

REALIZING A GOOD LIFE

MEN'S PATHWAYS OUT OF DRUGS AND CRIME

ELIZABETH COMACK

FERNWOOD PUBLISHING
HALIFAX & WINNIPEG

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Development editing: Wayne Antony
Copyediting: Jessica Antony
Cover image: Jackie Traverse
Cover design: Ann Doyon
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Fernwood Publishing
2970 Oxford Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 2W4
and 748 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3G 0X3

www.fernwoodpublishing.ca

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. We acknowledge the Province of Manitoba for support through the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Book Publishing Tax Credit. We acknowledge the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage for support through the Publishers Assistance Fund.



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Realizing a good life : men's pathways out of drugs and crime / Elizabeth Comack.

Names: Comack, Elizabeth, 1952- author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230138772 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230139116 | ISBN 9781773635651

(softcover) | ISBN 9781773636252 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781773636269 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Criminals—Rehabilitation—Case studies. | LCSH: Ex-convicts—Case studies. | LCSH:

Recovering addicts—Case studies. | LCSH: Ex-convicts—Social conditions. | LCSH: Recovering

addicts—Social conditions. | LCSH: Social networks. | LCSH: Men—Social conditions. | LCSH:

Indigenous men—Social conditions.

Classification: LCC HV9276 .C66 2023 | DDC 364.80811—dc23

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people and organizations have had a hand in bringing this book into being, and to them I am extremely grateful.

First and foremost are the twenty-three men who entrusted me with their stories. Special thanks are due to Lance, Mark, Peter, Shaun, and Trevor, who stayed with the project over the five years, meeting regularly with me to share their histories, experiences, and insights. I hope they realize what a privilege it has been for me to get to know them and to learn about their challenges and successes as they strove to realize a good life.

The research that underpins this book was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA) for our project entitled “Partnering for Change: Community-Based Solutions for Aboriginal and Inner-City Poverty.” I am indebted to my colleagues at the MRA for their support, and especially to John Loxley, the principal investigator on our project. John’s passing in July 2020 was a loss that many of us are still feeling.

I also had the benefit of input from Robert Henry (University of Saskatchewan) and Jim Silver (University of Winnipeg), who reviewed the manuscript and provided me with thoughtful feedback. Their comments enabled me to strengthen the work, but it goes without saying that any errors or omissions that remain in the book are my own.

Kathy Jaworski had the arduous task of transcribing the 113 interview recordings I collected over the course of the project. I’ve come to depend on Kathy’s expertise as a transcriptionist for the various projects I’ve done over the years, and am continually thankful for her support.

The book’s cover art, titled “All My Relations,” was produced by Anishinaabe artist Jackie Traverse. Jackie and I have known each other for over two decades, and this is the fifth time that she has graciously

created the artwork for one of my book's covers. I am forever in awe of her incredible talent and creativity.

The John Howard Society of Manitoba was an important source of support to the project, allowing us to post ads for the study to recruit men who were part of their Bail Assessment, Support, and Supervision Program and providing a space where the regular meetings with the men took place.

Mitch Bourbonniere was also an invaluable support to the project, providing me with counsel when I needed it and helping to facilitate our final gathering in January 2020.

And then there's the folks at Fernwood Publishing. My work as an academic committed to realizing social justice has been so enriched by my association with this independent Canadian book publisher that produces "critical books for critical thinkers." Tanya Andrusieczko, Brenda Conroy, Anumeha Gokhale, Sara Hollett Rimmer, Fiona Jeffries, Fazeela Jiwa, Debbie Mathers, Beverley Rach, Errol Sharpe, and Sanna Wani are all to be commended for the heavy lifting they do in bringing books from an idea to print and making sure those books get to their readers. I also thank Jessica Antony for putting her finely honed copy-editing skills into action to make the manuscript more readable. As always, special mention is due to my publisher and development editor, Wayne Antony. I have worked closely with Wayne on all of my Fernwood books, and have come to rely heavily on his critical acumen and keen political sensibilities to inform my writing. I think you well know, Wayne, that I couldn't do this work without you.

Finally, I pay tribute to my friend, Larry Morrissette. Larry was my collaborator on this project before his passing in September 2016. You left us way too soon, Larry. I miss our regular meetings and the teachings you gifted me about the harms that colonialism has wrought on the lives of Indigenous peoples. You knew there was a better way, and demonstrated that daily in the caring work you did in the community. It is only fitting that the royalties from this book will be donated to support the organization that Larry started, Ogijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK).



CHAPTER ONE

REALIZING A GOOD LIFE

In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King tells us, “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous.”¹ Telling stories is wondrous because they can open up our minds to new ways of thinking and understanding about what goes on in the world around us. But stories can also be dangerous because they have the power to unsettle or disrupt what we think we already know. As a criminologist, I have spent the better part of my career telling stories. Stories of men and women who have been traumatized by violence, engaged in violence of their own, succumbed to the lure of drugs and alcohol, become involved in all manner of criminal wrongdoing, and spent time incarcerated in Canada’s prisons and jails. My intention was to midwife those stories, to make them available to many people in the hopes that they might be dangerous, that they just might unsettle or disrupt what we think we already know about the lives of individuals who have been pushed to the margins of our society. This book follows that same path. It, too, is a book about stories. The stories belong to men, most of whom identify as Indigenous, who are trying to realize a good life. These are stories of trauma and hardship, but they are also stories about hope and promise. You might wonder, then, what a privileged white woman like me is doing in writing such a book. So, I’ll start by telling you a story.

My work as an academic has been focused on social justice issues, on exposing the ways in which social inequalities affect people’s lives and on figuring out strategies for alleviating the injustices those inequalities create. As part of that work, in 2009 I joined with Jim Silver, Lawrie Deane, and Larry Morrissette to do some research about Indigenous street gangs in Winnipeg. Like me, Jim and Lawrie were academics. Larry was also teaching some university courses but was primarily working in the community as Executive Director of Ogiijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK), an organization that supports gang-involved men who are try-

ing to move forward in their lives. That summer, several members of an Indigenous street gang had approached Larry, wanting to meet with us. Larry had developed trusting relationships with the men, and they knew that he worked with some university people who were conducting research in Winnipeg's inner city. Concerned about how the media had represented the violent death of a street gang member, they wanted to talk with us and share their standpoints. We arranged to meet with six of these men over a two-day period. On the basis of that encounter, we wrote a report titled "If You Want to Change Violence in the 'Hood, You Have to Change the 'Hood" after something one of the men had said during our meeting.

After that initial encounter, one of the street gang members expressed an interest in meeting with us on a more regular basis, and so we did that. He told us his life story, about his childhood, his initial involvement with street gang life, and his subsequent activities as a leading member of an Indigenous street gang that had been active for more than two decades in Winnipeg's inner city. That encounter set us off on a three-year journey of interviewing Indigenous street gang leaders in depth and, in a number of cases, multiple times, and conducting other related interviews with Indigenous men and women who had grown up in Winnipeg's inner city about their experiences with school and work, and their involvement in street gangs and the drug trade. We also met with Elders and cultural facilitators who had years of experience working with Indigenous youth and knew the inner-city scene well. We brought together what we had learned from these interviews in a book called "*Indians Wear Red*": *Colonialism, Resistance, and Aboriginal Street Gangs*.

Feeling that the work we did for "*Indians Wear Red*" was only beginning to scratch the surface, Larry and I decided to do another project. This one would involve connecting with a number of men over a longer period of time (five years, as it turned out) with the idea of following them on their journey as they tried to realize a good life. We started that work in December 2014. With the assistance of the John Howard Society of Manitoba, we reached out to men who were part of their Bail Assessment, Support, and Supervision Program. Several men came forward, willing to participate and tell us their stories. Other men joined as our project unfolded and, in total, twenty-three men participated in the project. While we lost contact with many along the way, several of the men stayed in touch with us. We would meet every five months or so

to catch up on where they were at in their lives, to learn about both the successes and the struggles they were encountering.

Then, on the early morning of September 20, 2016, I received a text message from one of the men we had been meeting with. He wanted me to call him. He had news about Larry. On phoning him, I learned that Larry had passed away the night before.

Larry was only 59 years old when he died. Like many Indigenous people, Larry had been struggling with diabetes. He had lost a toe and wore a foot cast for over a year, as doctors were trying to heal an open wound. He was optimistic, though, that he could beat the disease, and was looking forward to being able to go swimming and enjoy the other activities that had brought him joy in life. Larry was apparently found at his computer the night he passed. I saw the irony in that. Computers were not Larry's friend. He never really "got" them. We would joke about how technically incompetent the two of us were when it came to computers, especially in conversation with one of the guys we were meeting with, who was far more computer savvy than the two of us could ever hope to be.

As news of Larry's passing circulated within Winnipeg and beyond, people came together to share in their grief. A memorial event was held at Winnipeg's Neeginan Centre, and a wake was held at Thunderbird House the following day. Hundreds of people were in attendance. They were there to honour Larry.

Larry could be described as a "quiet warrior." He never sought the limelight but was always there to do the work. He worked closely with many, many individuals whose lives were being ground down by colonialism, providing them with counsel and connecting them to the supports they needed. He dedicated his talents and energies to giving back and making change in the Winnipeg inner-city community in which he was raised. His involvements were many. To name only a few, in the 1980s, Larry was actively involved in the efforts that led to the creation of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, an organization established to support Indigenous families. Larry was also a co-founder, as part of the Thunder Eagle Society, of the Children of the Earth High School, an Indigenous school in Winnipeg's North End. In the 1990s he helped to found the Bear Clan Patrol and played a role in its revitalization in the 2010s. Drawing its purpose from Bear Clan teachings, the patrol works to provide protection and security in Winnipeg's inner-city communities and to reclaim those communities as Indigenous spaces.

While we were all reeling with our loss, the men involved with the project agreed that in order to honour Larry, we would continue with that work. And so we did, meeting on a regular basis, all the while with the feeling that Larry's spirit was still with us, helping to guide us on a good path.

These men's stories are the heart of this book. While there are important differences reflected in their stories, the men do share many things in common. Most of the men identify as Indigenous. Some grew up in First Nation communities, some in Winnipeg's inner-city communities. Many grew up in poverty and experienced the intrusion of the child welfare system into their lives. Many have spent time in provincial jails and lockups and some in federal prisons. Almost all of the men have encountered trauma, some in their childhood and some later as adults. All of the men were struggling to live a good life. Some were still very much living "in the problem," caught up in the tangled web of gang life, being in and out of jail, and dealing with addictions to drugs and alcohol. Others were dealing with mental health issues and the imprint that earlier traumas have left on their wellbeing. Still others were endeavouring to live a life of sobriety, working to make a safe home for their families.

We can learn a lot from these men's stories, about their own courage, resilience, and tenacity. But we're not quite yet ready to do that. In telling the stories that have been entrusted to me, I'm going to do it in a way that aims to give some context to these men's lives. To do so, I draw on my sociological training to situate these men's lives within the society in which they found themselves. Since the focus of this book is about realizing a good life, I'll start by unpacking what that might mean.

THE "GOOD LIFE"

What does it mean to realize a good life? In trying to answer that question, we could look to individuals who have received public attention for the life they are living. In doing so, it wouldn't take too long to recognize how much we tend to focus on the lives and lifestyles of the rich and famous. Tales of self-made men (and they usually are men) who pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, without any outside help, are typically the ones on the receiving end of public adoration. They are, after all, the epitome of the American Dream, the widely circulated idea that everyone has the chance to be happy and successful, especially in the attainment of material things, if they just work hard enough.

From this vantage point, Bill Gates might stand as the poster boy for realizing a good life. The co-founder of Microsoft Corporation, Gates was reported to have a net worth of \$124 billion in 2021, a mind-boggling amount of money.² Gates is in many respects the perfect role model for the American Dream. Unlike some other billionaires (Donald Trump, for instance), he didn't just inherit his fortune. He set out to make one on his own in the capitalist marketplace, pioneering the microcomputer revolution in the 1970s and 1980s. Gates not only possessed considerable talent, but worked hard to get to his station in life, making full use of his abilities and grabbing every opportunity that came his way.

But there is deception in this account. As Linda McQuaig and Neil Brooks remind us in their book, *The Trouble with Billionaires*, successful men like Bill Gates do not realize their riches all on their own. A large part of their success is due to luck, not only the luck of being in the right place at the right time in history but also the luck of their class (as well as their gender and racial) privilege. In Gates's case, being born into a well-to-do family gave him opportunities that are denied to children of low-income parents. His father was a successful lawyer and his maternal grandfather a rich banker. His family could afford to send him to a private school, Lakeside, which happened to have a computer club, something unusual for the late 1960s. A lucrative fundraising drive by the mothers of the Lakeside students provided the money to buy a \$3,000 computer terminal, launching Gates on his journey to become a computer-savvy entrepreneur.

Gates caught other lucky breaks along the way, including getting access to free computer time at Information Services Incorporated and the University of Washington. Attending Harvard University (another sign of his privilege), he honed his knowledge of computers, eventually dropping out of university in 1975 to set up Microsoft with his former Lakeside pal and computer enthusiast, Paul Allen. The two men caught yet another lucky break in the 1980s, one that launched Microsoft to become the dominant force in the computer industry. IBM was looking for an operating system for its new desktop computer. At the time, Microsoft was not the leader in the field. Rather, Gary Kildall held that status with his CP/M system. But Gates was able to strike a deal with IBM after buying the rights to another system fashioned after Kildall's CP/M. As they say, the rest is history. Bill Gates went on to become one of the richest and most celebrated men on the planet.

In addition to highlighting the luck of birthright and the opportunities that come with it, McQuaig and Brooks make a significant point: Gates's success in life would not have been possible without "the collective contributions of many, many people."³ As they remind us, the personal computer "was the product of a long series of technological developments going back decades (or even centuries), each one making possible the advance of science to the point that the next breakthrough became possible, indeed almost inevitable."⁴ According to McQuaig and Brooks, if the story of the development of the personal computer was presented as a stage play, it would involve "a rich and complex drama with a long list of characters."⁵ In that drama, Bill Gates would have only a minor role, showing up on stage very late in the final act.

Men like Bill Gates, therefore, do not realize this version of a good life all on their own. Not only do they rely on the knowledge they have inherited from those who came before them, they require the support of the society in which they live — not just in terms of a capitalist economy that favours their interests, but in every other aspect of their lives, "in nurturing them, shaping them, teaching them what they know, performing innumerable functions that contribute to the operation of their business and every other aspect of the market and indeed every part of life around them."⁶ So, while an idea like the American Dream holds out the promise that *anyone* can live a good life if they just work hard enough, Gates's story points to some larger forces that matter in terms of a person's ability to realize a good life. In particular, inequalities that prevail in society cast the idea of the American Dream into doubt. Those inequalities break down along a number of fault lines, with class, gender, and race being three main ones.

CLASS MATTERS

The class position you are born into establishes an important determinant of your life's pathway. Those born with class privilege will have a much easier time in realizing a good life, especially when it is defined by the accumulation of material wealth.

To say that wealth is unevenly distributed in our society is a huge understatement. As one example, Canada's top 100 corporate elite — the highest-paid corporate executive officers of companies listed in the Toronto Stock Exchange Index — had an average annual compensation of \$10.8 million in 2019. In contrast, the average Canadian working full-time, full-

year earned \$53,482 that year, which means that Canada's corporate elite made *202 times* more than most Canadians. Expressing this gross disparity as a factor of time and not money, by 11:17 a.m. on the first working day of that year, the average top-100 CEO in Canada would already have pocketed what the average worker had to work all year to earn.⁷

We can turn to McQuaig and Brooks again to gain a visual picture of what this income inequality looks like.⁸ Imagine the distribution of income as a national parade in which everyone in the country marches. The height of the marchers would be determined by their incomes, and the entire parade would pass by in one hour, starting with the shortest marchers at the front and ending with the tallest marchers (the highest income earners) at the rear. For the first few minutes, only very tiny people (less than a foot tall) would be visible; welfare recipients, part-time workers, and pensioners would be among them. Fifteen minutes into the parade, fast-food workers, retail clerks, and other service providers would pass by, all less than three feet tall, followed by other workers such as truck drivers and factory labourers measuring only four feet in height. People of average height would only begin to appear some forty minutes into the parade, reflecting average income levels (teachers, nurses, office managers). Only in the last ten minutes would we see really tall people begin to appear — high-income professionals such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, and engineers standing seven or eight feet tall. In the last six minutes, the marchers become taller still, at more than fourteen feet in height. It is not until the last minute of the parade, particularly in the last few seconds, that some real giants walk by (billionaires like Bill Gates among them). Their faces are so high up that it's impossible to see them. Their incomes are so great that they reach several kilometres into the sky.

GROWING UP IN POVERTY

While children born into wealthy families will have plenty of opportunities made available to them to realize a good life, children who are born into families living in poverty will have more of an uphill battle. And there are many of those children in Canada. In 2019, almost one in five Canadian children under the age of 18 was living in a family that was below the poverty line. Manitoba had the highest child-poverty rate among the provinces, with more than one in four Manitoba children living in families that were below the poverty line.⁹

Growing up in poverty means not just a shortage of income but a number of other consequences — what Jim Silver refers to as “complex poverty.”¹⁰ These consequences, which are interrelated, include having to live in inadequate housing or even having no housing, having difficulties doing well in school and then finding a decent job as you grow older, and experiencing poor health.

Housing and Homelessness

There is a serious shortage of housing for low-income families all across Canada. Nearly 1.7 million Canadian families experience a lack of access to adequate housing.¹¹ They live in housing that is overcrowded, in need of repairs, and more expensive than they can afford. Homes that are poorly insulated and affected by mould and bed bugs create a range of health problems for their occupants. Slum landlords frequently make things worse by refusing to make necessary repairs or spend money on basic maintenance. Many low-income tenants end up moving frequently in search of more decent housing.¹²

The poor condition of low-income housing and the frequent moves make it all the more difficult for children growing up in poor families to do well in school. This challenge is reflected in the statistics. One Manitoba study found that while almost all students (99 percent) in the highest income group graduated from high school on time, only just over half (55 percent) of those in the lowest income group did so.¹³ In some inner-city neighbourhoods in Winnipeg where poverty is prevalent, only one in four young people graduate from high school on time.¹⁴

While many people living in poverty are dealing with inadequate housing conditions, some people have trouble finding any housing at all. More than 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year, with 35,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night.¹⁵ The numbers are especially high for youth. One in five homeless people in Canada are between the ages of 13 and 24; four in ten of those youth will have experienced homelessness before the age of 16.¹⁶ With no roof over your head and having to rely on friends who let you couch surf, realizing a good life will be a challenge.

Precarious Jobs

According to the American Dream, a key element of realizing a good life is hard work, which presumes that people have access to jobs that will pay them a decent salary. But full-time, full-year work is becom-

ing harder to find since more and more jobs are now either part time or temporary. Termed “precarious work,” these jobs are less likely to be unionized, and are typically low-paid and have few benefits, such as sick leave, dental plans, or pensions. Precarious work can include part-time work in factories, offices, and stores or seasonal jobs such as landscaping, lawn mowing, snow shovelling, and construction work.

Back in the 1950s, fewer than one in twenty of all jobs were part time. Since the early 1990s, one in five Canadian workers are in part-time jobs.¹⁷ In 2017, 3.5 million Canadians were working part time as their main or only job.¹⁸ The number of temporary workers has also been growing. In 2018 there were 2.1 million people working temporary jobs, up from 1.4 million in 1998.¹⁹ Canadians younger than 25 are especially at risk of falling into precarious work. But even those who can find full-time work are at risk of poverty. Some 70 percent of Canadians living in poverty are considered the “working poor.” They’re working almost twenty hours each week but aren’t making enough money to get by.²⁰

The precarious nature of the labour market became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Canadians began to feel the impact of the pandemic in March 2020 when businesses began closing and the population went into lockdown. By April 2020, as the full force of the pandemic hit, more than 3 million jobs were lost and the unemployment rate soared to 13 percent, a rise that surpassed previous financial crises. Added to the staggering job losses, people who were still employed worked less than half their usual hours, affecting some 2.5 million workers. The impact was especially hard on people who had jobs with less security and poorer pay, which included those working in accommodation and food services and the wholesale and retail trades.²¹ Despite a massive influx of government benefits meant to assist Canadians whose incomes were disappearing due to COVID, experts were predicting that more people would fall through the cracks and into poverty.²²

Poor Health

People living in poverty have a lower life expectancy. Living on a low income means a greater likelihood of suffering from heart diseases, chronic health conditions, and mental health issues. Suicide is also more common for people living on a low-income. One study found that women from low-income neighbourhoods have a life expectancy of 82 compared to a life expectancy of 84 for women in high-income neighbourhoods. Men living in low-income neighbourhoods have a life ex-

pectancy of 76 while men living in high-income neighbourhoods can expect to live until the age of 80.²³ Another study looked at the earnings of Canadians who lived past the age of 50 and found an even larger longevity gap: high-income women outlived low-income women by 6.4 years, while high-income men outlived low-income men by 7.7 years.²⁴

Hunger is one factor that affects people's health. A 2020 study of more than half a million Canadian adults found that hunger was linked to an increased chance of dying from all causes of death except cancer. Infectious diseases, unintentional injuries, and suicide were twice as likely to kill people who faced severe problems finding enough food as those who do not. The study also noted that more than four million Canadians struggle each day to get enough to eat.²⁵ Indeed, more and more people in Canada are having to rely on food banks in order to meet their daily food needs. According to Hunger Count 2019, an annual survey of food banks and emergency food programs carried out by Food Banks Canada, during one month in 2019, over one million (1,084,386) Canadians used a food bank. Over one-third (34 percent) of food-bank users are children.²⁶

Growing up in poverty is obviously a key factor in determining whether a person will be able to realize a good life. But there are other factors at work.

GENDER MATTERS

The American Dream version of a good life is a masculine one, premised on the “self-made men” whose determination and hard work brought them their successes, especially in the world of capitalist business ventures. The notion of the “self-made man” provides but one example of the ways in which class inequalities stemming from capitalism are intertwined with gender inequalities stemming from patriarchy.

Feminist writers have drawn attention to the many ways in which patriarchy — a system of male domination — has constrained women's lives. To name just a few:

- Women are paid less than men with the same qualifications, even when they work the same number of hours. They are also segregated in the labour market into certain kinds of jobs (such as in the retail and service sectors) that have lower hourly wages and fewer benefits than sectors dominated by men (such as con-

struction and mining), even when they require the same skill level.²⁷

- Women have been traditionally assigned the important role of child rearing, even when they are also working in the paid labour market, taking on what is referred to as the “double day.” Mothers who parent on their own are at increased risk of living in poverty; more than one in four (26 percent) female single-parent families in Canada are living on low incomes.²⁸
- Women are more at risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Women account for eight in ten victims of intimate partner violence and are the victims in the vast majority (79 percent) of intimate partner homicides in Canada.²⁹ Sexual assault is also a gendered crime. Women are victimized at a higher rate (37 incidents per 1,000 women) than men (5 per 1,000 men).³⁰ Between 2009 and 2014, the vast majority (87 percent) of police-reported sexual assault victims were women or girls, most of whom (70 percent) were under the age of 25.³¹

However, while patriarchy is a system that privileges men, it does not benefit all men equally. As sociologist Raewyn Connell notes, “the men who receive most of the benefits and the men who pay most of the costs are not the same individuals.”³² In these terms, patriarchy is not just about men controlling women. It is also about how *all* men are made subject to a particular ideal of a “real man.” Yet, not all men are in a position to live up to this ideal.³³

Connell coined the term “hegemonic masculinity” to capture how this ideal of a “real man” plays out in Western cultures. She was interested in understanding how a particular gender order, a “historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity,” comes to be reproduced in society.³⁴ According to Connell, male dominance in the gender order is achieved by the circulation of a particular idealized form of masculinity that is culturally glorified, honoured, and exalted. In Western cultures, this idealized form casts the “masculine” as synonymous with being tough, self-sufficient, and assertive. Its opposite is the “feminine,” which is associated with weakness, dependency, and passivity. This cultural ideal may not correspond with the actual personalities of the majority of men, and may well not be “normal” in a statistical sense because only a minority of men may enact it. In these terms, sports heroes, movie

stars, business tycoons, and even fantasy figures (such as the X-Men or Superman) can offer representations of masculinity that come to be the standard in the sense that they embody “the currently most honored way of being a man” and require all other men to position themselves in relation to this idealized form.³⁵

Masculinity, then, is a relational construct. It influences the relations not only between men and women but also among men. As a pattern of practice, masculinity finds expression in different social contexts depending on the resources available. Corporate bosses, for example, will practice a masculinity that does not require resorting to physical violence as a means of exerting their power. They have other means of getting their way, particularly their ability to hire and fire employees. In contrast, economically marginalized men who have been denied the opportunities to accomplish masculinity through conventionally accepted routes (such as education and jobs or even prowess at sports) may draw upon the resources available to them to perform a “street masculinity” that emphasizes physical toughness and violence — a violent presentation of self that sociologist Jack Katz refers to as a “bad ass” identity.³⁶

Criminologist James Messerschmidt has argued that engaging in criminal activity becomes a way that economically marginalized men can “do” masculinity. He explains: “Because types of criminality are possible only when particular social conditions present themselves, when other masculine resources are unavailable, particular types of crime can provide an alternative resource for accomplishing gender and, therefore, affirming a particular type of masculinity.”³⁷ Messerschmidt’s linking of masculinity to crime helps to explain why the vast majority of individuals who come into conflict with the law are males. In 2017–18, men accounted for 85 percent of adult admissions to provincial/territorial custody and 92 percent of adult admissions to federal custody. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of youth admitted to correctional services that year were male.³⁸ Doing crimes — at least the crimes that the criminal justice system typically concentrates its attention on — becomes a way of doing masculinity, of living up to that ideal of a “real man.”³⁹

For our purposes, this notion of hegemonic masculinity points to the pressures on men in our society to be self-reliant, to secure the material resources that will enable them (and their families) to realize a good life. Economically marginalized men will have a harder time living up to that masculine ideal, especially if they are also racialized.

RACE MATTERS

The persistence of racism is another factor that has a bearing on individuals' ability to realize a good life. There has been much talk about racism in recent times, especially with the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the deaths of Black people at the hands of police officers. In May 2020, George Floyd was stopped by Minneapolis police officers for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. During his apprehension, an officer knelt on Floyd's neck for over eight minutes while he was handcuffed and lying face down on the ground. Floyd repeatedly told the officer "I can't breathe." But to no avail. He died at the scene. Floyd's death prompted protests around the world. In addition to demands to end police brutality and racially motivated violence, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought attention to the ways in which racism permeates the lives of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (often referred to in shorthand as BIPOC).

However, there is confusion, and even denial, over the existence of racism, especially in its systemic forms. For instance, when asked about the protests that were occurring over the death of George Floyd, the Deputy Commissioner of the RCMP in Alberta, Curtis Zablocki, responded, "I don't believe that racism is systemic through Canadian policing." Zablocki later expanded on his position, saying "We all acknowledge that racist individuals can be anywhere throughout our society and institutions — and we have acknowledged that organizationally in the RCMP."⁴⁰ A short time later, RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki was also asked whether systemic racism existed in her police force. She replied, "You know, it's a question I haven't been struggling with but I have been struggling with the definition of systemic racism and when I think of unconscious bias, there is unconscious bias in the RCMP, most definitely."⁴¹ Such comments point to the need to clarify the meanings of race and racism, and the difference between racist individuals, unconscious bias, and systemic racism.

RACE

The meaning of "race" has changed over time. When the term first appeared in the English language in the early sixteenth century, it was used to distinguish between different nation states, such as England and France. In the English case, for instance, Anglo-Saxons were described as a "race" of people.⁴² With the growth of science in the nineteenth cen-

tury, “race” came to be understood as a way of separating groups of people on the basis of their physical characteristics (such as the complexion of their face, the texture of their hair, and the width of their nose). This view of race as a biological category came under heavy criticism during the first half of the twentieth century when advances in scientific knowledge made it clear that the world’s population could not actually be categorized into distinct, biologically based racial groups.⁴³ But this understanding of race has persisted as a way of separating out groups of people on the basis of features such as their skin colour, culture, religion, and language.

Rather than a biological category, race can be understood as a social construction.⁴⁴ In other words, race is an idea that has been created to represent the world in certain ways. The idea of race is one of the ways (gender is another) that individuals are differentiated from each other both in terms of how they are perceived and how others act towards them. Viewing race as socially constructed draws our attention to the social relations between people that are being produced in the process. In this sense, race is a social practice that is connected to power. Certain groups come to be “racialized.” They are designated as different and, on that basis, subjected to unequal and oppressive treatment. When race is understood in this way, the focus shifts from the people being racialized to those *doing* the racializing.

RACIST INDIVIDUALS AND RACIAL PRIVILEGE

The RCMP Deputy Commissioner made the point that “racist individuals can be anywhere throughout our society and institutions.” A racist is someone who believes that their own racial group is superior to another, and holds onto beliefs and assumptions that reinforce that viewpoint. Members of white supremacist hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan are obvious examples of people who are racists. But holding onto racist beliefs and engaging in racist behaviour is not always so obvious or direct as the lynching of Black people engaged in by the Klansmen.

In her statement, RCMP Commissioner Lucki referred to “unconscious bias” in relation to racism. As we go about our daily lives, all of us operate on the basis of unconscious bias in the sense that the decisions we make are being informed by our preferences. The colour of the clothes we choose to wear (for my young granddaughter, that would definitely be pink or purple) or the kind of food that we buy (sweet or

savoury?) are determined by our likes and dislikes — and sometimes to the point where we don't even think about the fact that we have those preferences. They become taken for granted, an accepted part of the way things are.

To say that our interactions with other people are based on an unconscious bias suggests that we may be engaging in racism without even knowing it. How can that be? Understanding race as a social relation, as a social practice connected to power, draws attention to the question of “who benefits?” when groups are racialized. In societies in which white people are the dominant group, whiteness goes unmarked. Whiteness becomes the unacknowledged standard by which all others are measured and judged. Being white, therefore, brings racial privilege. Individuals may not see themselves as being racist — their bias may well be “unconscious” — but they can still benefit from a society in which privilege is granted to one group and not others simply on the basis of their membership in that racial group.

Peggy MacIntosh offers a way of understanding racial privilege with her metaphor of the “invisible knapsack,” which refers to a package of unearned assets that white people can count on cashing in each day, but about which they remain largely ignorant.⁴⁵ MacIntosh spells out a long list of conditions that are contained in this knapsack, including:

- If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
- I can be sure that my children will be given educational materials at school that recognize and value their racial heritage.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.

These conditions highlight the taken-for-granted benefits that are granted to white people, and how BIPOC may experience society quite differently.

Similar to the ways in which individuals with class privilege will be given benefits that can contribute to realizing a good life, those who are granted racial privilege will have an advantage. White people, for instance, do not encounter what Philomena Essed calls “everyday racism” — those daily situations racialized people encounter that, over time, become part of their life stories.⁴⁶ These situations can include being followed by store security when you are shopping because they suspect that

you might be stealing, arranging to view an apartment and being told by the landlord that it had already been rented, or being stopped by police because they say you “fit the description” of someone who had just committed a crime.⁴⁷ On their own, these experiences may not seem all that troublesome. But when they happen on an all-too-regular basis, they produce a pattern of social marginalization. As such, racism cannot simply be reduced to single incidents or specific events — or even unconscious bias. Racist beliefs and actions that infiltrate individuals’ everyday lives become part of a wider system that reproduces racism and racial inequality.

SYSTEMIC RACISM

Racism is not just a matter of the actions of racist individuals. Racism is the oppression of a subordinated racialized group to the social, political, and economic advantage of a dominant racial group. Contrary to the position taken by RCMP Deputy Commissioner Zablocki, racism *does* have a systemic basis. The institutional and social processes in society — including policing — operate to support, reinforce, and sustain patterns of racial inequality.

One way to understand how systemic racism operates is to examine its connections to other forms of oppression. While capitalism is a global economic system that has created massive inequalities worldwide, several writers have used the term “racial capitalism” to draw attention to how this system relies on racial hierarchies to justify and perpetuate those inequalities.⁴⁸

As one compelling example, the slavery of Black peoples was the bedrock of capitalist development and expansion in the Americas. Between the 1440s and the 1880s, the transatlantic slave trade resulted in some twelve million African men, women, and children being violently captured, held hostage, and exposed to untold physical, sexual, and psychological brutality. Most were put to work in sugar plantations. Brazil was one of the largest importers of enslaved peoples, receiving almost five million people from Africa between 1501 and 1866. One of the first shiploads carrying enslaved Africans to the United States landed at Point Comfort near the English Colony of Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, beginning that country’s history of the institution of slavery.⁴⁹ Black enslavement became foundational to the American capitalist economy, especially in the development of cotton plantations in the South, which supplied

the British textile industry. As James McPherson notes, “by 1860 there were more millionaires (slaveholders all) living in the lower Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the United States. In the same year, the nearly 4 million American slaves were worth some \$3.5 billion, making them the largest single financial asset in the entire U.S. economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined.”⁵⁰ Translated into today’s dollars, \$1 million in 1860 is \$31.3 million; \$3.5 billion would be a whopping \$109.7 billion.

While Canadians have been content to point their fingers at the United States for its racist past, Canada too has a history of racism that continues into the present day. As Robyn Maynard details in her book, *Policing Black Lives*, slavery was practiced in Canada for over two hundred years, and only formally abolished in 1834. Even so, Canada’s long history of anti-Blackness continued into the twentieth century with “segregated schooling in many provinces, discrimination in employment and housing and significant Ku Klux Klan membership.” Yet, “the long history of anti-Blackness in Canada has, for the most part, occurred alongside the disavowal of its existence.”⁵¹

Anti-Black racism is not the only form of systemic racism operating in Canada. Racial capitalism has also taken the form of settler colonialism. Indigenous scholar Michael Yellow Bird explains settler colonialism as “a system in which one people claim sovereignty over another and assert social, political, economic, and spiritual domination over the colonized.”⁵² Similar to other forms of racial capitalism, settler colonialism is geared toward the advancement of a capitalist system that is designed to produce profits for a few at the expense of the many. However, unlike other forms of racial capitalism such as slavery, settler colonialism is focused on the colonized being dispossessed from the land as opposed to exploited for their labour.⁵³

The history of Canada as a settler colonial nation has become better known in recent years, especially with the formal apologies issued by governments and attempts at reconciliation for the harms that have been caused to Indigenous peoples in Canada. Some of that history bears repeating.

The dispossession of First Nations and Métis peoples from their traditional homelands was enabled by treaties and scrips, both of which were intended to extinguish Aboriginal title.⁵⁴ On the surface, the treaties seemed a fair exchange. In return for access to the land, the Canadian

government reserved smaller tracts of land for use (but not ownership) by the First Nations.⁵⁵ Government officials also promised monetary payments, agricultural and economic assistance, schools and teachers, “and other goods and benefits depending on the particular group they were negotiating with.”⁵⁶ On closer inspection, however, the treaties reveal a gross deception. While First Nations were willing to share the land with the newcomers “in a spirit of peace and coexistence,”⁵⁷ the government saw the treaties as a legal transfer of land title. Treaty negotiations were conducted in the oral traditions of the First Nations, with a formal text compiled later in the process. While those texts included terms such as “cede,” “surrender,” “extinguish,” “yield,” and “forever give up,” the meaning of those concepts is not found anywhere in the records of the negotiations.⁵⁸ Ownership of the land is contrary to First Nations’ ways of knowing, and Indigenous languages do not even have translations for words like “cede” or “surrender.”⁵⁹ As Anishinaabe/Métis lawyer Aimée Craft notes in her analysis of the Treaty One negotiations, had such terms been raised, “they would likely have resulted in an immediate breakdown of the negotiations, as the Anishinabe would not have agreed to a surrender of the land.”⁶⁰

Unlike the treaties, which treated First Nations peoples as collectivities, the scrip applied to Métis people on an individual basis, “because the Crown did not accept the existence of a Métis collective with title and rights.”⁶¹ The scrip was a promissory note entitling the holder to a cash payment or a small parcel of land (sometimes thousands of kilometres away). As Métis lawyer Jean Teillet notes, “The Métis scrip process was a rotten deal. And everybody knew it.”⁶² It resulted in the systematic loss of Métis lands. Speculators, for instance, were notorious for buying up scrips at low prices from Métis who needed the money to stave off starvation, and then selling the land for a profit to banks and churches.⁶³

Through these two processes, then, the Canadian state claimed control over large Indigenous territories in order to ensure access to the land for settlement and agriculture production as well as making way for the construction of the transcontinental railroad to deliver settlers and move goods in both directions, thereby facilitating the advance of capitalist industries and resource extraction.

Dispossession also involved establishing a colonial system in which white settler society was imposed on Indigenous peoples, disrupting their own systems of governance and ways of being. The imposition of