

# Book Review

Dodson, L. (2009). *The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Unfair Economy*. New York: The New Press

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle, Ph.D, CPA, LMSW  
The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota

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Lisa Dodson, a sociology professor at Boston College, invested 8 years of her life in conducting five separate research projects distilled into a compelling series of stories for easy consumption in this book. Her collaborative social research is augmented by an innovative series of interpretative focus groups. The uniqueness of this book is that the empathic recitation of the hardship and unfairness of an economic system that leads to poverty are voiced by the middle-income supervisors, teachers, and health-care workers who work intimately and directly with working poor families. As such, the voices shared by Dodson resonate with the values of Middle America and challenge Middle America to face the immorality of an unfair economy in a way that transcends political debates on income redistribution and welfare eligibility. “. . . [W]hen ordinary people just don’t matter to those who get to make the rules, it may be time to break them” (p. viii).

The ten short chapters are divided into four sections. In the first section, Dodson describes the fault line that divides middle-income supervisors from the working poor, and the moral conflicts that may ensue from the enforcement of workplace rules. Some supervisors have little problem with low wage work. They keep their distance from the personal lives of their workers; implement inflexible corporate standards of punctuality and attendance; and construct work schedules with a workplace-first focus that limits the number of full-time employees and keeps employee benefits

just out of reach. They expect the employee to adjust family life, child care, and transportation schedules to accommodate unstable work schedules and then blame the employees for a poor work ethic when the *noise* of their personal lives intrudes on the workplace.

But this book is not about the *amoral marketeers* who attempt to justify corporate profits and escalating wage inequalities. This book is about the other supervisors, those who remember that the essence of wage labor in America is predicated on “a fair day’s pay for a hard day’s work” (p. 40). The noise of personal lives intrudes on the workplace because wages are inadequate to sustain working class families. Dodson’s heroes are the middle-income supervisors who have taken personal responsibility for doing something about the unfairness of an economic system that does not provide living wages. These supervisors admire the work ethic of their employees. They understand how workplace rules are stacked against the single parent, and they have chosen to resist the unfairness, to “refuse to go along with the economic abuse” (p. 10). These heroes may look the other way when an employee needs personal time to deal with a sick child. They may revise work schedules, detour overstuffed items or spoilage to worker families, or even pad paychecks. Dodson’s heroes are those who feel the immorality of enforcing unfair workplace rules on hardworking people and who are willing to find or create cracks in the system to mitigate the injustices.

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The instability of working class lives, explained so sympathetically in the first section, is reconsidered through the school setting in the second. The children of the working poor represent significant challenges to America's public education systems. Designed to require substantial parental support and involvement in accord with middle class norms, public school systems are unprepared for working class expectations related to family responsibilities and a more hands-off parenting style. Coping with tardiness, unfinished homework, parental unavailability, and their students' lack of nourishment and sleep can lead some educators to question the personal character of parents. Others noting the challenges of low-wage work find more compassion. Dodson's heroes are those who refuse to sacrifice a child or a child's education on the altar of rules and regulations.

The correlation between health problems and poverty is the background for the third intersection of middle-income and low-income people. In Dodson's experience, health-care workers seem the least likely to blame patients for ill health and the most likely to bypass or jettison rules in order to help. Although unstated, the recent shifts in the national health-care delivery system to cost reduction and profit seeking may explain this behavior. When health-care workers perceive that third-party payer standards are conflicting with patient care, there may be a natural affinity between the caregiver and the patient. Moral justifications for breaking rules come easy when the rules seem canted toward profits rather than people. Many health-care workers are among Dodson's heroes.

In the last section of the book Dodson analyzes the moral roots of rule-breaking and provides a brief summary of policy considerations that might move America toward a more fair and moral economic system. She finds resistance to the immoral consequences of objective and impassionate rule enforcement to be rooted in

personal experience of hardship, concern for children, and even religious teachings. ". . . [W]hen everyday institutions and ordinary rules harm people *right in front of you*, that provokes a kind of soul searching. . . ." (p. 187). The product of this soul-searching process, to Dodson, is in the finest traditions of American social protest. Should these very personal acts of resistance ever merge into a social reform movement, Dodson suggests policy changes to promote a minimum living wage, career pathways for care workers, a higher national priority on children, expanded access to affordable health care, and improved access to ongoing adult educational opportunities. The book closes with a summary of Dodson's research projects and methodology.

I teach social work classes in one of the many "red states" in America, in which personal responsibility and hard work are the *sine qua non* of economic advancement. Pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps is more than a metaphor; it is the mystical antidote to every economic problem. Having assigned Dodson in both my undergraduate and graduate policy classes, I endorse her book without reservation. My students loved it, and Dodson's rhetorical technique of juxtaposing the hardliner approach against case studies of low-income families and the heroes who break the rules yields much fruitful class discussion. I have used nothing comparable as a means of broadening my students' understanding of low-income America, and I believe that the moral questions raised in this book should be required in every ethics course.