

What Do We Know About the Working Class?

If you were to ask an academic about poverty or the working class, they would probably point you to *Nickel and Dimed*—in fact, that’s how I found out the book even existed. Since Barbara Ehrenreich wrote the book, it’s been on summer reading lists and has even had the honor of being banned.¹ Why has it been banned? Because Ehrenreich dives headfirst into an account of the lives of the working class, exposing an uncomfortable reality about the world in which we live—chiefly, that we do not pay the working class enough to live.

In the introduction, Ehrenreich recounts her editor, Lewis H. Lapham, saying that *she* should be the one to actually go try living the working class life when she offhandedly suggested it during a lunch focused on her future articles. Despite many hesitations—particularly since she would be attempting to confirm unpleasant descriptions—she undertook this experiment. She set herself three rules,

Rule one, obviously enough, was that I could not, in my search for jobs, fall back on any skills derived from my education or usual work... Two, I had to take the highest-paying job that was offered me and do my best to hold it... Three, I had to take the cheapest accommodations I could find, at least the cheapest that offered an acceptable level of safety and privacy...²

She also rented a car in the second and third city, despite using her own in the first, and she focused on making sure she would make enough to pay her bill. Ehrenreich specifically made sure that she made enough to continue living the working class life in each city. Staying within these rules—at least mostly and with clear notes about breaking them—she experienced, and especially observed, the life of the working class for three months.

She then wrote and released *Nickel and Dimed*, being largely met with enthusiasm by other writers, academics, and the generally well-educated. People were thrilled to be exposed to the lives of the working class, and most found the book sharp and insightful. One professor’s review encapsulates these sentiments as he writes “[Ehrenreich’s] experiences and observations shed needed light on this important yet neglected segment of the workforce. They also make it difficult to not be sympathetic to the struggle and supportive of efforts to improve the life of the working poor.”³ She even inspired copycats such as Elisabeth Wynhausen, who wrote *Dirt Cheap* for Australia’s working-class people.⁴ However, she also inspired—or rather annoyed—a 25-year-old recent college graduate named Adam Shepard.

Shepard wanted to prove Ehrenreich wrong because, as he put it, “I am frustrated with the whining and complaining.”⁵ He set out on a train with \$25, got off in a random city, and began working to prove the American Dream still exists for those who want it. Shepard ended

his experiment early to be closer to his mother as she fought cancer, and he believes that having \$5,300 by the end of the 9 months means his experiment was a success, and that you just need a good work ethic and discipline to succeed in life. However, he does not have a journalist's training or code of ethics.

Shepard routinely fails to see the lives of most of the people he bunked with in a homeless shelter, as he regularly discounts their experiences and trauma. During his time at the shelter, Shepard invents a story of a troubled home life, and while talking about how he and a genuinely homeless man hit it off due to similar backgrounds, Shepard writes "Sure, mine was fabricated, but I played the part well."⁶ The fact that he was *playing* a part meant it was easy for Shepard to succeed, after all, what desire is there to get high to escape the nonexistent trauma of being willingly homeless? He is merely playing the part of being homeless, so he carries none of its emotional baggage—he doesn't carry the shame of medical debt⁷ or the guilt of trauma-fueled substance abuse.⁸ Shepard can easily say people just need an attitude adjustment because he doesn't have any trauma to process or any demons to grapple with. Blinded by his belief that he played his part well, Shepard failed to meaningfully see the people around them—he never really reflected on why he saw the options that he used or why people around him were so defeated, and, unlike Ehrenreich, he never meant to.

From the onset of his experiment, Shepard also has the comfort of a credit card ready to go, in case he needs an early emergency ending to his planned climb out of homelessness. While Ehrenreich also had a life to go back to, Shepard's naïve, preconceived confidence about the world he chose to inhabit exacerbates the security of his get-out-of-jail-free card. His credit card exemplifies his place in what Xochitl Gonzales—a writer with a very working-class background—would call the comfort class. Gonzales defines the comfort class as "people who were born into a life of financial stability."⁹ Hidden in this financial stability is a security, a feeling that things will end up okay. Gonzales best describes the marker of the comfort class in an example, "An emergency expense—say a \$1,200 medical bill—would send most Americans into a fiscal tailspin; for the comfort class, a text to Mom and Dad can render 'emergencies' nonexistent."⁹ With the security of his emergency credit card, Shepard wraps himself in the comfort of his class, and he readily utilizes every surprisingly well-staffed service at the homeless shelter he stays in,¹⁰ trusting they help him get on his feet. He didn't prove the homeless just need an attitude adjustment; he merely experienced a self-fulfilling prophecy. His class safely disconnected him from the psychological perils—there is no stress inhibiting your ability to think¹¹ when you trust everything will work out.¹²

Not only does the class disconnect protect Shepard, but the working class and the comfort class have different thought patterns brought about by different needs in entirely different realities. Our working-class writer, Gonzales, recounts various class disconnects in her article, like a former roommate not understanding the financial disruption of eating her leftovers or the fact that there was a library but not a bookstore in her blue-collar childhood neighborhood.⁹ That disconnect fits with my experiences as well, just last year I was waking up at 5:30 AM to walk to work when my fellow students talked about sleeping in till noon. One of my former roommates repeatedly told me that there's nothing better than a home-cooked meal when I heated up a frozen pizza inbetween working 30 hours a week and taking 15 credits. Even one of my honorary sisters encouraged me to spend \$50 on something I wanted because I "never splurge," not realizing I heard that in terms of days of food or half my car insurance, that no matter what there was something else that money *should* be going to.

Shepard—who proudly boasts he's not an academic—fails to notice the class differences at play; he simply assumes the people who are homeless have the wrong attitude and that he will show the right way without ever asking *why* they might have the wrong attitude. He shows his sense of superiority in the introduction, writing "I could work my way through years and years of school, and when the time came for me to write my dissertation, I could turn my teachings into a book worthy of being published about the science of change or the science of attitude... Or, I could take matters into my own hands. And that's what I have decided to do."¹³ He plays at being a journalist like Ehrenreich, without any concern over a journalist's code of ethics or reasons behind their approach.¹⁴

Despite my initial mixed-to-negative feelings about *Nickel and Dimed*, I've come to appreciate it on account of the ethical considerations it takes into account. While I am not sure I'll ever be able to fully disagree with the interpretation that Ehrenreich was slumming it, she was ever-mindful of her advantages, paid special attention to noting the disconnects, and took great care to observe her coworkers. I am tempted to credit her background as the daughter of a working class family working its way up the ladder,¹⁵ but I really do not think it is that simple. She brings a mindfulness to the project that offsets the disconnect of her current class—whether that mindfulness is brought about by the journalistic code of ethics or if Lewis H. Lapham merely encouraged Ehrenreich to pursue the project herself due to her mindfulness, I couldn't say. Unfortunately, her mindfulness doesn't negate the class difference—it still prohibits her from speaking about the mindset necessitated by working-class life.

At her first job in the first city of Ehrenreich's research, she noticed a change in herself. While she worked as a waitress, the restaurant manager locked the dry storage due to a

dishwasher allegedly stealing from the dry storage room—a dishwasher the manager would not fire without a replacement ready. Ehrenreich conveys frustration with herself as she recounts “something loathsome and servile-had infected me, along with the kitchen odors that I could still sniff on my bra when I finally undressed at night. In real life I am moderately brave, but plenty of brave people shed their courage in POW camps, and maybe something similar goes on in the infinitely more congenial milieu of the low-wage American workplace.”¹⁶ Her interest in observing the life enables her to observe this facet of the lived experience of working-class people, but she does not have the same kind of direct experience to notice possible points of infection: she does not reflect—at least not here—on the impact of living life according to everyone else’s schedule or the effects of constantly being managed, she does not reflect on a constant awareness of having little-to-no influence.

While I was reading *Nickel and Dimed*, I constantly felt the sentiment expressed in the title of a responding article: “When Will Real Waitresses Write Their Own Books?” The responding writer, Lauren Sandler, inscribes the complicated emotions I hold towards *Nickel and Dimed*: it is a thoughtful, well-researched, and well-intentioned expose, but it can never be a true account. Despite the efforts of noble comfort-class journalists, there is a resounding “lack of underclass America telling their own stories in their own words.”¹⁷

Admittedly, journalists are not commonly working class.^{18,19} Writing did not become a prospective future career for me until I went to college, until some of the social markers of being working class fell away. Honestly, I’ve generally been more willing to explore communications as a career as I’ve had less of the working-class social markers—I want to explore future options when I am not worried about making ends meet. I find it much easier to make optimistic, future-oriented plans when I’m not concerned with how I’m going to pay rent; I find it much easier to consider *influence* when I’m not preoccupied with the inadequate resources of my present.

Journalists and editors deal in influence; the desire to change hearts and minds defines their desire for influence. Leveraging influences requires an optimistic vision of a better future, an optimistic vision that becomes harder to maintain with the emotional baggage of a chronically bleak present, especially if the chronically bleak present carries the shame or guilt of failure. Influence sits diametrically opposed to the ever-present rationing of scarce resources that the working class experiences daily. However, this is not to say that nothing can be done.

There *are* things we can do to close the current gap. Sandler, who is either smarter or more optimistic than myself, suggests a few solutions in “When Will Real Waitresses Write Their Own Books?” She suggests an easy-to-implement course of action as a hypothetical

compromise, writing “Let's set aside a weekly column that will feature writing from the below-professional strata.”¹⁷ Despite the fact that this would leverage existing mechanisms of newspapers, I imagine it would be hard to offer influence to someone regularly denied influence and autonomy—at least without solid pay.

Sandler briefly suggests paying working class people to write. She reasons that “someone had the guts to give Larry Brown a book contract when he was a firefighter. Why not to janitors and waitresses and slaughterhouse workers as well?”¹⁷ Furthering her point, if the class-defining lack of money prohibits the working class from dealing in influence, paying the working class a living wage to write would not only give them a voice, alleviating the scarce present would allow the working class to consider the future. I know it worked for me: ever since I completed Independent Status paperwork that increased my college financial aid, I've been able to devote more time, attention, and energy to my future.

I fully acknowledge that my current reality of being paid to go to college offsets me from the ever-present scarcity of my working class history.²⁰ However, I haven't just magically become a comfort-class citizen. I still carry the baggage of my history; I have to learn entirely new skill sets like how to manage my time that is no longer allocated by necessity and planning a future beyond the next bill. I have the time to reflect upon this ongoing transition.

While a reflection on class-transition is not the same as the direct thoughts of the working class, a reflection is a step closer to the thoughts of the working class. I still have more of the working-class social markers than I would like, and I can track how I have to change my thinking to accommodate my current life, allowing me to more sharply contrast working-class and comfort-class life. Additionally, and possibly supporting Ehrenreich's point about the philanthropy of the working class,²¹ I'm motivated to help *my friends*. I want to understand the plight of the working class to make things better for the people I grew up with.

I understand that I'm not particularly special; I'm just some poor kid who was pushed towards college and quietly helped by more people than I can name. I expect that if other working-class people are given the help and money that I was, they will likely be motivated by the same gratitude, and they will bring with them all of the clever tricks and quick-thinking their lives require. I expect that if we take the first step of paying working class people to write, it will be easier to find the next step—we may even find that step easier to take.

The Code of Ethics published by the Society of Professional Journalists says to “be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.”²² Why don't we give the voiceless *their* voice?

Notes

1. New York Public Library Staff, "Banned Books Reading List: Stand for the Right to Read Freely," *New York Public Library*, September 25, 2023.
<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2023/09/25/banned-books-week-reading-list>
2. Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (Metropolitan Books, 2001), 9.
3. Casson, John J. "Nickel and Dimed." *American Economist* 46, no. 1 (Spring, 2002): 78-79.
4. Clausen, Lisa, "Life at the Bottom," *Time*, March 1, 2005.
<https://time.com/archive/6671487/life-at-the-bottom/>
5. Shepard, Adam, *Scratch Beginnings: Me, \$25, and the Search for the American Dream* (Harper Collins 2007), vii.
6. Shepard, *Scratch Beginnings*, 27.
7. Bielenberg, Jessica E. et. al., "Presence of Any Medical Debt Associated With Two Additional Years of Homelessness in a Seattle Sample," *Inquiry* vol. 57 (2020).
8. Williams, Julie, "'I Have No One': Understanding Homelessness and Trauma," *Psychiatric Times*, September 1, 2022.
<https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/i-have-no-one-understanding-homelessness-and-trauma>
9. Gonzales, Xochitl, "What the Comfort Class Doesn't Get," *The Atlantic*, April 6 2025.
10. There are no federal regulations about what services a homeless shelter must provide other than actually functioning as a closed building. Michigan has "Minimum Standards for Emergency Funding" that applies to any homeless shelter funded by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority via their part of the federal Emergency Services Grant. When I worked at a homeless shelter subject to these minimum standards, there was one caseworker that would come twice a week, and the shelter had a capacity of 75 "guests."
Michigan State Housing Development Authority, *Minimum Standards for Emergency Shelter*. October 2021.
11. Fairly recent research found that Indian farmers performed worse on cognitive tests in worse financial conditions. The researchers equated the worsened performance to a drop in IQ of 13 points or losing a full night of sleep. While the research centers on how the stress of poverty in particular impacts cognitive capabilities, poverty stress is likely

more analogous to homeless stress than a test using the stresses of the general population—particularly since the researchers theorize there is a problem of “attentional capture,” essentially that the impoverished farmers can’t focus as well since they are worrying about paying their bills.

Mani, Anandi et al. “Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function.” *Science* vol. 341, Issue 6149, Aug 30, 2013.

12. In his stress and coping theory, Richard Lazarus defined stress as the byproduct of a situation in which a person appraises/realizes that they cannot cope with a threat/situation.

Biggs, A., Brough, P., & Drummond, S. “Lazarus and Folkman's Psychological Stress and Coping Theory” in *The Handbook of Stress and Health: A Guide to Research and Practice, First Edition*, (2017) John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

13. Shepard, *Scratch Beginnings*, vii-viii.

14. I want to draw particular attention to two points of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. Both points fall under the headline of “Seek Truth and Report It,” the first being “Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.” Shepard disregards the context of how people became homeless, pretending his choice to be homeless has the same impact on his journey as does someone who chooses to sleep in a shelter over living with an abusive father as in the case of one of the people he fabricates a relationship with. A second point of concern is in the blatant disregard of the point “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.” Unlike Ehrenreich, Shepard claims he speaks with the voice of the homeless—readily using the pronoun we when describing any observations, and, I cannot stress this enough, he believes he played the part well.

“SPJ Code of Ethics” *Society of Professional Journalists*, September 6, 2014.

<https://www.spj.org/spj-code-of-ethics/>

15. Schachar, Natalie, “Barbara Ehrenreich, Explorer of Prosperity’s Dark Side, Dies at 81,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2022.

16. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 28.

17. I have found the article cited enough times to know it is real, but I have only found access to the actual text via the University of Massachusetts-Lowell website.

Sandler, Lauren, “When Will Real Waitresses Write Their Own Books?” *Newsday*, September 9, 2001. https://faculty.uml.edu/sgallagher/nickel_and_dimed.htm

18. Gonzales cites two different key points: that 65% of summer newsroom interns came from elite colleges, and that 1 in 7 students at elite colleges come from families in the top 1% of earners. About 1 in 10 of those interns are likely specifically from the top 1% of earners, living lives *far* more removed from the working class than even the comfort class.

Gonzales, "What the Comfort Class Doesn't Get."

19. According to data published by the National Council for the Training of Journalists, 80% of journalists and editors have at least one parent in the top-echelons of society, almost 2x the percentage of the general public. Only 2% have a parent that works a menial labor job (compared to 20% of the population-at-large), and only 5% have a parent in the trades (compared to 21% of the population at large). The National Council also notes a trend that journalists and editors are increasingly more likely to come from the upper classes. While this data comes from across the pond, Gonzales' article "What the Comfort Class Doesn't Get," my own personal experience, and my expectation that you, the reader, weren't particularly surprised at the data all suggest it's not a problem unique to the United Kingdom. Rather, I think the data was easier to find for the UK because they are more openly having that conversation.

Butcher, Joanne, "Diversity in Journalism: An update on the characteristics," *National Council for the Training of Journalists*, May 2022.

<https://www.nctj.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Diversity-in-journalism-2022.pdf>

20. Since I went through the Independent Status process, I get enough from the Pell Grant (and a matching University Aid Award) to cover tuition. I take the federal student loans to not have to work as much.

21. Ehrenreich evaluates her experiences at the end of her book. She writes "When someone works for less pay than she can live on-when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently-then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society... As Gail, one of my restaurant coworkers put it, "you give and you give." Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 120.

22. "SPJ Code of Ethics" *Society of Professional Journalists*.

<https://www.spj.org/spj-code-of-ethics/>