

Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America

Author: Eyal Press

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Reviewed by: Joshua Burns, *Kennesaw State University*

“One characteristic common to nearly all forms of dirty work is that they are hidden, making it easier for “good people” to avoid seeing or thinking about them.” (Press, 2021, pp. 12-13).

Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America exposes the hidden work we benefit from in the United States. This work is termed dirty work, which is “unethical activity that [has been] delegated to certain agents and then conveniently disavowed” (Press, 2021, p. 5). From working as a mental health counselor in prisons to being on the killing floors of industrial slaughterhouses, this work is deemed essential and beneficial to society but detrimental to the physical and mental health of those who are in it. The author, Eyal Press, traveled throughout the country to interview several people who have worked and experienced dirty work. These first-hand narratives and the in-depth analysis provided an overview of inequitable and dangerous work in the United States and an included argument that these workers deserve visibility, respect, and the challenging of norms through a change in culture and policy. This book should be considered for a first-year common

read program, but with considerations for which campus partners implement it for programming, how learning outcomes would be structured and met, and the campus partners that would enhance the success of programming.

The book includes an introduction to provide an overview and explain what dirty work is. Though it is filled with historical context, this section is vital to the rest of the book. Then, three parts provide unique narratives and analysis of dirty work in three varying contexts. In Part 1, the American prison system and its relation to mental health are covered. This is done primarily through Harriet Krzykowski, who served as a mental health counselor in a prison in Dade County, Florida. This perspective and others classified as having occupations in dirty work provided some of the most powerful takeaways as a reader, and students will have several anecdotes to connect to. Part 2 adds a complex layer to the dirty work argument through military personnel who operate drones and analyze drone imagery in the U.S. military. This is aligned with dirty work as those who conduct it come into experience with public scrutiny for the ethics and nature of drone warfare. Part 3 exposes the dangers of working in industrial slaughterhouses and the impact COVID-19 had on those workers deemed “essential” during the pandemic.

The themes of this book include inequality, labor rights, health and well-being, and social justice. While these themes are important in their own right, first-year college students would benefit from programming around each. For example, it provides opportunities for students to learn new concepts, engage in discussion and dialogue with others, and more. It is highlighted throughout the book that dirty work is often performed by those who are most marginalized in society. For the theme of inequality, there is a lot of conversation about why these marginalized groups are delegated to dirty work and why their work conditions are inequitable. This ties into more extensive student learning regarding privilege, power, and oppression. While some students might already be familiar with these conceptually or through lived experiences, this might be an introduction for them through *Dirty Work*.

As someone who comes from a lower-income family and who has seen the physical and mental impacts of essential work, I found conversations about the impact of dirty work on health and well-being impactful. Harriet Krzykowski’s health was severely impacted due to the stressors of working in an environment that directly conflicted with her training in mental health counseling. In part 3 of the book, labor rights are especially centered when analyzing slaughterhouse work conditions. Press is sure to draw global connections to other slaughterhouse industries, “In Germany, the dirty work in these facilities has been delegated to transplants from poorer neighboring states...” (Press, 2021, p. 202). This broader context can help students understand that dirty work and labor vary from country to country and that the United States is not alone in the

marginalization of groups delegated to these industries. Overall, there is a call to action from Press to take the necessary steps not to accept the current state of society but to achieve social justice for workers. In addition to this, how to advocate for the well-being and health of these workers, “the most effective way to help people overcome moral injury is to communalize it...” (Press, 2021, p. 270). While social justice is centered around labor rights, this is an essential practice for students to learn about other social issues and how to advocate for a more just society. These themes are appropriate for any higher education institution type, especially those with much more affluent student populations, classified as predominately white institutions, and could use more learning outcomes based on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Higher education professionals should strategically incorporate this text into new student programming. First, specific academic departments, programs, and living-learning communities might align with this being their first-year common read instead of an institution as a whole. For example, conversations around medical ethics and practice come out of part 1, which would benefit students aspiring to enter a health profession. Overall, the book can be a lot for students to read in a short amount of time. It is best to separate readings throughout the first year of the experience. The fall semester alone could cover the introduction, part 1, and part 2. As a result, if there is an opportunity to find a year-long context in which students can engage with *Dirty Work*, it would benefit their learning. On a smaller scale, discussion groups should be a practice to engage students further with the reading and topics. Instead of pushing students towards specific takeaways, create an environment where students come into the space with their own questions and ideas and then engage in dialogue with one another. Instructors and facilitators of the text should be knowledgeable. Another opportunity is incorporating various media forms and catering to several learning styles throughout the programming. Facilitators should incorporate social media posts, news articles, research articles, video clips, and guest speakers aligned with the book’s themes. This builds on the content presented in the book and broadens the scope of how students understand labor, inequitable labor practices, and connections to social justice.

Students can produce a final learning product where an area of dirty work in the context of the United States or another country is highlighted. Several industries can be of focus, including the technology industry, which was briefly covered as dirty work in Chapter 9. This allows for more significant learning outcomes, such as investigative inquiry, research, critical analysis, and synthesizing an argument. Ultimately, institutional stakeholders should make a call on what learning outcomes should be associated with the common read program with *Dirty Work*. Still, there is an opportunity to build interdisciplinary skills that can carry into a student’s entire college experience and post-graduation.

Some campus partners can assist in ensuring programming is effective. One partner is intercultural offices. Since there are themes of inequality and social justice, there are opportunities for programming that further explores these. Many students may need a more conceptual understanding of these terms, while others might have lived experiences that align with some of the narratives in the book. Intercultural offices usually have trained staff to facilitate conversations around these topics and co-develop programming directly connected to *Dirty Work*. Another campus partner is a global education or international affairs office. While most of the context in the book is in the United States, students should understand and make connections to dirty work in other countries. The text offers some examples of this, but a global educator or international affairs professional could provide context for these work conditions on a global scale. If the book were to align with an academic department, sociology would be the strongest contender. The sociology department should act as a support system to ensure that programming assists students in understanding some of the sociological theories and methods that underline the book. Further, there could be collaboration in introducing the programming since the term Dirty Work comes from sociologist Everett Hughes and his work in post-WW2 Germany (Press, 2021, pp. 3-6). Sociology faculty can help build material that expands upon how sociology and other disciplines have aided in research and pedagogy that is social justice-based.

Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America has the potential to introduce concepts, themes, and learning to students who have not previously engaged with them. Although there is a lot to take in in terms of reading, the sensitivity of some content, and ensuring that students are coming away from the programming with meeting learning outcomes, there is a powerful opportunity for students to connect with themes of inequality, labor rights, health and well-being, and social justice. Eyal Press effectively connects the personal narratives of folks who work in dirty work with larger political, historical, and social contexts. With the appropriate selection of campus partners who would facilitate the new student programming and provide additional support, there is potential for students to develop a sense of awareness and advocacy for not just the rights of workers but also other issues they will connect to throughout their collegiate journey.