

Nickel and dimed by barbara ehrenreich



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, published in 2001 by Barbara Ehrenreich, is a book in which the author goes “undercover” and investigates the lives of the working poor by living and working in similar conditions. The book demonstrates fairly well two social paradigms, namely conflict theory (inspired by Marx and Weber) and structural-functionalism (inspired by Talcott Parsons). Conflict theory is clearly demonstrated throughout the book-social order based on inequality, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. There is also evidence of structural-functionalism, though it is not the best fit. Structural-functionalism is defined as a society in which there are groups of people organized into levels that enable individuals in this society to find stability, order and meaning (Kimmel, Aronson, and Dennis 2011). Ehrenreich shows that there are certainly levels within society, however, because of the inequalities that are present, the individuals in the working poor are unable to find stability or order because they are running a never-ending race so to speak. These inequalities have many effects on society at large (both wealthy and those in poverty), as well as the families within the working poor.

The economic inequality in our culture has many probable causes, but they all affect society as a whole, regardless of your class or status. These effects include things such as trust/social cohesion, crime/deviance, and population health (especially that of the working poor). There is a correlation between income inequality in a society and general mistrust, demonstrated by a U. S. General Survey (Uslaner and Brown 2002). One economist, a Joseph Stiglitz (2012), argues that this inequality has also led to distrust of businesses and the government. Crime is also a correlated factor in societies with a bigger

economic gap. Several studies have been done that show a significant increase in homicides, both in the U. S. and worldwide, in societies that have a large margin between the rich and the poor (Martin, Wilson, and Vasdev 2001). Homicides are generally the most common measure of violent crime due to the fact that statistics are reported worldwide. There are also numerous consequences for population health in societies with a larger economic inequality. Researchers have found that these societies have a slightly lower life expectancy, and a higher incidence of social and health problems like incarceration rates, teenage births, mental illness, obesity, education and others (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). It has also been shown that this inequality and social stratification can be linked to anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and other stress-related disorders (Booth 2010).

It is because of this constantly present inequality that I believe Ehrenreich's book most accurately represents conflict theory. At one point in the book, Ehrenreich remarks, " Maybe, it occurs to me, that I'm getting a tiny glimpse of what it would be like to be black (p. 100)." This is a slightly good point because, while we as a society view class as an achieved status, oftentimes it is fixed and ascribed much like race. Of the consequences brought about by this societal inequality and conflict, the working poor themselves experience the majority. Throughout Nickel and Dimed we are shown that there are many " hidden costs" to being poor, and oftentimes those in poverty are stuck in a rut with no way out because of them. The working poor have to live day-to-day in hotels accumulating costs, where it would normally be cheaper to rent an apartment if they could simply afford the security deposit and starting utilities. Without a semi-permanent shelter and

rising debt, the working poor are usually forced to buy less healthy, more expensive meals because they don't have the luxury of the appliances needed to cook and store food. Being poor is often a self-fulfilling prophecy, and those who believe they are stuck in poverty for the rest of their days are often likely to do just that.

In another part of the book, Ehrenreich and other maids are watching a training video on how to clean rooms and vacuum. The video itself is slightly demeaning, almost as if made to be watched by young children. In one part of the video, the man giving instructions says " See, I am the vacuum cleaner (p. 74)." This sort of paints a picture in the readers head as to how the company views and treats its employees: like they are mindless robots whose only purpose is to serve the business. To the rich, that is basically what they are. The rich view the working poor as a group in society that is made to be taken advantage of, very similar to Karl Marx' view of the proletariat. In their eyes it fulfills the structural-functionalism paradigm of society-as many say, " someone has to do it". Unfortunately this is not the case, because the theory calls for all individuals in society to have stability and order in their lives. As evidenced by Ehrenreich's investigation into the working poor, the last thing the working poor have is stability, therefore this theory is not an entirely accurate representation of our culture. Instead there is the ever-present conflict between the rich and working class.

It is shown by both Ehrenreich's book and in the real world that the working poor are blocked from advancing in society by many different obstacles. These obstacles are things like housing, transportation, and other basic necessities (Ehrenreich 2001). For instance, the working poor often do not

<https://assignbuster.com/nickel-and-dimed-by-barbara-ehrenreich/>

have a permanent residence or family to stay with while they save money, and cannot afford a large deposit for an apartment. This means they have to settle with weekly hotel rooms, which end up being more expensive, yet are the only affordable option because they don't require large down payments. Transportation is another common factor; if one is a member of the working poor they likely do not have their own car and have to rely on public transportation. Depending on the location it is do-able, but public transportation in our society is still not widely-available in every city. One study shows that single mothers who were able to work out a carpool or something similar with their peers were much less likely to require government aid (Eden and Lein 1997).

Food and clothing are also problems; without savings it is much harder to buy uniforms and such for jobs. The working poor also have to deal with odd work schedules, often working all times of the day and never having consistent hours. Not only does this mean it is harder to save up money, but being able to spend so little time at home also puts the working poor in a position where it is difficult to find the time to cook for themselves, and are often left with the choice of unhealthy fast food. Working odd hours also leaves parents helpless when it comes to childcare; while there are many options for childcare including free programs and social networking with peers, working at all hours of the night means you might not always have a babysitter lined up. Obviously this has negative consequences for both the children and the parents.

Ehrenreich's book shows quite well how the conflict theory can apply to our society and the ever-growing gap between the rich and the working poor. In <https://assignbuster.com/nickel-and-dimed-by-barbara-ehrenreich/>

recent years people seem to be taking more notice of the working poor, but the gap is still as large as ever. In her evaluation at the end of the book, Ehrenreich states,

The “ working poor,” as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor...

I agree with the author in the sense that the working poor are definitely “ taking one for the team” so to say. They carry out the menial labor that is required in our society, but not everyone wants to do. Unfortunately because we don’t live in a utopia, they suffer for it. They make great sacrifice by doing jobs they often know don’t lead to advancement in society, because they know that it has to be done by someone. The conflict theory applies to both Ehrenreich’s book and our society in the real world-there are numerous inequalities in the workforce, and the allocation of resources for individuals in our society is distributed unfairly.