.

Change and progress remain evident, however, and the author concludes by indicating the instances of advances toward gender equality that have been noted. She notes that large numbers of women are entering the workplace in developing countries. In addition, increased access to education has resulted in many women emerging more highly qualified than men. Finally, women are becoming increasingly visible in roles of public leadership. Change has been noted amongst men as well, though on a somewhat smaller scale: An increasing number of men are seen occupying roles traditionally associated with women and femininity, evidenced, for instance, in the increasing number of men choosing to be or become homemakers and ‘stay-at-home’ dads. This, according to the author, ultimately points to a shift in the distribution of domestic gender roles (p. 195).

While the text offers an in-depth exploration of the numerous factors at work in the construction of gender identity, it must be emphasised (as mentioned earlier) that Lips provides a *basic* examination of gender construction. This is, of course, ultimately fitting, given the context in which the work is produced, namely that of the Routledge *Basics* series. Therefore, while the author explores the subject in thorough and highly accessible detail, it remains better suited to readers with no prior history of engagement with gender studies. By extension, it is also highly suitable as introductory material in any gender studies course.