

November 1, 2005
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Essay #1 Final Draft – Ethos
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On (Not) Squeaking By

Is it humanly possible to create and sustain an affordable standard of living in the United States as a long-term low-wage worker? This is the question journalist Barbara Ehrenreich seeks to answer in her essay “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America.” Ehrenreich describes herself as “A middle class journalist setting out to explore the world that welfare mothers are entering, at the rate of 50,000 a month, as welfare reform kicks in.” She is poised to go undercover to research the minimum wage nightmare that awaits former welfare recipients, as they prepare to exit the welfare rolls. (760). By willingly immersing herself into the minimum wage world, she shows her audience the strength of her convictions, as well as the compelling uses of ethos, and succeeds, for the most part, in drawing us into her drama. Ehrenreich’s credibility is essential to her experiment. By emphasizing the human side of her point of view, the oppression and indignities she endures first hand to make her point are highlighted.

Unless otherwise specified, page references refer to Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America” from Fields of Reading 7th edition, edited by Nancy R. Comley et al (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004)

Ehrenreich's intended middle-class audience needs to not only identify with her and her subsequent dilemmas, but trust her as well. Although some practical considerations are flawed, Ehrenreich succeeds in establishing credibility in most ways, and builds on that trust through both professional and emotional means. The examples that made Ehrenreich most trustworthy were the ways in which she sincerely cared about her co-workers as well as her customers. She did not have to scrounge around for more nutritious salad components, (766) or pay out of her own pocket (and the goodness of her heart) for truly down on their luck clients, or "patients" as she fondly referred to the patrons of her low-wage employer, the Hearthside Restaurant (766). The concern Ehrenreich voices over the dismal living conditions and arrangements her fellow dining staff endures, speaks directly to her inherent compassion and furthers her ethos appeal (770). Ehrenreich also displays a strong work ethic, instilled in her as a child, by her father, as she proudly points out (766). These attributes all contribute to successfully conveying trust. By making her story as a low-wage insider as personal as possible, from enduring the demeaning process of simply obtaining an interview, to sexist nicknames, to not being allowed to rest her feet during slow times, Ehrenreich not only sets up a compelling read, but a compelling compilation of the pitfalls and failures of long-term low-wage life in the United States (764-6,8).

"A hand up, not a hand out" was the slogan devised by Congress to sell the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. This act put time limits on the number of years a mother with children could collect welfare benefits in her lifetime. It also specifically calls for mothers to obtain jobs in order to leave the welfare rolls by the five-year time limit allotted. This is the welfare reform act to which Ehrenreich refers to in her article.

As she sees it, the humanitarian rationale (by Congress) for this reform “is work will lift poor women out of poverty, while simultaneously inflating their self-esteem and hence their future value in the labor market.”(762). In other words, just get a job and everything will be fine. So what if the influx of a million former welfare recipients depresses wages by as much as 11.9% (according to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in Wash. D.C.)(762). Minimum wage is just not a living wage (According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, in 1998 it took on average nationwide, an hourly wage of \$8.89 to afford a one bedroom apartment.)(762).

Ehrenreich writes: “The thinking behind welfare reform was that even the humblest jobs are morally uplifting and psychologically buoying. In reality they are likely to be fraught with insult and stress.” Ehrenreich voices all of these arguments and decides to follow through with the experiment that she and her editor have devised. Ehrenreich ventures forth into low-wage hell even though she readily admits she does not have childcare to deal with, and thus cannot approximate a mother in her situation. “Ideally, I should do this with two small children in tow, that being the welfare average”(762). She states her understanding of this position however; “ So this is not the perfect experiment, just a test of the best possible case: an unencumbered woman, smart and even strong, attempting to live more or less off the land.” By backing away from her original thesis, Ehrenreich’s experiment turns into something other than what the average welfare recipient would experience. Because she is “an experimental scientist by training”, is not, in this new circumstance, as compelling a reason for attempting such a task (762). She acknowledges: “the viability of low-wage work could be tested, after a fashion, without ever leaving my study”(762). This is one of the ways Ehrenreich’s study is flawed in

terms of what welfare mothers would actually have to endure. Paradoxically, going undercover into the low wage world is also one of the main reasons Ehrenreich's experiment garners ethos. Throwing in a reasonable estimation of child related expenses on top of rent, food, etc. would have strengthened the integrity of both the premise and outcome of her experiment.

Another flaw in this undercover expose is the one bedroom ("a sweet little place") cabin apartment with cable TV, Ehrenreich rents for \$500.00 per month (761). She seems naïve, if not completely blind, to the practicality of not sharing a place given the meager circumstances she has thrust herself into. A question arises regarding a possible self-serving motive for the unshared rent. The percentage the rent represents of her take home pay (772) is out of the question for the math to work in her "scientific" experiment, especially if she continues to shop in convenience stores. Ehrenreich does, however, whole-heartedly acknowledge the financial foolishness of that practice. A mother's childcare costs on top of the rent alone, negates the viability of this portion of the study, and begs a question regarding the integrity or bias of her hypothesis, although to be fair, Ehrenreich makes no bones about her underlying liberal leanings or disdain for welfare reform (761).

Another very effective use of ethos Ehrenreich employs lends enormous believability to her portrayal of the disgraceful manner in which much of the hospitality industry in Florida treats its lowest paid workers. By casting a bright and very favorable light on the competence and intelligence of her under appreciated and increasingly marginalized co-workers, she highlights not only their mistreatment, but also the managements' failure to recognize valuable assets in their midst and use them wisely (772). In her appreciation of

the agile, anti-corporate Gail, and the homeless feminist hostess Joan, Ehrenreich succeeds in not only intellectually elevating her low-wage cohorts, but setting herself on an equal field with them as well. Also indispensably effective in building her case for credibility is her genuine camaraderie, generosity, and empathy, towards many of her fellow dining room staff:

“But I did discover one redeeming feature of the most abject low-wage work – the camaraderie of people who are, in almost all cases, far too smart and funny and caring for the work they do and the wages they’re paid” (772).

Even though the co-workers all laugh and joke around together after the degrading “summoning” about suspected drug use, Ehrenreich writes:

“I haven’t been treated this way – lined up in the corridor, threatened with locker searches, peppered with carelessly aimed accusations – since junior high school”(769).

Ehrenreich’s outrage and subsequent empathy with her co-workers is palpable!

She also delves into many of her co-workers personal lives in hopes of discovering some hidden economic management methods to supplement their low-wage existence (770). Finding nothing but the frustration of obtaining safe, affordable housing, Ehrenreich makes sure to pass her deluxe digs onto the smart and sweet, but housing-challenged Gail, after the experiment has run its course (772). With her final act of generosity Ehrenreich completes her ethical appeal for better wages and living conditions for decent, caring, intelligent, and hardworking people just like her.

Ehrenreich actually has far more to expose about the deplorable state of particularly insidious and “fascist” corporate policy such as random drug testing and hierarchical arrangements that pit low level (former minimum wage workers) “management” against his or her former co-workers, as well as the high cost of high turnover transient workers (763-4,768). Ehrenreich’s essay succeeds brilliantly in bringing into a very human light, the ridiculous, even ludicrous corporate practices and how they relate to the low-wage workers who ultimately represent the corporation to the public. The disparity between what the various CEO’s make per hour and what their minimum wage cooks and servers accrue for the same amount of time could have been an effective comparison for this part of Ehrenreich’s study. Such a contrast would have furthered her already solid reporting regarding particularly unsavory corporate values and practices.

Predictably, Ehrenreich’s hypothesis is proved correct by her experiment’s end. If the flaws previously cited were corrected, a single unencumbered person sharing housing expenses, usually would be able to squeak by each month on low wages, as millions apparently do in America today. According to the EPI, 30 percent of the workforce makes less than \$8 an hour (762). There is no question however, that a full time minimum wage job would not cover the expenses of a former welfare mother with dependent children. Exposing the harsh realities of this way of life, with its many disturbing facets for everyone to see and ponder is really a very brave and generous gift Barbara Ehrenreich has bestowed on us all.