Nickel and Dimed Reaction Paper

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INTRODUCTION

In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America*, originally published in 2001 with an afterword by the author added in 2008, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich creates an interesting and entertaining narrative based on her own experiences and observations as she takes on the role of a working class woman in 20th century America. Although not a sociologist herself, Ehrenreich, explored many sociological concepts through her research, and in attempt of capturing the essence of her social findings, I will start by providing a brief summary of the book’s content and by exploring the overall themes of Ehrenreich’s analysis. I will then digress into a discussion of how elements of her story relate to sociological concepts and theories presented in Richard T. Schaefer’s *Sociology Matters* and discussed in lecture, concluding with my own evaluation of the book, which will include my thoughts on the legitimacy of Ehrenreich’s research and what points I found most relevant to my own life and the lives of my peers.

BOOK SUMMARY

Ehrenreich’s Research Methods

Ehrenreich conducted what Schaefer terms (2011:28) “participant observation,” in which “the researcher actually joins a group for a period, to get an accurate sense of how it operates.” Ehrenreich, after suggesting that somebody should go undercover, experience and report on what life as a member of the working-class was like, disguised herself as an uneducated, poor, middle-aged woman and attempted to establish herself in three separate cities over the course of three months. Her goal, she reports (2008:6), was “straightforward and objective—just to see whether I could match income to expenses, as the truly poor attempt to do every day.” She began from scratch in each city, seldom knowing anyone in close proximity, and in attempting to meet this “straightforward and objective” goal, Ehrenreich experienced first-hand the conflicts the poor and working-class face in making ends meet and surviving each day, recording in detail her experiences along the way.

Financial Strain
The most prominent obstacle Ehrenreich faced in each city in which she lived was poverty; with her new persona, she was qualified for only the lowest paying jobs in the labor market, which hardly paid enough to sustain a healthy life over the course of a month, as she soon found. She worked as a waitress in Key West and attempted a second job as a maid at a hotel, but still, she reports (2008:197), “if I had remained in my $500 efficiency, I would have been able to pay the rent and have $22 left over (which is still $78 less than the cash I had in my pocket at the start of the month).” She would have ended with less money than with she had started, and because she had to move to a more expensive living space, she actually ended the month owing more than she had earned.

In Portland, where Ehrenreich worked as a maid for a housecleaning company on weekdays and as a “dietary aide” on weekends, she reports to have (2008:197) come “closest to achieving a decent fit between income and expenses, but only because I worked seven days a week.” That being said, however, she still lived a less than comfortable life, constantly aching from work and having very little downtime for herself.

Ehrenreich worked at Wal-Mart for the month she lived in Minneapolis and had the hardest time making ends meet here, for she couldn’t find cheap housing and had to live in a motel, which cost much more than an apartment would have. Much ambiguity existed in her findings from Minneapolis, for Ehrenreich avoided many options that could have given her more financial stability. She turned down a higher paying job at a Home-Depot-type store called Menards, for example, and chose to stay in a motel over a dormitory that would have cost far less. She admits (2008:198), “with some different choices, I probably could have survived in Minneapolis. But I’m not going back for a rematch.”

Physical Strain

Not only were Ehrenreich’s finances strained in working the jobs of the lower classes, but so, too, was her physical state. Each of her jobs, whether it was waitressing, cleaning or working in the women’s clothing section of Wal-Mart, required her to be on her feet for extended periods of time, and on several occasions, as a maid in particular, work was so physically demanding that she and her co-workers became tired and physically inept, increasing the likelihood of injury. As Ehrenreich and the other maids hurried
from one house to another to complete their schedule for the day, Ehrenreich recalls Holly tripping and severely hurting her ankle. Financial strain, however, caused Holly to refuse taking the rest of the day off, for a day without pay would be detrimental to the livelihood of her family and herself; working lower-class jobs, therefore, not only tends to increase the likelihood of injury based on the jobs’ tendencies to be physically straining, but it also decreases the likelihood of attending to such injuries in an efficient manner.

Ehrenreich describes (2008:89) her world as a working-class woman as one “of pain—managed by Excedrin and Advil, compensated for with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on weekends, with booze.” Members of the poor and working-class experience more physical hardship than their middle and upper-class counterparts, but, ironically, have neither the budget nor insurance to treat themselves. They turn to whatever means they have, which are often only temporary and, in the case of alcohol and tobacco, can actually cause more health problems in the long run.

Health Strain

In addition to the health concerns brought on by replacing reliable methods of pain relief with cigarettes and alcohol, Ehrenreich discovered several other aspects of life in the working-class that made room for sufficient deficiency in health. Ehrenreich suffered from sleep deprivation due to the aches she acquired through such labor-intensive work, and, as reported by The FASEB Journal (1996), “prolonged and severe sleep deprivation is associated with alterations of natural and cellular immune function.” Just by impeding on her sleep, then, work took the most elemental approach in harming Ehrenreich’s health by attacking her immunity.

Ehrenreich also found that, based on her budget, healthy foods were simply unobtainable without putting herself in severe financial trouble. She notes that her co-worker Rosalie ate only half of a bag of Doritos for lunch, for (2008:78) “she just didn’t have anything in the house.” Ehrenreich sees this trend periodically while working amongst the poor; they eat “meals” of little nutrition despite working labor-intensive jobs that actually increase the amount of calories they should be taking in. I’ll speak more of malnutrition amongst the poor later in “Sociology in Nickel and Dimed.”
As was seen in the inability to acquire necessary pain relief, all other medications, too, were very difficult to acquire for those working the low-paying jobs Ehrenreich attempted. When Ehrenreich got a skin rash, for example, she had to (2008:88) “fall back on the support networks of my real-life social class, call the dermatologist I know in Key West, and bludgeon him into prescribing something sight unseen.” A worker who didn’t have the same connections Ehrenreich did may not have been able to treat the problem as quickly or as satisfactorily and may not have been able to afford it at all. Inability to treat illness was yet another obstacle Ehrenreich discovered the working class faced each day that those of the upper and middle class often take for granted.

SOCIODY IN *NICKEL AND DIMED*

Although not technically a sociologist, Ehrenreich uncovered and explained several sociological concepts through her experiment and evaluations.

*Research Design*

Participant Observation

As previously stated, Ehrenreich conducted her experiment based on participant observation, where the observer takes on a particular role and experiences first-hand that which she is researching. The most difficult challenge to overcome as a participant observer, Schaefer says (2011:28) is “gain[ing] acceptance into an unfamiliar group.” Ehrenreich did this by creating a new identity: that of a divorced housewife without a college degree, and by sharing as little as possible about her personal life. Her co-workers, for the most part, never suspected her as a fake, allowing her to experience life as a low-wage worker quite authentically and providing readers with an accurate depiction of such an existence.

The Hawthorne Effect

Schaefer defines (2011:29) the Hawthorne effect as “the unintended influence of observers or experiments on subjects of research, who deviate from their typical behavior because they realize that they are under observation.” The Hawthorne effect can greatly influence the observations made from an experiment, and by creating a new identity and keeping her journalistic intentions from everyone she
encountered, employers, co-workers and customers alike, until the experiment’s end, Ehrenreich once more took precautions to provide the most accurate depiction of life in the working-class.

Poverty

Ehrenreich found herself during the experiment surrounded by the impoverished and in a state of poverty herself. Schaefer defines (2011:145) relative poverty as “a floating standard of deprivation by which people at the bottom of a society, whatever their lifestyles, are judged to be disadvantaged.” When compared to others in society, Ehrenreich and her co-workers were definitely at a disadvantage in their low-paying jobs, and Ehrenreich noted several sociological aspects of poverty in her report.

Diminished Health

One of the major sociological observations Ehrenreich made during her research was the effect poverty had on one’s health; not only did the nature of the jobs she held make her more prone to injuries, for she was constantly on her feet in high-stress, fast-paced surroundings as a waitress, maid and Wal-Mart employee, but her poor pay and busy schedule made eating nutritional meals almost unfeasible. Meals consisted mainly of fast foods and snacks bought at gas stations, and even when Ehrenreich went to a food pantry, she reports (2008:103) that “my dinner choices…are limited to any two of the following: one-box spaghetti noodles, one jar spaghetti sauce, one can of vegetables, one can of baked beans, one pound of hamburger, a box of Hamburger Helper, or a box of Tuna Helper. No fresh fruit or vegetables, no chicken or cheese, and, oddly, no tuna to help out with.” Her options were extremely limited and promoted a malnourished diet: a trend she discovered very common amongst her fellow working-class co-workers.

Malnourishment only further complicated other health risks associated with working low-wage jobs. Workers Ehrenreich studied worked labor-intensive long hours with few breaks, and, as irony would have it, few earned enough money to obtain resources that were necessary to upkeep their bodies to endure such work for extended periods. Ehrenreich notes (2008:90) that “my very ability to work tirelessly hour after hour is a product of decades of better-than-average medical care, a high-protein diet, and workouts in gyms that charge $400 or $500 a year. If I am now a productive fake member of the working class, it’s
because I haven’t been working, in any hard physical sense, long enough to have ruined my body.” The work in which low-paid workers were involved, then, was ruining their bodies and health even further than they had been originally just by growing up impoverished.

Measuring Poverty

Ehrenreich was made aware very quickly that the lives of the poor, while already difficult, were made even more so due to the government’s poor method of measuring poverty. As discussed in Sociology Matters and in lecture, Ehrenreich explains how poverty is measured and why the method is inadequate by saying (2008:200) “the official poverty level is still calculated by the archaic method of taking the bare-bones cost of food for a family of a given size and multiplying this number by three. Yet food is relatively inflation-proof, at least compared with rent… [and] in 1999, food took up only 16 percent of the family budget, while housing had soared to 37 percent.” The government’s definition of poverty, therefore, is an incredibly inaccurate measurement, making it exceptionally difficult for individuals who are struggling to make it financially to receive aide they desperately need merely based on the fact that they are not technically labeled as living in “poverty.”

Bureaucracy

In holding each of her jobs, Ehrenreich maintained position in a bureaucracy, which Schaefer defines (2011:93) as “a component of formal organization in which rules and hierarchical ranking are used to achieve efficiency.” In order for an organization to be considered a bureaucracy, it must have division of labor, hierarchy of authority, written rules and regulations, impersonality and employment based on technical qualifications. Ehrenreich saw each of these qualities in each of her places of employment, and while working in a bureaucracy promoted efficiency, problems within the bureaucracies often arose.

Problems with Bureaucracy

As a server, Ehrenreich found that the impersonality of working for a corporation made goal displacement (defined by Schaefer [2011:96] as “overzealous conformity to official regulations”) a constant force in the working environment. Because servers were seen as mere pawns as opposed to individuals in the eyes of the corporation, as Ehrenreich’s co-worker Gail describes (2008:22) it,
“[Corporations] don’t cut you no slack. You give and you give and they take.” Managers became so consumed with making sure servers and cooks were working efficiently that they forgot to regard them as individuals, which only exhausted workers, making them bitter and disconnected from the business.

Ehrenreich found the most concerning problems with bureaucracy during the hiring process she underwent in each of the cities. Most of the time, the process began with a questionnaire in which (2008:59) “the ‘right’ answers should be obvious to anyone who has encountered the principle of hierarchy and subordination.” The hiring process, then, was so impersonal that one’s true character could easily be overlooked because he knew how to answer a set of questions correctly.

Ehrenreich argued the same point from the opposite side, that somebody qualified for a position could be turned away due to the impersonality of the hiring process, by considering and discussing the concept of drug tests. Having smoked marijuana out of stress prior to looking for a job in Minneapolis, she reports (2008:127-128) “it rankles…to know that the many engaging qualities I believe I have to offer—friendliness, reliability, willingness to learn—can all be trumped by my pee.” Despite being a qualified individual, impersonality of the bureaucratic system could have potentially kept Ehrenreich from acquiring a job she desperately needed.

Both of these examples contribute to the Peter Principle in bureaucracies, which describes the trend in which individuals who are not qualified competently for positions obtain them based on technical qualifications.

Statuses

Schafer defines (2011:78) status as “any of the full range of socially defined positions within a large group or society.” As was expected, Ehrenreich saw a very distinct change in her status as she moved from educated, achieved journalist to the theoretical character she created for herself of uneducated, divorced homemaker, and as a result, she made note of the importance of both relativity and mobility in exploring the concept of statuses.

Relativity
A crucial concept in sociology is status relativity; statuses only exist in relation to other statuses, and Ehrenreich made constant note of this throughout *Nickel and Dimed*. Though she saw herself as lower class by living in a community such as Blue Haven while in Maine, she soon realized (2008:70) “the mere fact of having a unit to myself makes me an aristocrat within the Blue Haven community.” She saw similar relationships while cleaning houses, for although in her previous life she may not have regarded a particular individual as “wealthy,” she discovered through her team leader’s observation (2011:95) that “if we’re cleaning their house, they’re wealthy.” Status, then, can only exist if there are others to which they can be compared.

Mobility

Ehrenreich discovered, in addition to the prominence of status relativity, how difficult it was for individuals to move amongst statuses. Social mobility is a term defined by Schaefer (2011:149) as “the movement of individuals or groups from one position in a society’s stratification system to another,” and is very rare in American culture due to the culture’s closed system, described by Schaefer (2011:150) as allowing “little or no possibility of moving up.”

Ehrenreich found that there were many factors preventing members of the working class from moving upwards on the social ladder; many times these factors, ironically, were directly tied to the individual’s status as “working class.” She notes (2008:205) that “the poorer they are, the more constrained their mobility usually is,” and goes on to explain that, for example, not having a car because of limited finances may prevent an individual from finding a job that would in turn help him afford one in the future.

Similarly, Ehrenreich points out when in Portland (2008:54), “I need a job and an apartment, but to get a job I need an address and phone number and to get an apartment it helps to have evidence of stable employment.” It is hard enough, as evidenced by this Catch-22, to even establish one’s existence in a lower status, let alone try to work one’s way up.

EVALUATION

*Validity and Reliability of the Experiment*
Scientific research results require both validity and reliability in order to be accepted as legitimate; Schaefer defines (2011:25) validity as “the degree to which a measure or scale truly reflects the phenomenon under study” and reliability as “the extent to which a measure produces consistent results.” Ehrenreich’s experiment certainly provided results that can be considered reliable; in each city in which she worked, Ehrenreich was considered qualified for similarly paying jobs of similar labor-intensive qualities. In each city, Ehrenreich obtained similar living quarters and faced the same difficulties, supporting the reliability of her account and ultimate conclusion that it is incredibly difficult to support one’s self on such low-wage conditions.

It is validity that often came into question during Ehrenreich’s research; she notes (2008:10) that her experiment represented “the best-case scenario: a person with every advantage that ethnicity and education, health and motivation can confer attempting, in a time of exuberant prosperity.” What I really appreciated about Nickel and Dimed, however, was that when such discrepancies arose due to Ehrenreich’s true identity, she not only stated them, making the reader cognizant of their existence, but she also explained how their existences altered the validity of her results. For example, as previously noted, Ehrenreich used connections she had with a dermatologist to treat a skin condition when she was living in Portland. Had she not had this connection from her life as a middle-class journalist, seeking treatment would have been much more difficult. She also noted that, unlike so many of her co-workers, she had no children to support on her wages, making ends meet more easily, and had the physical advantage of not having (2008:195) “to go home from my various jobs to chase toddlers and pick up after a family, as so many women do.” I therefore believe, then, that Ehrenreich’s experiment was both valid and reliable, supporting its legitimacy, for when discrepancies became apparent to Ehrenreich, she in turn made them apparent to readers and explained their consequences.

Relevance to the Life of a College Student

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Nickel and Dimed, in part due to Ehrenreich’s sarcastic and humorous narrative approach to reporting her experience, but also because I found it very relative to my own life. Although I grew up in a middle-class home and never had to suffer the kinds of difficulties children of the
working-class go through on a daily basis, I have constantly been surrounded by low-wage workers, and it was interesting to see life from their perspectives. I worked in the food industry for a little over a year, so I had somewhat of a taste for what serving others was like, but I feel that I was treated much more amiably being a teenager as I would have had I been middle-aged working the same job. There is a stigma on middle-aged people who maintain low-wage jobs, for they are often seen as lazy, but I admired Ehrenreich’s reports of the individuals she met who were simply “stuck” in their positions in society. I am therefore much more aware of how I treat workers I encounter since having read the book, as many of her readers shared in the afterword, and try to give them the benefit of the doubt whenever possible.

As Ehrenreich so eloquently states (2008:199), “something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don’t need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high.” I agree wholeheartedly with this observation, for Ehrenreich proved its legitimacy by experiencing the difficulties of life in working-class America first-hand, and I feel that it is a message that every individual, regardless of social status or class, should take in and really consider. This is our society and our country, and people who are just as human as us are suffering to survive each day right within our borders, and this is just as universal a message as any other.
Bibliography