

Like “Sisyphus or the Sorcerer’s Apprentice“ –
Working-Poor Women in U.S. Society

Hausarbeit zur Erlangung des Akademischen Grades

Bachelor of Arts

vorgelegt am Fachbereich 05 – Philosophie und Philologie
der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

von

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geboren am 11.06.1995 in Erlenbach am Main

2017

Kernfach: American Studies

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1. Introduction

“When I watch TV over my dinner at night, I see a world in which almost everyone makes \$15 an hour or more ... The sitcoms and dramas are about fashion designers or schoolteachers or lawyers, so it’s easy for a fast-food worker or nurse’s aide to conclude that she is an anomaly—the only one, or almost the only one, who hasn’t been invited to the party,” writes Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (117), referring to working-poor women in U.S. society. Seemingly forgotten—invisible, at the very least—in the Land of Plenty, these women struggle to make a living despite their best efforts. As the gap in U.S. society keeps increasing and the rich keep getting richer, the poor remain caught up in the low-pay spiral. “I grew up hearing over and over, to the point of tedium, that ‘hard work’ was the secret of success,” admits Ehrenreich, “no one ever said that you could work hard—harder even than you ever thought possible—and still find yourself sinking ever deeper into poverty and debt” (220). Still, this is the paradoxical fate that awaits millions of Americans every year. Confined to jobs such as waitressing and nursing that rarely pay more than minimum wage, the working poor barely make enough money to get by. Women are even more likely to be among the working poor than men. Juggling two jobs at a time up to the point of physical exhaustion while figuring out a schedule that fits child care arrangements and some quality time with the family are only few of the hardships they are dealing with. Once stuck in poverty, most of them find themselves unable to escape. This paper will be concerned with the struggle working-poor women are faced with in U.S. society in their day-to-day lives. First of all, definitions of poverty as well as working poverty will be provided. Secondly, the concept of the feminization of poverty as coined by Diana Pearce will be laid out. Moreover, Barbara Ehrenreich’s undercover reportage *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* will serve as a basis to analyze the struggle working-poor women face as far as working conditions, housing, and health are concerned. Finally, the perception of working-poor women in U.S. society will be examined with regard to prevailing cultural ideals. Since Ehrenreich’s case study was conducted between 1998 and 2000, statistics provided in this paper will also refer to this period of time.

2. Defining the Working Poor

2.1 Distinctions of Poverty

Defining the working poor requires a closer look at what it means to be poor in the first place. Notions of poverty certainly vary from country to country. Standards considered to be common among the poor in one country are likely to be considered middle-class in another. Still, there are certain means to assess poverty within society. In the U.S., poverty is measured by the Census Bureau which maintains and updates poverty thresholds to do so. These are “based on families’ total cash, pre-tax-income. Federal government assistance, housing subsidies, and other types of noncash benefits are not counted under the ‘official’ measure, nor are the taxes they pay” (Gabe 228). Poverty thresholds then amount to the “official poverty line” (226). Families living below the poverty line are considered poor (228). In 2000, the official poverty line for a family of four was \$17,603 (BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). “The official poverty line was originally defined as three times the minimum cost of food. The other two-thirds would pay for rent, utilities, transportation, clothing, medicine, and all other necessities,” explain Goldsmith and Blakely (52). However, the aforementioned measure of poverty has been established in the 1960s and not been adapted to economic and social changes since. Therefore, it does not necessarily reflect current standards or needs, respectively. Consequently, poverty thresholds are commonly criticized as being outdated. Since geographical differences as to rents and prices in general are not taken into account either, it is hard to grasp poverty in U.S. society in its full dimension (Gabe 232-37). What is more, notions of poverty may be subjective. Thus, confining oneself to statistics only is not enough. One needs to take a look at what poverty actually means for a human being. In 1997, Douglas Dowd established that

to be poor is to live in inadequate housing in overcrowded neighborhoods with bad schools and few or no recreational facilities; to be mired down in an atmosphere of hopelessness, of enduring agony over one’s children, of poor health, rampant crime, price-gouging in local stores, job discrimination, political under-representation, police brutality, and constant insults – not least in the local welfare office. (qtd. in Goldsmith and Blakely: 50)

Accordingly, the poor are faced with notorious hardships in their day-to-day lives. What is more, they are at a disadvantage in society in so far as they lack not only money but

the influence and power that comes along with it. Therefore, it is crucial to note that even though there may be no “vast cultural divide that separates the poor from the nonpoor ... [and] [t]he aspirations of the poor resemble those of the affluent ... the poor are limited in their access to the means required to realize those aspirations” (Royce 59).

2.2 Poverty in Cultural Theory

In the Land of Plenty, poverty “is deemed a social problem” (Royce 47), at least according to the “culture of poverty concept” (48) which emerged in the 1960s. Thus, in cultural theory, poverty “is not primarily a matter of economic resources” (47). It is in fact the poor themselves who are held responsible for their situation. “The cultural theory of poverty tells a simple story, a morality tale essentially. Middle-class people are rewarded with success because they have values and behave responsibly. Poor people are stuck in poverty because they have bad values and behave irresponsibly,” establishes Royce (50). Accordingly, the poor are accused of being lazy, of simply not working hard enough. They are accused of making bad choices such as dropping out of high school, of being criminal and of being addicted to drugs or alcohol (50). Consequently, they would be the ones to blame, for “[e]mployment opportunities are plentiful, according to the cultural theory, and anyone willing to put in the necessary effort can work their way out of poverty” (50). The way poverty is being constructed in cultural theory may certainly be appealing, “in part, because it plays on popular stereotypes about the poor and affirms ... the notion that opportunities are abundant and that anyone can make it if they try” (55). However, there is little evidence to this theory, and indeed, “[t]he vast majority of Americans who experience a spell of poverty do not fit the cultural theory’s stereotypical portrait of the poor. They are not lazy and irresponsible, they are not enmeshed in a deviant subculture, and they are not engaged in criminal or immoral activities” (57). Finally, it is the phenomenon of the working poor which refutes the concept of the culture of poverty. Stuck in low-paid jobs, these workers cannot seem to make a living no matter how hard they try. A profile of the working poor in the U.S. will be established in the following subchapter.

2.3 The Working Poor

A clear-cut definition of the working poor is hard to assess since “working is an attribute of an individual while poverty is defined in terms of the total income of the family to which the individual worker belongs” (Kasarda 45). According to Levitan, Gallo, and Shapiro, the working poor are “persons whose earnings are not sufficient to lift them or their families out of poverty” (qtd. in Kasarda: 46). Kasarda distinguishes between working poor and “poverty-wage workers” (47):

Working poor are those persons age 16 and older who have worked for at least 27 weeks the previous year, usually for at least 20 hours a week, and who lived in families with incomes below the official poverty threshold ... [whereas] [p]overty-wage workers are those persons 16 and over who work full time (50 or more weeks per year, including paid vacation, usually for 35 hours or more per week) and who do not earn enough to lift a family of four out of poverty. (47)

An official definition has been established by the Bureau of Labor Statistics according to which “the working poor are individuals who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work), but whose incomes fell below the official poverty level” (*Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). “Working poverty starts with low-wage jobs, falling purchasing power, intermittent employment, and involuntary part-time work,” assert Goldsmith and Blakely (56). Oxfam’s report *Working Poor in America* highlights:

[M]illions of Americans [find themselves] do[ing] arduous work in jobs that pay too little and offer too few benefits. They serve food, clean offices, care for the young and elderly, stock shelves, and deliver pizza. They work these jobs year after year, while caring for their children and parents, trying to save for college, and paying their bills. And yet despite their best efforts, these low-wage workers fall further and further behind. (1)

In 2000, 6.4 million people in the U.S. were considered working poor; 445,000 fewer than in 1999. Three-fifths of the working poor worked full-time. The federal minimum wage at the time was at \$5.15. Depending on the state of residence, the minimum wage varied from \$6 to \$7 an hour. The minimum tipped wage for service jobs was and has since remained at \$2.13 (BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). However, if tips plus wages would not amount to the federal minimum wage, employers were required to

make up the difference (Ehrenreich 16). According to Oxfam, “[t]he states with the highest percentages of low-wage workers are in the South, led by Arkansas and Mississippi, and including Oklahoma, West Virginia, Florida, South Carolina, and Kentucky” (*Working Poor in America* 10). Besides, there are areas in which low-wage workers struggle significantly harder to keep up with the cost of living than in other areas; the “list is topped by the East Side of Manhattan in New York ... where the rent on a two-bedroom apartment is several times what a low-wage worker earns in a month” (5). While 4.0 percent of male workers—equaling 2.9 million—were poor, 5.5 percent of female workers or 3.45 million, respectively, struggled to earn wages above the official poverty line in 2000. Thus, women were more likely to be among the working poor than men. Among women, single mothers were facing a greater risk of being working poor than married women (16.7 % vs. 1.8 %). Families with children and at least one working member were more likely to be poor than families without children. The rates for Blacks and Hispanics among the working poor were roughly double the rate for whites (8.7%/10.0 % vs. 4.0), presumably due to the large number of black single mothers (BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). People aged 35 and younger as well as those aged 60 and older are generally believed to be more likely to be part of the working poor than middle-aged workers (Kasarda 58). And indeed, in 2000, the rate of working poor among 20 to 24-year-olds amounted to 8.7 percent whereas only 4.5 percent of workers aged 35 to 44 had incomes falling below the poverty threshold (BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). Moreover, a significant relation between working poverty and education is common since workers with low earnings are likely to have either dropped out of high school at an early stage or to have a high school degree but no higher education (Kasarda 56; BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). Industries with the highest percentage of low-wage workers are “private household personal services”, “child day-care services”, “apparel and accessories industries”, “beauty shops”, and the “agricultural sector” (Kasarda 59-61). In 2000, almost 31 percent of the working poor in the U.S. were employed in service jobs. According to a report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[p]rivate household workers, a subset of service workers that is made up largely of women, were the most likely to be in poverty (20 percent). Farming, forestry, and fishing was another occupation with a relatively high proportion of workers in poverty (13.7 percent)”

(*Profile of the Working Poor 2000*). Physically demanding work, and long hours as well as poor safety standards are only few characteristics of low-paid jobs:

Sales clerks, janitors, house cleaners, child-care attendants, restaurant workers, and other low-wage occupations are not likely to get paid time off for illness, paid vacation days or holidays, pension payments, or job training. They are less likely to be well protected with safety rules and equipment and less likely to have job flexibility, allowing time to care for a sick child, visit a school, or exercise some control of the pace of work. (Goldsmith and Blakely 56-57)

Furthermore, low-paid jobs offer few opportunity of upward mobility within a company:

One of the great myths about the low-wage labor market is that it is a stepping stone to better and more stable employment. The reality is far more complex, and in fact, the majority of those employed in the low-wage labor market remain there, stuck with low-wage jobs, have few if any benefits, and experience considerable job instability and insecurity. (Handler and Hasenfeld 239)

As mentioned above, women are more likely to be caught up in the low-pay spiral than men. Consequently, they are particularly affected by its perils—a phenomenon scholars have termed the feminization of poverty. This theory will be explored in the following chapter.

3. The Feminization of Poverty

3.1 Women in Low-Paid Jobs

In order to develop an understanding of women's situation in the labor force, and particularly in low-paid jobs, a brief glance at the history of working women in the U.S. is essential. While women had no choice but to work during the wars, they usually returned to domesticity afterwards. Yet, by 1960, twice as many women worked outside the home as in 1940, and soon enough women constituted about one-third of the labor force:

Most women worked to augment family income, not to challenge stereotypes. Most held so-called 'pink-collar' jobs in the service industry—secretary or clerk, waitress or hairdresser. Their median wage was less than half that for men. Yet

many women, as during World War II, developed a heightened sense of expectations and empowerment as a result of employment. (Boyer 840)

While the number of women entering the workforce increased—from under 20 million in 1960 to roughly 60 million in 1990—their wages did not; women were still earning considerably less than their male counterparts (901). Moreover, “the workplace remained gender segregated, and the ‘glass ceiling’ that limited [women’s] ability to rise beyond a certain corporate level remained in place” (901-902). Even though more women were obtaining college degrees and pursuing a career in the years to come, a vast amount of female workers has since remained in low-paid jobs. According to Oxfam’s report *Undervalued and Underpaid* which is concerned with working-poor women, “[m]any of these jobs involve tasks historically considered ‘women’s work.’ These workers are cooking, cleaning, serving, and caring for people (children, the elderly, and the infirm), and playing support roles in offices and businesses” (1). Jobs typical of low-wage women’s work may be divided into seven sectors. For one thing, there is “office and administrative assistance,” (3) which constitutes the largest share of female low-wage workers. This sector is followed by “healthcare support,” “retail/cashiers,” “food preparation and serving,” “early childhood care and education,” as well as “beauty and personal services,” and finally “cleaning and housekeeping” (3). While these jobs rarely require a lot of training, they are often physically demanding. Not only are they poorly paid, but they also offer few flexibility, partly due to irregular schedules (1-3). Still, “over the past few decades, the economy has been creating disproportionately more low-wage jobs,” especially in the service sector (5). Though some jobs considered typical women’s work require higher education, or a degree, respectively, for example in teaching, they pay low-wages (5). It is “some of the largest jobs [that] cause the highest levels of poverty and near-poverty” (12), forcing female workers in particular into precarious situations.

3.2 Pearce’s Thesis on the Feminization of Poverty

“Poverty is rapidly becoming a female problem,” writes Diana Pearce in 1978, coining the term “feminization of poverty” (28) at a time when women were becoming more independent, yet often at the price of living in or near poverty despite their growing participation in the labor force. Even though they were in fact increasingly receiving

higher education (28), parents still did not invest as much into their daughter's education as they invested into their son's educational training. Thus, women had little opportunity to pursue a career from the very beginning (31). Moreover, women were led to view their work as temporary, for their permanent commitment was believed to be the home; and, more importantly, their employers used to view women's work as temporary. Hence, they put little effort into improving their working conditions (29). "Dramatic compositional changes in American family structure" (Blank and London 104) added to the fate of working women: due to "the rise of divorce and childbearing outside of marriage" (104), the number of female-headed families rose. Since oftentimes the absent fathers contributed nothing to child support, single mothers were particularly affected by what Pearce calls the feminization of poverty (31). Confined to "low wage and dead end" jobs (29), "[s]ingle women bear a double burden, as they ... must support families with just one income, and tend to work fewer hours. Their poverty rates ... are particularly severe," assert Goldsmith and Blakely (64). Soon, they find themselves caught up in a loop: Child care problems may force them to work part-time, meaning they will receive fewer perks than full-time workers do such as unemployment insurance, or drop out of the labor force altogether. "In turn, their lesser attachment to the labor force is identified as the cause of their disadvantaged status. Their interrupted work lives also make upward mobility difficult; they never achieve seniority, and career development suffers," argues Pearce (30). She also criticizes that "the occupational ghettoization and discrimination has prevented an improvement in women's earnings relative to men [and] [c]hild support ... is so minimal in reality that even the one- or two-child family runs a high risk of becoming poor if the father leaves" (34). Thus, Pearce finally comes to describe the "process of feminization of poverty [as] a process of institutionalization of sexual inequality" (32), hence suggesting that "the poverty of men and the poverty of women are different problems, requiring different solutions" (35). Pearce's theory has been taken up by various scholars over time. Fukuda-Parr, among others, has taken it a step further by suggesting that the feminization of poverty is not solely confined to income poverty but is rather an issue of human poverty, a concept, which, in addition to income poverty, entails poverty of choices and poverty of opportunities:

Poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well-being. It is in the deprivation of the lives people lead that poverty manifests itself. Poverty can be defined as the denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human life—the opportunity to lead a long, healthy, and creative life, and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect from others. This concept of poverty, referred to as ‘human poverty,’ is distinct from ‘income poverty.’ (100)

And, in fact, “[i]n societies throughout the world, women [do] face restrictions on their choices and opportunities that men do not” (101). This has deteriorating economic and psychological effects on women dealing with constant deprivation in their day-to-day lives.

3.3 The Struggle of Working-Poor Single Mothers

Working-poor single mothers are particularly affected by the feminization of poverty. Their numbers have increased alarmingly over the years. “The percentage of unmarried mothers in the work force rose from around 48 percent in 1996 to around 65 percent in 2000, although many held low-paying, unskilled jobs, and changed jobs frequently,” writes Boyer (941). On the one hand, this development may have occurred owing to changes in American family structure as illustrated in subchapter 3.1. Policy changes, on the other hand, may be identified as another reason for growing numbers of working-poor single mothers. While a cash benefit called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) had provided for single mothers in order for them to stay home and care for their families since the 1930s (Kim 91), 1990’s welfare reform replaced the AFDC by granting temporary assistance to single mothers only, thus making an effort to move them back into work (Boyer 940). As a consequence, “[s]ingle mothers’ labor force participation rates rose faster than those of less-skilled childless or married women between 1989 and 1999. A number of studies indicate that these labor force changes were at least partially due to welfare reforms ... which could have led to less-skilled women’s labor market participation increasing faster than men’s” (Blank and Shierholz 40). Going along with these policy changes were changing expectations for single mothers:

[Now,] single parents are expected to work, at least part-time ... because relatively fewer single parents are widows, and relatively more have never been married, they are viewed less as victims of misfortune and more as a population consciously choosing to become single parents. (Kim 91)

These developments are linked to numerous issues working-poor single mothers are faced with. Caught up in the “low-wage trap” (Handler and Hasenfeld 242), they are struggling to make enough money for the family to get by. With low-wage jobs typically being considered temporary, working-poor single mothers have little job security and may be forced to change jobs frequently. Consequently, they have few opportunity of “employment mobility” (Handler and Hasenfeld 251), and, more importantly, few opportunity of better pay. Since most low-wage work is also “nonstandard” (Handler and Hasenfeld 246), hours diverge from the standard shift, or the standard work week, respectively, making it harder for single mothers to figure out a schedule that fits work and child care responsibilities. Irregular hours as well as “just-in-time” scheduling (Oxfam, *Undervalued and Underpaid* 13) may then result in child care problems. Since affordable child care is hard to find in the U.S., especially when it is last-minute, and subsidies are scarce, single mothers are often forced to rely on relatives. Handler and Hasenfeld establish that “for most poor women, child care in formal, structured, and supervised settings such as day care centers is the exception. For working mothers with grade school children, after-school arrangements also depend mostly on informal care (parent, grandparent, sibling) with an increasing number of children in self-care” (258). Moreover, “[h]ours outside the normal business week make it harder for women to attend events at school or in the community” (Oxfam, *Undervalued and Underpaid* 11). Taking a day off work due to a child’s illness may have deteriorating consequences. According to Oxfam’s report *Undervalued and Underpaid*, “[m]others and single mothers are particularly challenged to care for themselves and their children when illness strikes. One survey found that one in seven low-wage women workers had lost a job as a consequence of taking a sick day” (11). Handler and Hasenfeld conclude that “[c]aring for children while working in the low-wage market presents a daunting challenge to the parents, especially single mothers” (266). And it is not only the parents who are faced with struggles here; growing up in working-poor families puts children at risk, too:

The costs [of low-wage work] to the mothers and their children are major. Remaining poor while working is detrimental to the well-being of the mothers and their children. The poorly paid, low-skill, unstable, and nonstandard jobs increase the risk of maternal depression and reduce the ability of the mothers to provide a nurturing home environment. These, in turn, lower the children's school performance and increase their behavioral problems. The cognitive development of the children is further compromised by low-quality child care. (Handler and Hasenfeld 281)

Moreover, “[c]hildren growing up in poor families are much more likely to experience various health problems, which, in turn, affect the ability of the parents to obtain or maintain adequate care for them” (Handler and Hasenfeld 264). Working-poor single mothers seem to be caught up in an endless spiral that offers no escape. They are desperately trying to balance work and family life while being faced with precarious living and working conditions, receiving little or no help at all. They are stuck, unable to lift their families out of poverty in a country known as the Land of Unlimited Opportunity.

4. Getting By on Minimum Wage – The Situation of Working-Poor Women in

Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*

4.1 Undercover in Low-Wage America – A Unique Approach

Now that the struggle of working-poor women has been laid out in theory, it will be illustrated more vividly, based on Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Barbara Ehrenreich, born in Butte, Montana, in 1941, is an American activist, journalist and writer. Between 1998 and 2000, she went undercover as a low-wage worker “to see whether [she] could match income and expenses, as the truly poor attempt to do every day” (Ehrenreich 6) as part of her research for what was initially meant to be an article and later evolved into a book. It is true that several portraits of working-poor members have been published by journalists time and again, giving them a voice by making the working poor a personal matter. Ehrenreich's approach is unique, though, since she rather portraits the struggle primarily working-poor women face in their day-to-day lives. Her approach, being “the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for [herself]” (1) implies the invisibility

of the working poor. Their situation simply seems to be so hard to grasp that one has to become a part of them in order to understand what it is like; for poverty, albeit omnipresent, in a way, is still publicly denied.

Ehrenreich conducts her experiment in three states: in Florida, because that is where she lived at the time, in Maine (“I chose Maine for its whiteness” (51)), and in Minnesota, for the state was supposedly “more merciful than many to its welfare poor” (121). Starting out, Ehrenreich suspects that the working poor “may have found some tricks as yet unknown to [her]” (3) to get by on minimum wage and admits: “The only way to find out was to get out there and get my hands dirty” (4). She commits to the following rules framing her experiment. First of all, she establishes that referencing her real education, skills, and work experience (4) was not going to be an option. In interviews, she would describe herself as a “divorced homemaker reentering the workforce after many years,” listing three years of college and a few housecleaning jobs (5). Secondly, accepting the “highest-paying job” and trying to keep it (4) was going to be key. Taking the “cheapest accommodation [she] could find, at least the cheapest that offered an acceptable level of safety and privacy” (4) was another agreement she made with herself; homelessness was ruled out (5). However, Ehrenreich admits right away that “in the course of the project, all of [the aforementioned rules] were bent or broken at some time” (4). Having a car at all times (5) and not going hungry (6) were rules she did stick to throughout the entire experiment, though. She describes her project as a process of “only visiting a world that others inhabit full-time, often for most of their lives” (6). In order to provide most detailed descriptions, she wrote down her experiences every night. The names of the people she encountered or worked with in the course of the experiment were changed by means of preserving their privacy.

4.2 The Hardships of Working-Poor Women in Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and*

Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America

4.2.1 Working Conditions

Starting out in Key West, Florida, Barbara Ehrenreich, after filling in dozens of application forms at hotels and supermarkets, is finally offered a job as a waitress at the Hearthside—as Ehrenreich calls it—which is a “family restaurant” (15) attached to a hotel. There, she works “from 2:00 till 10:00 P.M. for \$2.43 an hour plus tips” (16) for two

weeks. In this “parallel universe” (11), she is called “baby”, “honey”, “blondie”, and “girl” (12). “As a server ... I am beset by requests as if by bees: more iced tea here, catsup over there, a to-go box for table 14, and where are the high chairs, anyway?” writes Ehrenreich (17). And even if the customers are finally served and satisfied, a waitress’s job is not done, for “about a third of a server’s job is ‘side work’ invisible to customers—sweeping, scrubbing, slicing, refilling, and restocking” (17). Management never misses an opportunity to demonstrate their superiority over the staff. Manifesting their authority, managers determine whether or not the staff is allowed to use the break room, among other things. Also, “[m]anagement can sit—for hours at a time if they want—but it’s their job to see that no one else ever does, even when there’s nothing to do, and this is why, for servers, slow times can be as exhausting as rushes” (22). The following passage serves as a great example to illustrate management’s arbitrariness as well as the humiliation they impose on their staff. Ehrenreich writes:

When, on a particularly dead afternoon, Stu [the manager] finds me glancing at a *USA Today* a customer has left behind, he assigns me to vacuum the entire floor with the broken vacuum cleaner, which has a handle only two feet long, and the only way to do that without incurring orthopedic damage is to proceed from spot to spot on your knees. (23)

Despite Ehrenreich’s hard work, her tips and wages amount to \$5.15 an hour only, which is barely enough to get by. Hence, she takes on a second job as a waitress at a place she calls Jerry’s. Again, this is not the restaurant’s real name. At Jerry’s, Ehrenreich faces poor working conditions. For one thing, the place seems to lack hygiene standards altogether:

Put your hand down on any counter and you risk being stuck to it by the film of ancient syrup spills, and this is unfortunate because hands are utensils here, used for scooping up lettuce onto the salad plates, lifting out pie slices, and even moving hash browns from one plate to another. The regulation poster in the single unisex rest room admonishes us to wash our hands thoroughly, and even offers instructions for doing so, but there is always some vital substance missing—soap, paper towels, toilet paper—and I never found all three at once. You learn to stuff your pockets with napkins before going in there, and too bad about

the customers, who must eat, although they don't realize it, almost literally out of our hands. (30)

Moreover, she is told that “hardly anyone comes back after the first day” (31), and in fact her job turns out to be “a crash course in exhaustion management” (32). “The break room summarizes the whole situation,” Ehrenreich writes, “there is none, because there are no breaks at Jerry’s. For six to eight hours in a row, you never sit except to pee” (30). Consequently, working the morning shift at Jerry’s from 8:00 till 2:00 in addition to her 2:00 till 10:00-shift at the Hearthside is more than Ehrenreich can take. After two days of juggling the both of them, she decides to quit her job at the Hearthside, and switches to a 2:00-10:00 shift at Jerry’s, for, there, her pay amounts to about \$7.50 an hour, which is just a little more than what she had earned at the Hearthside. Most of Ehrenreich’s co-workers at Jerry’s are women. They “talk about the usual girl things—men, children, and the sinister allure of Jerry’s chocolate peanut-butter cream pie—though no one ... ever brings up anything potentially expensive, like shopping or movies” (36). And “[a]s at the Hearthside, the only recreation ever referred to is partying, which requires little more than some beer, a joint, and a few close friends. Still, no one is homeless, or cops to it anyway, thanks usually to a working husband or boyfriend” (36-37). Those who “lack[] a working husband or boyfriend seem[] to have a second job” (39) to make a living. And soon enough Ehrenreich realizes that, once again, she will need to take on a second job herself since working at Jerry’s only does not pay her bills. She starts working in housekeeping at a hotel in Key West at \$6.10 an hour (41-42); “the hours are nine in the morning till ‘whenever’” (42). She is entitled to a half-hour break in the break room (43-44). Her job involves cleaning hotel rooms, stripping and remaking beds. By seeing all of the hotel guests’ expensive and luxurious belongings, Ehrenreich feels like she has been entering “a better world” (43). Then, she is forced to realize that

We [Ehrenreich and her co-workers] are only gate-crashers in this fantasy, however, forced to pay for our presence with backaches and perpetual thirst. The mirrors, and there are far too many of them in hotel rooms, contain the kind of person you would normally find pushing a shopping cart down a city street—bedraggled, dressed in a damp hotel polo shirt two sizes too large, and with sweat dribbling down her chin like drool (43).

Since they are paid by the hour, “it doesn’t make sense to hurry,” concedes Ehrenreich’s co-worker (44). However, management is breathing down their necks, and supposedly, “there’s talk about switching to paying by the room” (44). Ehrenreich has been warned that “no one has so far succeeded in combining housekeeping with serving at Jerry’s” (45), and indeed, after one day of trying to combine the two, she quits both jobs because she simply cannot take it anymore:

I leave. I don’t walk out, I just leave ... and the surprising thing is that you can walk out without permission, that the door opens, that the thick tropical night air parts to let me pass, that my car is still parked where I left it. There is no vindication in this exit, no fuck-you surge of relief, just an overwhelming dank sense of failure pressing down on me and the entire parking lot. I had gone into this venture in the spirit of science, to test a mathematical proposition, but somewhere along the line, in the tunnel vision imposed by long shifts and relentless concentration, it became a test of myself, and clearly I have failed. (48)

So Ehrenreich turns her back on Florida, resuming her project in Maine. While hunting for a job, she figures that “Portland is just another \$6-\$7-an-hour town” (59-60). She accepts the first two jobs she can find, being a job as a dietary aide at a nursing home at \$7 an hour on weekends and a job as a cleaning lady at The Maids, a corporate cleaning service, at \$6.65 an hour (“though as a punishment this will drop to \$6 for two weeks if [she] fail[s] to show up for a day” (61)). At the nursing home, Ehrenreich gets food during her shift. On her first day she is even briefed about her rights. She describes her job the following way:

[A] dietary aide is, in large measure, a dishwasher, and there are about forty people ... to clean up after. You scrape uneaten food off the dishes and into the disposal by hand, rinse the dishes, presoak them, stack them in a rack, and load the rack into the dishwashing machine, which involves bending down almost to floor level with the full rack, which I would guess at about fifteen to twenty pounds, held out in front of you. (63)

At The Maids, there is free breakfast for the cleaning ladies every morning before they drive off to the houses they are to clean. Again, most of Ehrenreich’s co-workers are female (71). Orientation involves watching four video tapes: “dusting, bathroom,

kitchen, and vacuuming – each starring an attractive, possibly Hispanic young woman who moves about serenely in obedience to the male voiceover” (73). For vacuuming, they are to use a “special backpack vacuum” (74) that needs to be strapped onto one’s back. They “are given only so many minutes per house, ranging from under sixty for a 1 ½-bathroom apartment to two hundred or more for a multibathroom ‘first timer’” (77). The cleaning ladies usually have breakfast at 7:30 am, then take off at about 8:00 am, which is also when their pay starts, and work until 4:30 or 5:00 pm. However, they don’t get paid for the half hour after their shift sorting out dirty rags and refilling their cleaning fluid bottles (109). Trained for efficiency, “[they] do not walk to the cars with [their] buckets of cleaning fluids and utensils in the morning, [they] run, and when [they] pull up to a house, [they] run with [their] buckets to the door” (76). Most of the houses “are seriously dirty” (94), which makes cleaning them a challenge, particularly since Ehrenreich and her co-workers are supposed to use the “hands-and-knees-approach” (83), which is not only humiliating, but also physically damaging over the long haul. Moreover, the hands-and-knees-approach does not even get the job done, explains Ehrenreich:

We are instructed to use less than half a small bucket of lukewarm water for a kitchen and all adjacent scrubbable floors ... meaning that within a few minutes we are doing nothing more than redistributing the dirt evenly around the floor ... A mop and a full bucket of hot soapy water would not only get a floor cleaner but would be a lot more dignified for the person who does the cleaning. But it is this primal posture of submission ... that seems to gratify the consumers of maid services. (83-84)

Despite their hard work, the cleaning ladies don’t receive any gratitude. Instead, they are either treated as if they were invisible or they are faced with disrespect and humiliation. To make matters worse, some house owners have put up video cameras or frequently come by to check on them (93). Wondering why any of her co-workers would put up with this in the long run, Ehrenreich finally concedes that changing jobs is easier said than done, for “[e]ach potential new job requires (1) the application, (2) the interview, and (3) the drug test – which is something to ponder with gasoline ... not to mention what you have to pay for a babysitter” (135).

After working as a cleaning lady and a dietary aide in Maine for a while, Ehrenreich moves on to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she takes on a job at Wal-Mart. There, she completes an eight hour, paid orientation that involves watching a video “on the history and philosophy of Wal-Mart” (143) as well as “CBL, or Computer-Based-Learning” (147). She as well as her fellow orientees are confronted with Wal-Mart’s rules, being “[n]o nose or other facial jewelry ... earrings must be small and discreet, not dangling; no blue jeans except on Friday, and then you have to pay \$1 for the privilege of wearing them. No ‘grazing’, that is, eating from food packages that somehow become open; no ‘time theft’” (145). Employees are not allowed to talk to each other (180), “[n]o one gets paid overtime at Wal-Mart” (183). Moreover, the staff is to wear “polos, not tees” (159). However, a polo shirt at Wal-Mart is \$7 which is also an hour’s pay. Thus, Ehrenreich criticizes that “there’s something wrong when you’re not paid enough to buy a Wal-Mart shirt, [not even] a clearanced Wal-Mart shirt with a stain on it” (181). In her first week at Wal-Mart, Ehrenreich works from 10:00-6:00, in the second week, her shift changes to 2:00-11:00. Her job involves organizing clothes, assisting customers as well as putting away the ‘returns’ (153-54):

In ladies’ wear, the big task ... is to put away the ‘returns’—clothes that have been tried on and rejected or, more rarely, purchased and then returned to the store. There are also the many items that have been scattered by customers, dropped on the floor, removed from their hangers and strewn over the racks, or secreted in locations far from their natural homes. Each of these items, too, must be returned to its precise place, matched by color pattern, price, and size. Any leftover time is to be devoted to zoning. (154)

The workload is measured “in carts” (157), and Ehrenreich asserts, “my cart never empties and things back up dangerously at the fitting room ... think Sisyphus here or the sorcerer’s apprentice” (164-65). Complaining seems to be ruled out as an option, though. Ehrenreich’s co-workers feel like the company does not care about them and will readily replace them if they do complain (184). On the other hand, Ehrenreich is warned “never to reveal [her] full abilities to management, because ‘the more they think you can do, the more they’ll use you and abuse you’” (195). Her female co-workers rely on working husbands or live with grown working children in order to be able to ‘afford’ laboring at Wal-Mart. Some say it will not work for them in the long run, though, “if the

goal is to make a living” (181). And, once again, Ehrenreich, too, is struggling to match income to expenses: “In almost three weeks, I’ve spent over \$500 and earned only \$42— from Wal-Mart, for orientation night. There’s more coming eventually—Wal-Mart, like so many other low-wage employers, holds back your first week’s pay—but eventually will be too late,” she admits (173). Finding affordable housing seems to be the biggest problem: “For each day I fail to find cheaper quarters, which is every day now, I am spending \$49.95 for the privilege of putting clothes away at Wal-Mart,” Ehrenreich writes (186). Housing conditions as well as the struggle to find affordable housing will be illustrated in the following subchapter.

4.2.2 Housing

As far as housing is concerned, the area one lives in and the social environment that comes along with it is equally important as one’s housing arrangement itself. Royce establishes:

Where people live determines their prospects for education, employment, and mobility; their health and safety; their exposure to environmental hazards; their access to stores and services, libraries and parks; the characteristics of their friends, peers, and acquaintances; the quality of their social contacts and networks; and their level of prestige and political influence. (223)

In Key West, Ehrenreich, on her quest to find a place to live, is forced to acknowledge that she will be confined to “trailers and flophouses” (12) since she cannot afford to spend more than \$500 a month on rent if she is earning \$6-7 an hour only. “[I]t is a shock to realize that ‘trailer trash’ has become, for me, a demographic category to aspire to,” writes Ehrenreich (12). In the end, she goes for “a \$500-a-month ‘efficiency’ thirty miles up a two-lane highway from the employment opportunities of Key West ... a sweet little place—a cabin, more or less, set in the swampy backyard of the converted mobile home where [her] landlord, an affable TV repairman, lives with his bartender girlfriend” (12). Her co-workers at the Hearthside are worse off, even. Some of them live in overcrowded housing, sharing small rooms with several other people while others live on boats, in their vans or in shabby motels (25-26). Gail, a fellow waitress of Ehrenreich’s, “is sharing a room in a well-known downtown flophouse for \$250 a week. Her roommate, a male friend, has begun hitting on her, driving her nuts, but the rent

would be impossible alone” (25). Joan, another waitress at the Hearthside, “lives in a van parked behind a shopping center at night and showers in Tina’s [her co-worker’s] motel room” (26). These working-poor women seem to be caught up in a loop unable to escape:

There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs. If you can’t put up the two months’ rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hot plate at best, you can’t save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead. You eat fast food or the hot dogs and Styrofoam cups of soup that can be microwaved in a convenience store. If you have no money for health insurance ... you go without routine care or prescription drugs and end up paying the price. (27)

Ehrenreich herself is forced to take on a second job to maintain the cabin she lives in. To save on gas, she finally moves in to a trailer park closer to Key West, describing her trailer the following way:

Number 46 [her trailer] is about eight feet in width and shaped like a barbell inside, with a narrow region—because of the sink and the stove—separating the bedroom from what might optimistically be called the ‘living’ area, with its two-person table and half-sized couch. The bathroom is so small my knees rub against the shower stall when I sit on the toilet, and you can’t just leap out of the bed, you have to climb down to the foot of it in order to find a patch of floor space to stand on. (39)

And it is bound to get worse. In Maine and Minnesota, Ehrenreich fails to find affordable housing altogether. In Portland, instead of low-cost rentals, there seem to be only condos and expensive “executive apartments” (54-55). “A key factor underlying the housing problems of the poor is the dwindling supply of low-cost rental units,” highlights Royce (228). This is, in part, due to gentrification, meaning low-cost rentals are being replaced by apartments for the more affluent while low-income families struggle to find affordable housing (228). Ehrenreich herself ends up moving into a motel she calls Blue Haven Motel on Route 1 about 30 miles south of Portland, paying \$200 a week for “a bed/living area with a kitchen growing off of it, linens included, and a TV” (Ehrenreich 56; 101) due to her inability to find an affordable rental unit. At the

Blue Haven Motel, she encounters mostly blue collar workers sharing her situation (70). As far as her co-workers at The Maids are concerned, “no one seems to be homeless. Almost everyone is embedded in extended families or families artificially extended with housemates ... single mothers live with their own mothers or share apartments with a co-worker or boyfriend. Pauline, the oldest of [them], owns her own home, but she sleeps on the living room sofa, while her four grown children and three grandchildren fill up the bedrooms” (78-79). In Minneapolis, Ehrenreich lives in an apartment that belongs to a friend of a friend for the first couple days looking for a job. In quest of affordable housing, which in the end she fails to find, she is recommended to “find a motel that rents by the week and stay there until something opens up” (140). Again, she moves into a motel—the Clearview Inn—where she pays \$245 a week (141; 150) for a room that features neither a kitchen nor a window containing a screen (151). Furthermore, the motel is located in an overall unsafe environment, and Ehrenreich makes a crucial point claiming that “[p]oor women—perhaps especially single ones and even those who are just temporarily living among the poor for whatever reason—really do have more to fear than women who have houses with double locks and alarm systems and husbands or dogs” (153). When the Clearview Inn raise their prices, she moves into another motel she calls the Comfort Inn which is, at \$49.95, still way too expensive (172). Finally, the inability to find affordable housing forces Ehrenreich to end her project. In her book she refers to the affordable housing crisis several times. And in fact it is the working poor who are particularly affected by the lack of low-cost rental units. According to Royce,

Low-wage workers are caught in a vicious mismatch between what jobs pay and what housing costs. It is nearly impossible for them to find a decent place to live and harder still to find a place that is reasonably priced and conveniently located. The unfortunate result is they often end up spending more than they can afford for substandard housing in undesirable neighborhoods with a long commute to work. (226)

Housing subsidies are few (228-29), and “[w]hether or not people have reasonable access to housing in the United States ... is primarily dependent on market forces—meaning that people only get the housing they can pay for” (229). This ultimately leads to “residential segregation” (222) intensifying inequalities (223) and putting low-wage

workers at an even greater disadvantage. What is more, housing arrangements for the working poor often come at the price of safety. Fire and air standards, among others, are commonly rendered insufficient. Overcrowded housing may also favor “pest infestation” (28), which may in turn affect the residents’ health. Issues concerning health will be laid out in greater detail in the following subchapter.

4.2.3 Health

It is not solely the housing arrangements that may affect low-wage workers’ health in a negative way but also the neighborhoods they live in. The working poor are generally more likely to live in poor neighborhoods which are often characteristic for their abundance of fast-food restaurants and their lack of health-care centers as well as grocery stores properly stocked with healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables (Royce 258). This beautifully reflects Ehrenreich’s struggle to find healthy food choices in the course of her project. Among others, “[t]he town of Clearview [Minnesota] presents only two low-priced options (there are no high-priced options) to its kitchenless residents—a Chinese all-you-can-eat buffet or Kentucky Fried Chicken,” she writes (159). Over the long haul, these circumstances are most definitely bound to affect people’s health. “Poorer Americans ... have a higher incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure, respiratory ailments, diabetes, cancer, and low birth weight. Those on the lower end of the class structure are also three times more likely to die prematurely than those on the upper end,” writes Royce (256-57). Their jobs—often non-standard work that is physically demanding—are another reason for overall poor health:

Low-wage jobs rarely offer health insurance or sick leave, they are poorly paying and insecure, and they are also often exploitive and demeaning, hard on the body and the mind. Workers in the low-wage sector are at greater risk of workplace injuries and accidents, and they are more likely to be exposed to toxic substances on the job ... in many jobs the strain from being subject to continuous monitoring and harsh supervision takes a physical and psychological toll. (259)

In the course of her project, Ehrenreich herself is confronted with health-related issues as a consequence of her hard work. When waitressing in Key West, she “start[s] tossing back drugstore-brand ibuprofens as if they were vitamin C” (33). In Portland, while

working as a cleaning lady, she catches some sort of rash, possibly from being exposed to numerous chemical cleaning fluids. The manager has little sympathy for her situation, though, once Ehrenreich brings it up. He simply tells her, “Now if I get a migraine I just pop two Excedrins and get on with my life. That’s what you have to do—work through it” (87). About her co-workers, Ehrenreich writes, “If I don’t know how my co-workers survive on their wages or what they make of our hellish condition, I do know about their back pains and cramps and arthritic attacks” (89). She describes their world as “a world of pain” (89), wondering,

Do the owners have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect? Would they be bothered if they did know, or would they take a sadistic pride in what they have purchased—boasting to dinner guests, for example, that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears? (89)

At some point, Holly, one of Ehrenreich’s co-workers at The Maids, trips and twists her ankle at work. Though barely holding up and clearly unable to keep cleaning, she is furious when she is sent home by the manager as a consequence. Neither does she seek treatment, for it would simply be too expensive. As Goldsmith and Blakely put it, “[t]hose who are lucky, who do not have accidents ... avoid the need for medical care. But even the lucky ones worry about their health-care prospects. When the unlucky suffer injuries from accidents or get sick, they either forgo treatment or rely on services for the indigent” (69). The fact that many working-poor women like Holly lack health insurance since most employers don’t provide insurance for their low-paid staff and they are not likely to afford private coverage (Goldsmith and Blakely 67; Levy 400-401) adds to the situation which ultimately results in limited access to health care:

Lack of insurance ... causes people to postpone and reduce treatment ... Some who are ill do not seek treatment at all. Some, in overburdened emergency rooms, wait too long for attention, for hours or even days. Some get treatment too late, their conditions leading to complications or potentially avoidable illnesses. (Goldsmith and Blakely 69-70)

What is more, “[p]rivate hospitals assign physicians according to the patient’s health-insurance status ... large and very selective hospitals are beginning to turn away low-income noninsured patients” (Goldsmith and Blakely 68). This leaves poor people in

need of medical treatment with fewer options to begin with. Poor or inadequate treatment may then result in the subject's missing out on work, which in turn, may cost him his job altogether. Ehrenreich writes, "Marianne's boyfriend [Marianne has been a fellow waitress of Ehrenreich's in Key West] lost his job as a roofer because he missed so much time after getting a cut on his foot for which he couldn't afford the prescribed antibiotic" (28). In sum, low-wage workers find themselves caught up in a vicious circle once they start suffering from health issues. The likelihood for an overall unhealthy lifestyle as a consequence of poverty is no help either. The working poor are limited in their food choices since healthy food is rather expensive. Hence, they tend to eat fast food or else, go hungry. At work, they barely have time to eat at all. Ehrenreich establishes,

In my interview, I had been promised a thirty-minute lunch break, but this turns out to be a five-minute pit stop at a convenience store, if that. I bring my own sandwich—the same turkey breast and cheese every day—as do a couple of the others; the rest eat convenience store fare, a bagel or doughnut salvaged from our breakfast, or nothing at all. (77)

Ehrenreich's younger co-workers generally eat less healthy than the older ones. They frequently have pizza, pizza pockets, chips or Doritos for lunch. However, these foods high in saturated fat strongly favor obesity. Obesity, in turn, can lead to diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses (Goldsmith and Blakely 70). This spiral but illustrates that the cards are clearly stacked against working-poor women. Its physical impacts are worrisome. "[W]hat the two-job way of life would do to a person after a few months with zero days off" mentally, remains guesswork. "If you hump away at menial jobs 360-plus days a year, does some kind of repetitive injury of the spirit set in?" (Ehrenreich 106)

4.3 "Something is wrong, very wrong" – Evaluation of an Unusual Project

After her temporary plunge into the world of U.S. working-poor women, Ehrenreich draws conclusions. As expected, she wasn't able to match income to expenses. In Key West, Florida, she earned \$1,039 a month. Rent was at \$500 and she spent \$517 on food, gas etc., which left her with \$22 at the end of the month. "This in itself would have been a dicey situation if I had attempted to continue for a few more months,

because sooner or later I would have had to spend something on medical and dental care or drugs other than ibuprofen,” Ehrenreich admits (197). But when she moved to the trailer park, rent went up to \$625 a month. Thus, “two jobs, or at least a job and a half, would be a necessity, and [she] had learned that [she] could not do two physically demanding jobs in the same day, at least not at any acceptable standard of performance” (197). In Portland, Maine, she “came closest to achieving a decent fit between income and expenses, but only because [she] worked seven days a week” (197). Gas and electricity being included in her rent as well as free meals at the nursing home may have added to this. Still, Ehrenreich doubts that she “could have maintained the seven-day-a-week regimen month after month or eluded the kinds of injuries that afflicted my fellow workers in the housecleaning business” (198). In Minneapolis, Minnesota, the inability of finding affordable housing and thus the need to stay at a motel caused Ehrenreich to simply fail in matching income to expenses (198). She concludes that “[s]omething 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” (199). However, Ehrenreich encountered little resistance on the worker’s part, who, in her eyes, are “selling [their] *li/ves* [by] selling [their] time by the hour” (187). This may be at least partly due to what she calls the “money taboo” (206), meaning that low-wage workers often have no idea about what they could earn someplace else since wages are not mentioned in want ads and are not talked about among colleagues either. Still, Ehrenreich condemns the humiliation low-wage workers, and especially working-poor women, face, and the arbitrariness of management, often expressed by purse searches, drug tests, and “[r]ules against ‘gossip,’ or even ‘talking’” (210):

What surprised and offended me most about the low-wage workplace ... was the extent to which one is required to surrender one’s basic rights and—what boils down to the same thing—self-respect ... When you enter the low-wage workplace ... you check your civil liberties at the door, leave America and all it supposedly stands for behind, and learn to zip your lips for the duration of the shift. The consequences of this routine surrender go beyond the issues of wages and poverty. We can hardly pride ourselves on being the world’s preeminent

democracy, after all, if large numbers of citizens spend half their waking hours in what amounts, in plain terms, to a dictatorship. (208-10)

So first and foremost, it is the system that fails the working poor, that “leaves [them] to fend for themselves” (214). Politicians are putting little effort into improving their situation, for example by “compensat[ing] for the inadequacy of wages by providing ... public services such as health insurance, free or subsidized child care, subsidized housing, and effective public transportation” as is common in other countries (214). To make matters worse, low-wage workers are generally viewed with disapproval by U.S. society due to prevailing ideals advocating that a strong work ethic will lift you out of poverty. This, in turn, may then influence the way low-wage workers perceive themselves: “If you’re made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you’re paid is what you are actually worth,” suggests Ehrenreich (211). The perception of working-poor women—both the way they perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by society—will be examined in the following chapter.

5. The Perception of Working-Poor Women in U.S. Society

5.1 Identity and Self-Perception among Working-Poor Women

“Maids, as an occupational group, are not visible,” writes Ehrenreich (99). In society, they seem to be either ignored or looked down upon. Ehrenreich’s colleague Holly is convinced: “They [the public] think we’re stupid” (100), and Marge, another co-worker of Ehrenreich’s, concedes: “We’re just maids” (100). What is it like to identify as ‘just’ maids or ‘just’ waitresses, though? How does it affect the way working-poor women perceive themselves, how does it impact their identities? Identity, in short, means “the information that describes who you are” (Reutter et al 297). Among other things, people tend to define themselves by the jobs they work. Ideally, their jobs give them a sense of pride and the feeling to be ‘somebody’ (O’Brien 22). “[H]aving a job is satisfying, but having a job in the low-wage service industry is deeply challenging,” maintains O’Brien (22). Thus, low-wage workers are more likely to relate to race, ethnicity or gender as a source of identification than defining themselves as working poor. Consequently, ‘working poor’ is merely a “social construction” (40) commonly referred to in public discourse, argues O’Brien. Yet, it is undeniable that their working poor status affects the way members of this group perceive themselves—both personally and socially. In their

case study “*Who Do They Think We Are, Anyway?*”: *Perceptions of and Responses to Poverty Stigma*, Reutter et al assess the matter at hand. With regard to poverty stigma [stigma being the “discrepancy between virtual (social) and actual (personal) identity ... where virtual identity is the ‘you’ that other people believe you to be, and actual identity is who you perceive yourself to be” (Blaine qtd. in Reutter et al: 297-98)] the authors investigate how low-income people believe they are perceived by society and how these beliefs, in turn, affect their personal identities. According to the case study at hand, working-poor people—both male and female—tend to feel misunderstood within society. They feel “labeled”, like some sort of stereotype, and they believe they are regarded as “a burden to society and [as] undeserving” (300). Since their social identities are inevitably grounded in these beliefs, working-poor members cannot help feeling unworthy, as if they were a failure (302). Reutter et al describe this process as the “internalization of the stereotypes they wish to refute” (308). They emphasize:

Although some participants refuted characteristics of their social identities, many appeared to have internalized the stereotype that they are less worthy than others. They admitted that living in poverty lowered their self-esteem and led to depression and feelings of exclusion. They used terms such as not part of society ... misfit, second-class citizen, and the scum of the earth. (305)

As a result, those affected try to conceal their poverty status. They make up excuses rather than admitting to their precarious situation, ultimately creating an illusion. This strategy “intended to enhance acceptance and inclusion” (306) is called “impression management” (Goffman qtd. in Reutter et al: 306). It involves “cognitive distancing” (306), meaning that the working poor tend to distance themselves from fellow poor people, “arguing that it [the social identity] does not reflect their own personal identity” (306). Clearly, working-poor members, regardless of gender, struggle to come to terms with the identity society has constructed for them. Nevertheless, they “wish to be viewed as decent human beings, deserving of respect, arguing ‘The poor have the same feelings, the same desires, the same wants, the same needs as anybody else’” (Reutter et al 304).

5.2 The Invisibility of Working-Poor Women in U.S. Society

“[T]he affluent rarely see the poor or, if they do catch sight of them in some public space, rarely know what they’re seeing, since ... the poor are usually able to disguise themselves as members of the more comfortable class,” suggests Ehrenreich (216). Indeed, working-poor women seem to be invisible in U.S. society for several reasons. For one thing, they try to deploy strategies of impression management as introduced in chapter 5.1 whenever they can, thereby concealing their situation. “Those who work but live impoverished lives blend into familiar landscapes and are therefore overlooked,” writes Shipler (11). Secondly, their work often goes unnoticed. Maids, for example, usually clean houses while the owners are away. Thus, “[h]undreds of little things get done, reliably and routinely every day, without anyone’s seeming to do them” (Ehrenreich 215). Finally, working-poor women rarely share the same living spaces women of the middle- and upper-class do. While working-poor women send their children to public schools, those of the middle- and upper-class tend to put their children in private schools. While the working poor often rely on public transport, middle- and upper-class people drive their car to wherever they need to get to. They live in different neighborhoods, shop in different stores. Like this, they barely cross paths. If they do, members of the middle- and upper-class are often biased against the working poor. A case study conducted by Cozzarelli et al has revealed that Americans tend to believe they are “uneducated, unmotivated or lazy, or in some way socially irresponsible (e.g., alcoholic, drug-abusing)” (214). The study focuses on attitudes toward poor people in U.S. society and attributions for poverty. Its participants were significantly more likely to relate negative stereotypes to the working poor than to the middle class when the latter had been provided for comparison (214; 221). Those cherishing conservative values were found to hold more negative feelings toward poor people than those cherishing liberal values. Moreover, white Americans were more likely to view the working poor in a negative way than non-whites. Negative stereotypes were often related to the belief “that internal factors cause poverty”, whereas positive stereotypes were strongly related to the belief that “economic factors are important determinants of poverty” (222). Furthermore, Cozzarelli et al found out that “[i]t is likely that attitudes toward the poor and attributions for poverty are related to positions on public policy issues concerning the provision of welfare, availability of

health insurance, provision of child care for the working poor” which is in so far problematic that negative attitudes might then “have major implications for important social and political outcomes” (225) disadvantaging poor people. The fact that many Americans tend to blame the poor themselves for their situation was found to be related to core values of U.S. society. “In particular, making external attributions for poverty is less likely to occur for those with relatively strong beliefs in a just world and for those who endorse authoritarian values, and making internal attributions about the causes of poverty is more likely for individuals who hold stronger Protestant work ethic or authoritarian values,” establish Cozzarelli et al (223). “The individualistic propensity to blame the poor for their poverty [then] goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to regard poor people, in one respect or another, as inferior,” argues Royce (161).

American culture is based on certain “storylines” (Royce 158) such as the ideal of the American Dream and the ‘From Rags to Riches’-theme omnipresent in books and movies that influence people’s beliefs and serve as means of making sense of the society they live in. “For most of the public, the United States, uniquely, is a society of equals, a ‘land of opportunity’ where individual effort pays off, where ‘everyone who works hard can get ahead,’ and where anyone can become rich,” asserts Royce (159). This attribution is strongly intertwined with individualism, which is believed to be the “dominant ideology” (160) in the U.S. Accordingly, in a society in which success is regarded as the product of motivation and hard work, people tend to blame the victim; the poor. This ultimately makes poverty a “cultural problem” (158). Royce argues:

We have the poverty we have in this country in part because of the beliefs and attitudes prevalent among the larger population. The poor are held hostage not only to the decisions of economic and political elites, but to the beliefs and opinions of the middle class as well. (158-59)

Cultural ideals are persistently depicted in the media, prevailing beliefs within society are thereby reinforced. How the media impact the way Americans perceive the working poor in U.S. society will be laid out in the following chapter.

5.3 The Role of the Media

U.S. media are highly commercial. At the end of the day, journalism is a business like any other. Thus, media companies are more likely to court the advertisers they rely on

by casting a positive light on consumerism than to support controversial viewpoints concerning pressing social issues (Royce 166). The consequences directly impact the public agenda, for “[t]he news media creates both noise and silence, drawing attention to some issues and diverting attention from others. It sets the agenda, telling the public, by implication, what is important and what is not” (166). According to Royce, “for the most part, poverty is a neglected social issue” (166). This, he argues, is in part due to the media. Whenever poverty is represented in the media, it is usually dealt with superficially and thus rather portrayed as an individual problem than a social one (166). Media representation of the working poor rarely goes beyond human-interest stories (Kendall 138). Like this, the media affirm individualistic beliefs while leaving the structural perspective aside, which, in turn, leads to viewers or readers, respectively, blaming the poor for their misery, for they often lack social context:

The media plays a powerful role in shaping the perceptions and opinions of the American public and fashioning the imagery and discourse surrounding issues of poverty. While journalists do a good job of covering some issues, reporting on poverty is not their strong suit. News stories provide, at best, only cursory analysis of the structural causes of poverty and generally give tacit support to the dominant individualistic ideology. Media coverage of poverty serves less to enlighten the public or to provoke genuine debate than to pass along the conventional wisdom. In this respect, the media is a significant part of the poverty problem. (Royce 165)

What is more, the media reinforce prevailing racist and sexist stereotypes, for example by constructing poverty as “primarily a black problem” (169). Members of the lower working class are often referred to as “white trash” (Kendall 157) or “trailer park trash” (158); they are depicted as “tasteless, uneducated, lazy, and otherwise inferior” (157) or portrayed as “buffoons or bigots” (164). Also, “many media reports place working-class people [even those earning poverty wages] in a large, undefined middle class where ‘everybody’ belongs the ‘working class’ and the ‘working poor’ are often discussed somewhat interchangeably, particularly as more working-class employees are ‘only a step—or a second family income—away from poverty.’ As a result, societal lines, like media distinctions, between the working class and the working poor have become increasingly blurred” (139). The latter contributes to the invisibility of the working

poor, making them a “silenced majority” (Michael Zweig, qtd. in Kendall: 138). Since media representations barely do the working poor justice, it is not surprising, then, that the public regard them with disapproval. However, books such as Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* and David K. Shipler’s *The Working Poor* have drawn attention to structural causes of poverty in recent years, trying to do away with stereotypes in a society that keeps drifting further apart.

6. Conclusion

When Barbara Ehrenreich conducted her case study in 2000, there were 3.45 million working-poor women in the U.S. The numbers have increased over the years; in 2015, as many as 4.5 million women were considered working poor (BLS, *Profile of the Working Poor 2015*), emphasizing that working-poor women are still an issue that cannot be denied. As laid out in this paper, they are mostly service workers holding jobs that offer few perks, let alone opportunities of upward mobility. These jobs are often physically demanding and, due to irregular hours, barely allow a healthy balance between work and family life. As gender inequalities prevail, women are considerably more likely to be among the working poor than men. Single mothers face a double burden. Since child care subsidies are scarce, they are often forced to work part-time, ultimately receiving fewer benefits than those working full-time or none at all. At work, these women are exposed to the arbitrariness of management, facing humiliation on a daily basis, as Ehrenreich points out in *Nickel and Dimed*. Performed over the long haul, low-wage jobs are not only physically damaging, they also take away one’s self-respect. Health issues will eventually ensue from the two-job way of life. Moreover, housing prices in the U.S. have exploded. Like this, it is almost impossible to get by on minimum wage. No matter how hard working-poor women try, they will still be confined to trailer parks and overall unsafe neighborhoods. While others get to enjoy in abundance what American consumerist society has to offer, working-poor women seem to be the forgotten ones; the ones who haven’t been invited to the party. Although the deck is clearly stacked against them, working-poor women receive little sympathy from society. On the contrary, American ideals such as the ‘From Rags to Riches’-theme advocating that anyone can make it in the Land of Unlimited Opportunity if they only try hard enough lead middle- and upper-class people to blame them for their unfortunate

situation. These beliefs are not least reinforced by the media. Working poverty, on the other hand, is barely mentioned in the news, and if it is, journalists tend to give a very one-sided account of the matter at hand. This, in turn, results in stereotypes which, once internalized, are hard to do away with. Clearly, ideals such as the American Dream are grounded in society for a reason. They have not least shaped the country's image, both at home and around the world. Still, these ideals appear paradoxical once you take a look at reality. Millions of Americans are struggling to make a living despite their best efforts, suggesting that there is something wrong, very wrong with the system. Plus, in 2017, women are still facing discrimination, legitimized by a president who thinks it is okay to 'grab women by the pussy.' Because of their gender, millions of women are left with fewer opportunities of better-paying jobs; they seem to be stuck in low-wage work instead. How can the United States of America pride themselves on being a place where anyone can make it if they do not provide its own people with equal opportunities to start from? The situation at hand calls for sudden economic and political adjustments restoring social justice within U.S. society. If no changes occur, more and more American women will be caught up in the low-pay spiral, unable to escape like "Sisyphus ... or the sorcerer's apprentice" (Ehrenreich 165).

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14 quotes from Sorcerer's Apprentice: "Respect was one thing. Survival was another. It was important that I kept my priorities in the right order." Or, 'He learnt the language of pigeons, and forgot his own.' Or, the favourite of Jan Fishan Khan: 'Nothing is what it seems.' • Tahir Shah, Sorcerer's Apprentice. tags: afghan, afghanistan, folklore, proverbs, saying, sufis, sufism, wisdom. The Sorcerer's Apprentice, 1797 Poem by Johann von Goethe, Original Text with Translation. Sometimes we don't appreciate those around us. Often the thing we are looking for is right under our noses. Or how about the English idiom: "beauty is only skin deep". George the Giant tells of the last member of a race of giants who were quiet, peaceful beings until a bad king ordered that they all be hunted down and killed. Only George survived. Hills Like White Elephants is about a man and woman who have reached a crisis point in their relationship and find it hard to open up and talk about their true feelings on an important issue. However, the couple don't come out and say what the problem is; you need to work it out for yourself. Other articles where The Sorcerer's Apprentice is discussed: Paul Dukas: "dazzling, ingenious L'Apprenti sorcier (1897; The Sorcerer's Apprentice). "film's most famous segment, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," places Mickey Mouse in the title role and is scored with a piece by French composer Paul Dukas. Its famous central image, of an implacable army of enchanted brooms, is one of the most indelible in animated film. [Read More](#). [Load Next Article](#).