

# Nickel and dimed by barbara ehrenreich



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Barbara Ehrenreich began her research to explore how people attempting to move from welfare to work are managing—if at all. This exploration also extended to those who are apart of the working class and having not been on welfare. Attempting to place herself in the position of her subjects, Ehrenreich strived to see if she were able to survive on the minimal income provided by a series of low level and low paying jobs.

It was her foreknowledge of laws and the inclusion of these laws in *Nickel and Dimed* that brought about exposing historical and present-day 21st century contradictory practices, laws, and regulations that exploit the poor working class (if not through her experiment but by the subjects' honest experience). In addition to exposing this existing institutionalized discrimination, whether unconsciously or consciously, Ehrenreich demonstrates with her approach the severe state of class and racial segregation as it pertains to what jobs are available and to whom and what kind of lives are produced in such a class divided American society.

Consequently, Ehrenreich's method does not come without any flaws. It can be argued that when trying to place herself in the shoes of her subjects, she possessed some essential advantages that the average poor working class citizen simply do not have such as her level of educational attainment, White privilege regardless of her class status, and start-off funds that allowed her both the mobility and comfort of surviving.

This inevitable comfort reminded her of the obvious fact that her participation in the poor working class was strictly “temporary”; thus, relieving her of the honest stresses and worry that plagues the poor working

class—stresses and worries that often times leads to a battle with survival and can result in behavior that is often not analyzed but categorized; deeming a person (or a group of individuals) as “ criminals” rather than people who are trying to adapt to- and endure the unequal access to wealth in a world where there are particular citizens who are excluded from the American society and left to find alternative ways to survive.

Books Historical Relevance It is known that the American society and its relationship with capitalistic processes have resulted in a severe state of class separation. Unfortunately, seeming as how America had not yet finished her battles as they pertain to race relations; class then, is not the only issue of the 21st Century but rather both class and race. A counter argument would be that it now being the 21st century with President Barack Obama in office that America has somehow miraculously reached a state of a “ post-racial” society.

This is definitely not the case. Conducting her experiment in 1998 through the turn of the century in 2000, Ehrenreich entered this working class lifestyle at a time where the economy and opportunities were thought of as accessible to anyone. Converting a article into a full-blown book at the suggestion of her previous book publisher in 2001, Nickel and Dimed seemed to possess quality emergence journalism insight—Ehrenreich even receiving praise for her contribution.

Getting further into the book, unfortunately, Ehrenreich’s journalistic approach left readers with many gaps. Even with having experience with being a journalist, this experiment lacked crucial personal interactions with

her subjects and often times her attempt at positioning herself in the working class becomes deluded. With crucial interactions with her subjects missing—a requirement that later sacrificed any possibility of her research giving any true insight of the lives of the working class—Ehrenreich was left to talk more about herself.

Not stepping out of the comfort of the work place and her living quarters, Ehrenreich was not able to examine co-workers on a personal level with the exception of a few whom she describes having conversations with but never stepping fully into their worlds. For example, a woman suggested that she go to a church if she were having any trouble. Despite her attending a revival meeting where she criticizes and poke fun at the service, Ehrenreich dismisses this invitation, thus, unconsciously reminding her readers of her privilege.

Strengths / Weaknesses Before moving any further with potential weaknesses, the major and possibly only strength was Ehrenreich's issue with rent, but this later hits a dead-end. Rent being a significant problem for a society that expects and claims that people are able to afford to live off of minimum wage should highlight a flaw in that assumption. Throughout this book, rent becomes a major issue for her but her continuous complaining with no action becomes ineffective. When placed with desperate measures, strategies are quickly summoned.

If one has some family and/or friends, there will be an attempt to ask them to loan money. If the individual has formed relationships and associations with people who are also hanging on the poverty line, the idea of taking in a

roommate or moving in with a roommate to split the rent will definitely be a consideration as well as considering any government assistance programs. Ehrenreich's fictional character did not include any family nor friends and associations that she could split the rent with nor did she seek out any other ways to make ends meet.

These subtleties can make it easier for readers to disregard the stress of paying ones rent, because Ehrenreich's experience is simply not an accurate depiction; failing to demonstrate logical behavior of someone who is sincerely struggling to survive. One could even argue that Barbara Ehrenreich's tactics to exploring such lives was a bit self-righteous. Falling into the habit of talking more about herself than that of the actual victims, a vital question can be raised: Why couldn't extensive interviews and tracking provide the answers to her curiosity toward the lives of the working class?

It is true that when participating in a research that requires one to analyze the lives, conditions, behaviors, and attitudes of individuals that the option to put oneself in their shoes sounds like a great idea, but realistically when this has little direct effect the action is useless. Take the issue of gay marriage for example. A heterosexual couple proclaims that they will not get married until gays and lesbians are able to get married—whom does this approach directly affect? The couple. Does it force decision makers to get a little uncomfortable and decide to comply with their agendas?

Despite the couples "we're allies" appeal, this approach is flawed and reflects a bit of pretentious behavior that is not effective. Unlike the people Ehrenreich tried to represent, she had the option of creating a fictional

version of herself—minimizing her experience, disguising herself and her purpose. Had she focused more on the lives of actual working class members while thinking of herself as not fully immersed but rather undercover participating in investigative journalism, and then perhaps she would have given readers more insight.

Instead, as stated previously, she focused more on self, eventually quite the jobs and wrapped up her conclusion with congratulating herself; proud that she was able to manage. First Book Review Question It is possible Ehrenreich excluded some crucial information having to do with the attitudes of her co-workers, because it went against her personal views and presumptions. It is known that she has written other books about poverty and for that she is known to be very critical of the conditions of poverty and how it affects its claimed victims.

Nickel and Dimed tells us that prominent national and international chains such as restaurants, hotels, retail outlets, cleaning services, and retirement homes somehow makes low wage service industry workers to be proud of working such jobs. Had this been further explored, perhaps Ehrenreich could have included the obvious present issue of false consciousness—the inability for the working class to be aware of how the elite controls their lives.

Although when reflecting on her experiences, Ehrenreich claims that the most difficult circumstance for her to accept is the invisibility of the poor; one sees them daily in restaurants, hotels, discount stores, and fast-food chains but one doesn't recognize them as poor because, after all, they have jobs. Her book provides no real answers to this problem. Second Book

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Review Question The treatment of companies is not fair to their workers, but gives the illusion of being fair.

In collaboration with the countries questionably calculated poverty line and amount of minimum wage that has not increased with inflation keeps the working class cleaning toilets, making beds, and doing the dirty work the middle-, upper class, and the elite do not have to engage in to survive. In a concluding chapter, Ehrenreich does attempts to address why wages are so low, why workers are so accepting of them, and what Washington's refusal to increase the minimum wage to a realistic living wage says about both our economy and our culture.

Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* Stepping back to the time period in which Ehrenreich conducted her emergence journalism and even when considering Jacob Riis's analysis in *How the Other Half Lives*, it is quite obvious that while there has been some change, there has not been a dramatic change when it comes to the blue-collar working class in terms of job opportunities and advancements, earning reasonable and less degrading wages for the kind of work they do, and having little or no access to quality living accommodations.

Conclusion In conclusion, when using herself as the primary example to the lives of working class individuals, this caused a glitch in her product that cannot be ignored. Even while missing thorough interactions with her subjects, her writings were able to reveal some conditions such as, that there exist significant disproportions of individuals who fall in racial and

ethnic groupings and are stuck in the cycle of poverty that has existed in the American society for decades.

Not directly addressing these dynamics and focusing more on her own experience while experimenting with the life of the poor working class, Ehrenreich also lacks the analysis that could have further described the difficult lives of the people she worked with. This missing central analysis produces an inability to provide potential solutions that could possibly make their lives easier, hence her alternative application of self-praise in her concluding chapter.