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The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a discussion on gender, biology, social engineering and parenthood.

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Caution ahead: gender under construction

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When Chris Gardner, the hero-father in the new Will Smith movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* was faced with life obstacles beyond our understanding—he clung stubbornly to caring for his son. He declared unlike his own life experience, his son would know who his father was, not allowing the two of them to be separated by his wife's departure, by an eviction from their apartment, and subsequently from a motel. In one of many poignant scenes in the movie, Gardner is bathing his son: scrubbing him with a soapy cloth as the light in the homeless shelter turns off. He puts his son to bed—assuring him that he is nearby, and that his son can trust him.

That might leave a gender-bending movie watcher to comment that Gardner was actually mothering. Men can be mothers according to feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick who claims that “a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing childcare is a significant part of her or his working life.” [1] Ruddick reduces motherhood to a job description ably filled by a woman, man or seemingly anyone willing to take on the right tasks. But in the act of nurturing and caring for children, do women and men offer a unique contribution derived from their biologically and socially influenced gender?

Canadian psychology researcher Diane Dubeau argues that with the increase of divorce, remarriage and common law partnerships, “fatherly involvement is seen as a social construct that changes with the times, as well as with the culture, the characteristics and the mores of society.” [2] Add to this, the widely held view on university campuses that gender is a social construction historically serving the hegemonic masculine dominance over women. The resulting argument concludes that cutting the biological cord to Ma and Pop is a matter of equality.



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This may sound extreme, but the argument is influential. In fact, one could say the ideological assertion that gender is merely socially constructed drives the understanding of parenthood in this country and Canadian public policy has reengineered the definition of parenthood accordingly. Bill C-38, the Canadian Civil Marriage Act replaced 'natural' parent with 'legal' parent across the board. When this was raised in the recent debate to reopen the discussion on marriage in the House of Commons, it was cause for underwhelming concern.

Should Canadians be surprised that changes from natural to legal parenthood were ignored? Probably not: these days articulating that biology and gender share a significant connection is an invitation for backlash. Recently psychiatrist Dr. Louann Brizendine wrote a book suggesting male and female brains are inherently different, accounting for certain differences in behaviour. She reported, "I know it is not politically correct to say this but I've been torn for years between my politics and what science is telling us." [3] Her assertion regarding differences in language behaviour has been criticized by feminist linguist Deborah Cameron of Oxford University. [4]

Speaking to the relationship between gender and biology is for the brave: and ethicist Margaret Somerville, is no stranger to controversy. She suggests that the totality of human nature is a combination of biology and social construction. [5] She rejects the notion that gender is purely biological or that it is merely socially constructed. She suggests that science will continue to reveal this interconnectedness through Epigenetics, "the study of the interaction of genes and the environment, and how each affects and modifies the other in an ongoing process." [6] This emerging field suggests that environmental factors including lifestyle and family relationships may switch genes on and off. Scientists have found that the environmental affects on an individual may influence the biology of their future grandchildren. [7] Studies have shown that mother rats who lick their young activate chemical change in brain mechanisms, causing young rats to be more subdued. [8] While this science is still new, it seems to indicate biology and environmental influences are inter-related. Further research may yet confirm a biologically necessary connection between biological mothers and fathers and their child's development.

So we arrive back to the beginning: was Chris Gardner a mom or a dad? Perhaps that is not the right question: it's more important to emphasize the large body of social research that maintains that fathers are an important influence in the lives of their children.

Father attachment increases empathy and encourages better behaviour between siblings.[9] The father connection encourages healthy social connection and emotional regulation, a sense of responsibility and industry and successful academic outcomes.[10] A report released this month by the Social Justice Policy Group called *Breakdown Britain* asserts that fatherlessness is a pathway to poverty and social breakdown in the United Kingdom.[11] The report recommends that Britain take action to mend the social fabric damaged by absent fathers.

Scientific pursuit may continue to demonstrate biological associations to gender. Epigenetics may continue to reveal the biological and environmental relationship that affects the lives of future generations. These sciences may further clarify social research that confirms the unique and necessary influence of a married biological mother and father in a child's life. When parliament passed Bill C-38 it tipped its hat to an ideology without considering the future ramifications of redefining parenthood. Policy makers and legislators sighed with relief when the same-sex marriage issue was pronounced 'finally closed,'— but will policy makers have the fortitude necessary to reconsider the fundamental reengineering of parenthood?

[1] Sara Ruddick as quoted in Doucet, A. (2006) *Do Men Mother?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p.107.

[2] Dubeau, D. (2002) *Portraits of Fathers*. *Contemporary Family Trends*. Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family. P.7. [Electronic version] retrieved from <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/fathers.pdf>

[3] Women Talk Three Times as Much as Men, Says Study (2006, November 27) *Thisislonodon.co.uk*. [Electronic version] retrieved from <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/news/article-23376154-details/Women+talk+three+times+as+much+as+men,+says+study/article.do>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Somerville, M. (2006) *the Ethical Imagination*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press. p.99.

[6] Ibid., p.104.

[7] Evidence for a New Type of Environmental Inheritance. Paternal ancestors' experiences can affect development, health and survival ALSPAC Press Release. Retrieved from http://www.alspac.bris.ac.uk/press/env_inheritance.shtml

[8] McDevitt, N. (2006) *The Nurture of Things*. *McGill Headway* Vol. 2 No. 1 [Electronic version] Retrieved from <http://www.mcgill.ca/headway/fall2006/indepth1/>

[9] *How Do Fathers Fit In?* Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society. London. <http://www.civitas.org.uk/hwu/FatherFactsheet.pdf>
Retrieved December 12, 2006

[10] Ibid.

[11] *BreakDown Britain* (2006, December) Chairman Rt. Hon I. Duncan Smith. London: Social Justice Policy Group. [Electronic version] Retrieved from http://povertydebate.typepad.com/home/files/cs_j_final_2.pdf