

# Is society intrinsically unequal essay sample



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Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich, both amused and shocked me, with much more of the latter. In this study, Ms. Ehrenreich deliberately places herself in the position of the working poor, taking jobs that aren't even fit for one person to live off. I have heard that the best way to find out what a certain life would be like is to walk in the shoes of one who lives it. She attempted to the best of her ability to infiltrate poverty at its roots by filling those shoes for a month.

Temporarily altering her life, she was able to work the jobs, live in the accommodations, and eat the food, or lack thereof, of one who certainly lives below the poverty line. Quickly, it became evident that her study naturally includes C. Wright Mills' social issues and personal troubles. Throughout her study, she also seeks to examine the functional and conflict theories of stratification as they relate to the low-wage jobs she pursues.

Although there were obvious differences between her and those who actually live poverty-stricken lives, with no way out, the situations she placed herself in give at least an idea of what life is like for a significant percentage of the American work force. However, she confesses to having advantages such as having "starter" and emergency money. Today, American society faces issues concerning rises in the price of gas, food, and services. In Nickel and Dimed, the author explores living off minimum wage and the tribulations one experiences while trying to survive on minimum wage income.

Barbara Ehrenreich allots herself a small amount of money for startup, and then proceeds to find work and a place to live in Key West, Florida. She finds herself working as a waitress, and a second job as a housekeeper in a hotel.

Many of her co-workers live in motels, which she eventually has to do, in order to live. Her experiment is supposedly an investigative report on unskilled workers in the United States. The reader can't help but wonder how the welfare reformed unskilled workers survive on minimum wages. Do they possess survival secrets that we do not know or understand?

There are three major theories included in her experiment such as the Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Functionalism, with one of them more applicable than the others. Each theory was evident while interacting with fellow co-workers and management. Ultimately, each can be applied. I will discuss each theory, their relation to the text, and which theory was most prominent. A Conflict theorist believes tensions between social classes will ultimately result in stability. They differ from the Functionalist who believes society works to achieve harmony with a belief that society is continually in competition for limited resources.

Conflict is normal in a society, and the rich, who are in control of the majority of resources, have much of the power and remain rich, while the poor remain poor. In two instances, all new hires were required to be screened for drugs and the bar was off-limits to restaurant employees because of one person's mistake. In contrast, a Symbolic Interactionist would view the low-wage workplace differently compared to the functionalist and conflict viewpoints. The Symbolic Interactionist believes people construct their realities based on how they evaluate themselves and those around them.

This means that some people, after being yelled at and made to feel inferior by only being allowed to enter the restaurant from the back, as in the text,

might start to believe they are receiving the treatment they deserve.

According to Emile Durkheim, a Functionalist would infer that obedience leads to poverty. The Functionalist theory operates on the basis that society “ seeks stability and avoids conflict. ” It also functions on the basis that society has many parts which work together to create a general consensus as to what values are important.

This means that the value of obedience to authority is one of the things that keep society running in the Functionalist perspective. In addition, many of the employees seemed to be very obedient to their employers by accepting unwarranted punishments and restrictions to their already reduced freedoms. This was evident after the management of Hearthsides locked the dry-storage room because of suspected ketchup theft! Ehrenreich says, “ I wish I could say I stood up to Ted and insisted that George be given a translator and allowed to defend himself... on the contrary, something new-something loathsome and servile-had infected me.

Obedience seems to be quite important in keeping the poor down in society. With this example, functionalism seemed to best fit her work. Ehrenreich attempts to display our society as a caste system, where status is ascribed to individuals. Her research involved a sacrifice of actually living off the money she earned on the minimum wage jobs, and getting as close as possible as a reporter can get to the truth. She describes that even after hard work and obedience to management, the chance to move up in social class is very rare. How are people expected to achieve upward social mobility if they spend all of their waking hours working?

How are they supposed to get an education to improve their conditions? It has been said that education is “ the great equalizer,” but the fact is that education is just not available for every impoverished individual in our society. She discovered concealed charges plaguing the poor. For example, if one could not pay for the deposit for an apartment, they were required to have to pay more money by paying by the week. She wrote that a poor person cannot save money by cooking large amounts of food at one time and freezing it, because the person lacks the capabilities to cook in large quantities.

Since the government won't assist with medical care, an impoverished person cannot pay for regular check-ups and physicals. Soon any conditions they have with their health go unnoticed and become worse over time. These factors combined contribute to the poverty of already poor people. In efforts to imitate the real world of the impoverished, Ehrenreich nobly tries to uncover the harsh treatment the wealthy decide upon the poor by using her ambition of “ seeing what it's really like.

Yet, her story is absent of the authentic hardships that face the lower class daily; even as she partook in the job search and cleaned hotel rooms, I sensed the impression that she is on the outside looking in. It seemed as though her outlook may have impeded a consequential and precise assessment of the way life is like with such a wide range of salaries. Was Ehrenreich's purpose in detailing her experiences to uncover the injustices committed by the managers, or prove to the lower-class that she has compassion for her colleagues?

It almost seems as if her intent is to “ just to see whether [she] could match income to expenses,” which could have been easily interpreted through personal discussions or interviews. The biggest weakness with her research was that she did not “ network” while considering the expense of living. It is believed that the “ same socio-economic class works and lives together. ” Therefore, Ehrenreich could and should have asked her fellow co-workers, Gail and Joan, if they were in need of a cheaper living situation.

Although her experiment did not adhere to the way minimum wage workers generally live (few impoverished move every month and start over), Ehrenreich integrates humor despite the depressing subject matter. She includes detailed images of her impressions of her co-workers, the places she visits, along with the housing that she can afford. According to C. Wright Mills there exists a power elite that “ is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of men and women” (146). It is those few elite who not only control the bureaucracy but also maintain it by making it nearly impossible for workers to form unions.

Bureaucratic elites have considerable power and, whenever possible, give themselves higher salaries. In fact, a bureaucracy closely resembles an authoritarian state. They are able to maintain their power by supporting workers who support them and penalizing those who are opposed to them. Their method of exercising power is either by demotions, wage cuts, or firing them. From the text we can see the tactics employed by the bureaucratic elites to maintain the system. Mills would most likely characterize the experiences of the workers as social issues given their current situation.

I have heard people say that all poor people have to do to improve their lives is work harder to attain a better job. However, to them these personal troubles are in reality, social issues. This is true because it is often too difficult for an individual, already overburdened, to overcome with only their individual fortitude and will. This social issue can be solved with the help from government and management working for reform. There may be a solution to the decrepit system. I propose raising the minimum wage to a national minimum wage of \$10.00 per hour.

One may wonder how many companies would collapse under the stress of increasing the wages of their workers to this level. Many of the larger chains, such as Wal-Mart and Target, depend upon narrow profit margins, to build more stores, employ more workers, and to further expand their business. Remove the narrow profit margins and many companies might either close, move operations overseas or ideally change practices to help their workers. I advise there be a law to penalize the companies that produce overseas. The more jobs available, the more employers will have to compete with each other to attract workers.

Resulting from the competition would be better wages, better benefits, better treatment and working conditions, including better job security. In conclusion, Nickel and Dimed is but a taste of the working poor. Her journey had its strengths and its weaknesses, but overall Ehrenreich was successful in infiltrating the working-class poor to give the more privileged a new view of the social struggles faced by many in the U. S. everyday. She was limited by who she was, a middle-class journalist unconditioned to a world requiring the strongest survivors.

She was successful in her mission, to unveil to the public about the world of hardships and indignities many experience on a daily basis just to survive.

By “ becoming one of them,” she was able to find modern social issues and personal troubles C. Wright Mills described decades ago. She discovered the conflict theory, functionalism, and symbolic interactionism in her work.

Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich lead the reader to question the role of government in cases of extreme poverty and if having any job equates to a better life.