



The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Unfair Economy

Lisa Dodson

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Based on author Lisa Dodson's eight years of research and conversations with hundreds of Americans about the need to create ethical alternatives to rules that ignore the humanity of working parents and put their children at risk, *The Moral Underground* features stories of middle class managers and professionals who refuse to be complicit in an economy that puts a decent life beyond the reach of the working poor. Whether it's a nurse choosing to treat an uninsured child, a supervisor padding a paycheck, or a restaurant manager sneaking food to a worker's children, these unsung heroes reach across the economic fault line to restore a sense of justice to the working world.

Write-up by author: <http://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/...>

The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Unfair Economy **Details**

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From Reader Review The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Unfair Economy for online ebook

Eric Bottorff says

Essential book on the realities---structural, personal, moral, ideological---of the low-wage economy in America, from the point of view of both workers and their bosses, and the ways in which the latter react to and attempt to accommodate (sometimes) the difficulties of the former. Brilliant and utterly heartbreaking.

Wes Metz says

The people in this book give me hope that someday we may actually change our society so as not to exclude so many people from being able to live a decent life, regardless of the supposed 'value' of the labor they contribute to the economy. This is the story of the poor and the working poor, and the impossibility of their achieving the American dream; it's also the story of those managers, employers, teachers, and others who bend or break the rules to help the poor get by in a system that is stacked against them. Well worth your time if you have a social conscience.

Aspen Junge says

Dodson describes an acceptable, even fashionable, bigotry in our culture; that of blaming poor working people for their own troubles. With wages too low to support a family, working parents must scrape together child care arrangements, medical help, and go without basic necessities that our culture assumes that "good" parents will always supply their children. It is not always possible to be a "good" parent when poor. If your work schedule is irregular or inflexible, child emergencies must be neglected. If you are working two jobs to put food on the table, you can't make parent-teacher conferences in the middle of the day. If you have no insurance, that asthma inhaler isn't going to refill itself. When housing is either affordable or safe, but rarely both, your kids have to live with mold, bugs, pollution, and a host of other negative factors.

To make it worse, our political and economic dialogue blame the poor for their predicament. If they "were willing to work hard," they wouldn't be poor (many work two full-time jobs). If they want their kids to succeed at school, they would read to them in the evening (night shifts, and older kids often taking care of younger siblings). If they loved their kids, they would make sure they got nutritious food, adequate exercise, and yearly checkups (all hard to do when you're working for minimum wage and no benefits).

The problem is rooted in an economic philosophy that says that business has no moral obligation to the welfare of its workers or their family. Dodson describes managers, teachers, and health care workers who go above and beyond, usually breaking the rules of their employers, to give their work force a hand making their lives more manageable.

Chris Foley says

It seems a little crazy that this isn't normal, but why can't all working people earn a living wage, with affordable health insurance, and paid time off when necessary?

It's great that some wealthy people give to charity. Please give more! But what courage, what sacrifice is that? If you have a million dollars and give half of it to charity, you still have half a million dollars. But people like the ones in this book earn my greater respect. Some risk their jobs to help others. Some who struggle with their own issues, sacrifice for others. If you're just getting by yourself, and do ANYTHING to help others, that takes courage.

carl says

business is not like theoretical mathematics, it is a purely human endeavor driven by relationships between people. thus, it can, and it must, come under ethical scrutiny.

Books Ring Mah Bell says

The premise of the book is that decent people, wanting to work, are not given a fair wage and efforts they make to get ahead are often futile. Sometimes, if they are "lucky", a good boss will pad a paycheck, or not write them up if they miss a day, say, to care for a sick child, which may cause them to lose a job. By interviewing employers and employees around the country, the author gives us the low down on low wages, and how they affect everyone.

Let us take a look at the vicious cycle of the low wage for the employee. Employees struggle to make ends meet, sometimes they have to work a few jobs and then they are fatigued, thus more prone to injury or becoming unreliable at a job. They may lose that job, have to move, and may miss chances for promotion.

Now, for the kids of the low wage worker: they suffer also. A 10 year old may have to watch younger siblings while mom goes to her night job, the kids don't get proper supervision, rest, or nutrition, which jacks up their performance at school, which causes a drain on the school staff (and/or budget), and the kids can't get ahead in school, producing less educated children.

(like it or not, this is OUR problem, because the kids are the future.)

Some employers are empathetic to the plight of these low wage workers. They try to pad paychecks, or refuse to reprimand employees that come in late or have to leave early due to the troubles low wages cause the employees. Some employers in the retail world tweak orders so extra food or clothing can be given to those struggling to get by. In schools, administrators and teachers may fudge paperwork so kids can stay in the same district and have some sense of stability in their lives.

Are they dishonest? Stealing? Or are they doing what is morally right to care for these people?

Other employers are not so... understanding. These low wage people should NOT have children if they cannot support them. These low wage people are expected to be at work, rain or shine, and a sick child or lack of transportation is no reason to not be at work at the scheduled time.

Are they jerks? Or are they doing their job and trying to do what is right for the bottom line of the company?

Great book club book, sure to generate some conversation, and maybe, just maybe, some solutions to the problems.

Deanna Marshall says

This is a book for social workers, social activist, and the average every-day do-gooder.

Each of us has our own way within our own scope of resources that we can creatively assist someone and make part of their life a bit easier.

David Robins says

While this book does have some things to contribute, it has some terribly flawed premises. For a book that professes a "moral underground", it encourages or supports some very immoral things. It does provide a useful look at the problems of low-income individuals, although for the most part it focuses on single mothers. I think this was not by design, but necessary to find suitably sad examples; the story of a teenager working a "low-income" job is one of industry and seen as a stepping-stone to more responsibility, and a single individual may have difficulty supporting themselves that way, but can manage it. It is only when you add in the child or children that it becomes so generally hectic. Certainly they should not have had children (as many in the book pointed out, the author deriding them all the while), although that is in some cases rather to lock the barn after the horse has bolted (or child has emerged and father has bolted).

The major problem with the morality of the book is that there is no foundation, no principle. Stealing from an employer - because it is a "huge corporation" that "won't miss" the money (or goods, or paid but unworked hours) - is still theft (no matter how desperate the circumstances, they cannot make right wrong, although they might make the wrong justifiable), and shareholders in the corporation are not all rich (many pensions hold stock, for example). Certainly avoiding bureaucratic and rights-infringing laws and regulation is a good thing; but acts that harm (usually theft, but also the suggestion that employers should be forced to pay more, or to cover expensive benefits, or that service providers should be coerced to work cheap or free) and acts that avoid (usually state-initiated) harm are ignorantly conflated, hence the low score.

Barbara Mader says

Along the lines of Ehrenreich's *Nickle and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, but not quite as engaging. You meet a few assholes in the book (freely criticizing ala "these people are just irresponsible/don't have any character" etc,--despite not really knowing anything about 'them' and their individual situations. I wonder if the recession's impact on much of the middle class would give these same

people pause. I wonder if some of the assholes quoted in the book lost their jobs or homes.

You hear of some good stuff, too, but the main problem with this book is it's vague much of the time, in part to protect the managers etc. who are trying to do the right thing but bending rules to do so.

Reading it made me remember how one of my brothers, a teacher at a community college (math class), severely criticized his adult students for not putting his coursework ahead of everything else in their lives. I remember just looking at him and thinking there was absolutely no point in trying to explain real life to this person.

Markus Christoph schneider says

This book is incredibly eye-opening. It does a very good job of exposing a serious problem in the United States and really shows how income inequality impacts ordinary people. However, I feel that at parts Dodson's bias shows a little too strongly and I don't really agree with how she proposes we go about fixing the problem, but it is still a great book for anyone looking to learn more about the subject.

Angel says

Let's cut to the chase. The reason I did not rate this book higher is that it can get repetitive at times. The book also is a bit heavy on anecdotes, and to be honest, it goes more into effects and impact of poverty, which are important topics, than into the moral underground concept, which is the real reason I picked up the book. Now, don't let that fool you. This book presents some very solid research the author did over eight years, and it does include plenty of notes and documentation for those who want to go further. Do understand that names have been changed to protect people who often take great risks to help out their fellow human beings who happen to be poor and need a hand in a society that pretty much discards them. Anyhow, the book spends two-thirds of the content on the exposition of the poverty issue, and only towards the end does it get to the point promised in the title. After a while, you can skim some of it.

Now, leaving the negative I saw as a reader aside, this is a book that more people need to be reading. What I am afraid of is that the usual "poor blaming" and "victim blaming" crowds (you know them, the asshats who always say "if those poor people only did X and Y" and "why the hell do they keep breeding?") will probably glance at it, then toss it aside, minds already closed and made up. But they need to read this. Policy makers, educators, social workers, teachers, parents, all need to be reading this. Because when we think of poverty, we usually think of those who suffer it. The real issue, in addition to that, is the impact that poverty has on the rest of society. The poor do work, and they work hard. In their underpaid, often exploitative jobs they come across middle class people, their employers and managers, and this creates tension and strife. Some of these managers lack any sense of empathy or compassion in spite of the fact they are the ones who often enable an unjust system that does not even pay a living wage. But Dodson points out that there are some small points of hope: managers, supervisors, superiors, so on who see injustice and refuse to simply watch it happen. They show compassion and empathy, and they disobey the rules as need be because immoral conditions should not be tolerated. So, a manager might overlook a worker being late because of a mother having to take a kid to the doctor, or maybe said manager alters the time clock so she gets her full pay if the mother had to leave early for said doctor appointment. What conservative hypocrites fail to appreciate, and it is very well laid out here, is that minimum wage jobs not do not provide a living wage: period. For all their

whining about "welfare moms" and other stereotypes of unemployed people, there are tons of working poor, who have, you know, real jobs. And in their minds, work is what is supposed to lift them out of poverty and give them progress. Well, when you pay shitty wages that force someone to work two or even three jobs to make ends meet, other corners have to be cut. So, mom has to leave her child alone at home for a few hours because she cannot afford day care on the shit salary your slave job pays. Is that really neglect? It's either the kid or the job. Most middle class people would probably say the kid first, but they have the resources to buy child care as needed. Poor people often lack that option, and when they do, that situation does have ripples throughout the rest of society, something that most whiny right winger conservatives and libertarians fail to see.

So, a small, mostly invisible moral underground emerges where some folks with compassion do whatever they can to help out their poor workers and friends. Some of these managers do have compassion and hearts, and they see the plight of their workers. A doctor writes a prescription for an asthmatic patient, but puts it in the name of the aunt, for instance, because said aunt has health insurance, so the medication will be covered. Fraud? To the letter of the law moralists, maybe. But it's either that, or let a child go without life saving medicine. If I was that physician, I know my choice. Do you? And this kind of thing does happen all over the place. However, as Dodson points out, it is not visible. It is an underground. She had to do a lot of work and give a lot of reassurances to get some of the information. You see, people in the Moral Underground have certain mechanisms and knowledge in place, information they are not going to share with just anyone, if at all. In many cases, the best Dodson could do was just provide outlines of what some folks do, or mention they did something without giving any specifics so as not to disrupt a pipeline.

At the end of the book, Dodson does provide a plan, outlining what needs to change and happen for things to get better in order to have a truly fair economy for ordinary people. Overall, this is probably one of the best books I have read, and I do wish more people will read it.

Ron says

While she is not the dilettantish poseur that Barbara Ehrenreich is, Lisa Dodson still mostly fails to deliver on her thesis about the Moral Underground. Instead, the book is a lament about the plight of children in our economy, and it is a confused lament at that.

While Dodson does occasionally give us anecdotes about how middle and upper management bend rules ever so slightly--it isn't massively criminal or felonious as she so often suggests--to help the employees in the underclass, the help isn't always of the most needed (food, money, health care). She places the blame appropriately on the structures in our society, such as capitalist greed, that cause most of the problems, yet celebrates many of the same structures (schools and the institutionalized culture of fitting in) and numerous worthless things that are provided to the poor that are meaningless (prom dresses, trips to Disney World financed by selling the much needed child's bicycle, vitamins, and pharms). One also wonders how anyone raising two children pays \$135 a month for electricity (mine is under \$10) or spends an astonishing \$1200 a year on clothing for them. I am certainly not attempting to place the blame on the poor, as she does ably illustrate as a huge prejudice deriving from the right wing, but something seems off about those figures and the poor and less educated do need to allocate resources better and determine priorities.

Still, the book succeeds on many levels and is worth reading, even if it is a bit dry and boring from a style perspective.

Wealththeow says

After years of conducting focus groups and collaborative social research, Dodson wrote this book summarizing her findings. Mixing together anecdotes and US statistics on poverty, Dodson examines a country without universal health care, a livable minimum wage, or affordable care for children, the elderly, or the disabled. As Dodson says, poverty created and maintained at an institutional level is bad not only for the well-being of those in poverty but also harms everyone else in society. She breaks down the exact numbers of people's wages and bills, and presents the nearly impossible logistics required to raise children as a low-wage earner. She talks a bit about the strategies individuals have used to combat these structural problems, like allowing workers to have flexible shifts, "losing" diaper inventory, or letting uninsured patients use other people's insurance. She never gets in depth about these strategies for fear of making them more difficult to do, but it's still clear that even though she calls middle class individuals' efforts to ameliorate suffering due to poverty a "moral underground," there really isn't an "underground" in the sense of an organized network. From her descriptions, at least, it seems like it remains very disconnected and individual.

None of this is breaking news, but I like the way Dodson frames it all. I could feel her frustration biting through the numbers and her bland but leading questions to those who blame structural issues on individuals' work ethics.

Jacqui says

In the course of researching the lives of the working poor in America, the author uncovered a thread of civil disobedience. Healthcare practitioners, providers of state services, managers and religious leaders all finding ways to bend or break rules that would otherwise harm the working poor.

I've often wondered how single parents manage getting their children to and from school and what they do for child care on the days off seemingly randomly sprinkled through the school year. Summer vacation must be an even bigger issue. This book describes several individual families' schedules, and they sound complicated, chaotic, and entirely unworkable over even short periods. Lack of access to important health services, including mental health, add to these burdens.

Matt says

I thought this was an okay, but unchallenging look at people in a structurally unfair economy. It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into: this isn't a deep book in the sense of exploring why things happen--that's gestured toward but mostly stays outside the book's purview, and instead there's a lot of anecdotal stuff about how employers, for example, will bend the rules to allow employees to take their kids home if they are sick. It's heartening, of course, but in the end, it felt a little too general, and though Dodson's methodology was to have lots of conversations with people, especially groups of people, I feel like we don't see the emergence of this consensus that people need to help each other here-- instead, it's presented as a kind of fait accompli.... I think the problem here is that no one shows their work, in a math test sense, and that made a big hole in a book that's meant to show the development of a humane consensus. And I get it, that she can't

tell what employers do to help their employees because it will close down those avenues. But there needed, for me, to be something a little bit more here, something less cut and dried, less you're with us or against us.

The book is interesting in other ways, though: I like the organization, which Dodson says describes the three venues where middle class and working class folks come into contact: work, school, and health care. It's scary, but she's probably right that otherwise our society is functionally segregated. And as much as it hurts to hear it about education, she's probably right that health care is more aware of what's at stake than teachers are.

There's some good stuff here; I just think I'm not quite the audience for this book even though I'm interested in the topic.
