

Conflict theory in nickeled and dimed



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The middle class of America is slowly disappearing. Over the past few decades, the ability of the average American to afford a living wage has been deteriorating, with many citizens being forced to hold two or even three jobs at a time just to make ends meet. In the non-fiction book *Nickeled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, writer Barbara Ehrenreich showcases these difficulties by going undercover and living life through the low wages available to many Americans in an attempt to live in three different cities in America for a month each, with a goal of earning the next month's rent within that first month of work. Throughout her endeavors, she finds many struggles both with her own situation and the situations of the many coworkers she meets along the way, showcasing the real-world occurrences of the social conflict theory, both through the class-based interactions between employees and their employers and through immersion in relationships among employees themselves.

In *Nickeled and Dimed*, Ehrenreich put herself into the world of the poor working citizen, establishing a low-rent living situation and working a low-wage job, and trying to find if she can acquire the necessary funds to live in each area. She lived in each area with a goal of finding the highest wage job she could keep, the lowest cost housing available, and not falling back on her previous skills of work. She claimed the process as sort of like an experiment, and while she just wanted to see if she could find a way to afford rent off of the low-wage jobs, her experiences led to a strong sociological analysis of the effects of class systems on low-wage workers.

Barbara Ehrenreich starts off *Nickeled and Dimed* in the City of Key West, Florida, a city that was near her home. She initially rents a trailer to live in,

and acquires a job working as a waitress at a small restaurant in the area. Ehrenreich finds that the waitress job alone would not be enough to support herself and gets a second job as maid at a nearby hotel, but she soon finds the job too physically demanding and leaves. After 2 weeks, she comes to the conclusion that she cannot afford to pay rent, and moves on. The second city Ehrenreich lives in is Portland, Maine. Here she is unable to find an apartment, but takes advantage of the abundance of weekly rent hotels, finding an affordable hotel room to live in for a month. She again takes on two jobs, one as a housekeeper on weekdays, and another as a dietary aide in a nursing home during the weekend. She manages to make her rent for the month barely, but details the poor working conditions of the housekeepers. The third city that Ehrenreich attempts to live in is Minneapolis, Minnesota. Here she is unable to find a place to live due to very low vacancy, and ends up in a weekly motel with no bolt on the door. She gets a job at the local Wal-Mart, but it is incredibly low-paying and she is unable to eat anything more than fast food in order to afford her housing. Ehrenreich details the inner workings of how the Wal-Mart treated the employees, and her failed attempts to get them to join a union and demand better treatment. This month, like the first, was met with failure to maintain housing.

The biggest sociological theory that is displayed in *Nickel and Dimed* is the Marxist-based conflict theory. Conflict theory states that among different groups and individuals that have differing levels of power or wealth, the more powerful group will use that power to exploit the weaker groups. In the case of the low-wage workers at the various jobs Ehrenreich worked at, they

were constantly treated poorly by their employers, often being demeaned and insulted, and otherwise looked down upon. Florida's example of conflict theory at work was with one of Ehrenreich's coworkers, a Czech dishwasher whom she refers to as George. George did not speak English very well at all, and as a result there was a heavy language barrier. Within the first week of working, some items are found to be missing, and George is accused of stealing from the company. Unfortunately, with the language barrier, George is unable to defend his case, and gets fired from the company as a result.

The housekeeping job in Portland, Maine, had a demeaning training video, which represents conflict theory quite well. The video was set up in such a way that it appeared to be designed for young children. In one part, the man giving the instructions even says, " See, I am the vacuum cleaner." Having the video set up as if it were for children displays how the company views its employees, as unintelligent people, unable to do anything properly without dumbed-down instructions. The employees are treated with further disrespect as health-based issues were largely ignored, only acknowledged with the simple remark of " work through it."

The fear stricken into the lower class by the dominance of the upper class in conflict theory is showcased by the behaviors of one of the employees at the housekeeping job. The employee, referred to as Holly, refused to seek medical attention after injuring her ankle, despite being unable to walk without being in pain. Holly feared that if her situation prevented her from working for even a short while, she would lose her job and be unable to keep her meager living situation intact. Later it became apparent that Holly was pregnant; similarly, she refused to bring any sort of attention to it, in fear of

losing her job entirely. It wasn't until Ehrenreich asked for Holly to get medical attention that she was allowed a day off to see a doctor. Because of this level of fear, the upper class maintains its level of control over the lower class.

Wal-Mart displayed the concept of conflict theory with its sub-par treatment of employees as well. When Ehrenreich worked at the Minneapolis Wal-Mart, she found that the work was stressful and monotonous from the instant the interview started. The interview involved a series of questions designed to make the potential employee feel under severe scrutiny from the start, including many moral dilemmas such as dealing with coworker theft and dishonesty. This stage was immediately followed up by a drug test, showing an implied distrust for any potential employees and an assumption that drugs are the norm among the applicants. These practices displayed how the upper and middle class employers of corporations automatically assume the worst from the lower class employees, and work to put them down. The orientation process involved eight hours of tedious, repetitive teachings of Wal-Mart's ideologies and propaganda, much of it stressing how fantastic Wal-Mart is as a company. Once actually employed at the Wal-Mart, Ehrenreich found that the employees would continue to be put down for every minor issue that came up. For example, one of the managers, referred to as Howard, would hound over any employees that would start talking, accusing them of "time theft," or the act of not actively working while on the clock. In addition, Ehrenreich brings up a nature of competition that ultimately proves unhealthy. With the lower class employees being put into a position where they feel they have to prove their worth to the employers,

every little mistake gets brought up by coworkers and is used to ridicule the perpetrator of the mistake. With these issues constantly brought to the surface, workers start to dislike each other; such corporate strategy helps to keep the employees from cooperating in a way that could benefit themselves over their employers and the company as a whole.

Ultimately, the issues of conflict theory are amplified by the ratio of income to the cost of living. With even the low cost housing options being way out of reach for many low-wage citizens, the ability for many of these workers to make enough money to properly support themselves can be incredibly difficult. Ehrenreich reveals the low-wage workplace environment as a place where basic civil liberties are stripped away, as people are made to work long hours for little reward, making their hard work all for practically nothing. The upper class puts out the illusion that the cure for poverty as a whole is simply employment, but Ehrenreich's experiences, and those of many of her coworkers throughout the experiment, display the truth that simple employment is often not enough to get by in today's society and economy. Unfortunately, with the belief system in place that the poor continue to be poor simply out of laziness and poor work ethic, the middle and upper class continue to dominate the lower class, with little to no action taken to actually address the poverty level.

Barbara Ehrenreich thoroughly displays the reality of the social conflict theory through her experience dealing with poverty-level wages in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Many of the jobs that are easily attainable for the poor put them into positions where they are minimally cared for by their employers and are given wages that are insufficient for

<https://assignbuster.com/conflict-theory-in-nickeled-and-dimed/>

decent quality of life. Even the hardest-working employees of many of these companies are left without enough money to pay rent each month. With the upper class employers able to control wages, hours, and expected work requirements, the lower class employees are forced to work longer and harder for little reward, often being forced to eat unhealthily or in small amounts, or otherwise work in conditions that carry the possibility of personal injury. Ehrenreich's experiences showcased the impossible odds that many people go through simply to live a normal life in America, and how their employers do little to help them along the way. This dominance of the upper class over the poor is the true exemplification of social conflict theory.