Social scientists have recently shown increasing interest in finding ways of studying social phenomena across cultures and across national boundaries. This interest is, of course, a result of such factors as the increasing economic interdependence which binds countries and continents together as never before; the increasing cohesion within power blocs which has slowly progressed during the course of the cold war; greater facilities for international travel; and other processes which are transforming this globe – in a cultural, social and economic sense – into one world.

In the quest for a key to valid cross-cultural studies, attempts have been made to find universal institutions, or universal groupings which would serve as the basis for discovering similarities and differences between separate societies. As Marion Levy has argued, we may find that comparative study of family life is as good a key for ascertaining such similarities and differences as research on any other segment of society (Levy 1967). However, it is being argued here that family research of a comparative sort can not achieve so much if the focus remains always on motherhood, and on the mother-child relationship.1 It would seem that real progress in this area requires systematic attention to fatherhood, and not only the nature and content of fatherhood as a role-set in various societies, but also the ways in which fatherhood links families with other institutional structures throughout each society. The social science literature, these last 4 or 5 years, has shown a growing interest in these phenomena which were overlooked so thoroughly before.2

In this essay, we will suggest certain particular ways for cross-national or cross-cultural study of fatherhood to serve as a special angle of vision in the study of social institutions, and for greater understanding of how cultures perpetuate themselves. We can make good use of fatherhood as such a key, however, only if we understand the basic conceptions of fatherhood and how it can be approached in cross-cultural research.

As various authors have suggested (Bossard & Boll 1966: 221 ff; LeMasters 1970: 122–25), motherhood means a relationship with a child which is direct and primary. Such interaction is rather easy to study cross-culturally since (at

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1 For one of the few discussions aiming to explain why the husband-father role (area) has been neglected, see Tavuchis 1970: 15–17. Also Biller & Meredith 1972.

2 The single most comprehensive treatment to date is Benson 1968. Also see Davids 1971a; LeMasters 1970: 138–56 is a sound treatment of many problematic issues in regard to fatherhood now. A good popular account of the fatherhood problem today is Brenton 1967 (esp. Chap’s IV and V).
least potentially) it involves such body-linked tasks as lactation and bowel training, matters that, vary as they will from culture to culture, are dealt with somehow everywhere. However, fatherhood (Wolf 1966: 61–64) has generally the connotation of symbolic and reserve or resource functions. Outside of the “breadwinner” aspect, that is, the function which consists of acquiring the income by which the family is sustained, what are fathers expected to do? Mothers, not fathers, perform the routine tasks that are undertaken to sustain the child’s life. Fatherhood, within the home, means that where the mother is not able to handle a situation, cannot meet particular needs which exceed those of routine daily care, the father, being “in reserve,” enters the situation as a resource called upon to meet the extraordinary needs. However, when the processes of ordinary living go smoothly, when neither crisis nor new growth leads to demands on the mother that go beyond her capacity for adequate response, then father’s role is, as we said before, symbolic and potential rather than constantly being enacted. It must be remembered that this is the case in Western civilization, and would be accurate, therefore, in many nations of the world today, but is obviously not “given” in any biological or panhuman ways so that it would have to be so.

We must observe that not only is father’s role within the family not a constant one, but the impact of motherhood on the child is earlier. Furthermore, it is usually the mother who interprets to the very young children what father’s meaning is. The mother mediates an image of fatherhood within the family to her children, who will thus tend to approach their father with a mental “set” or framework of expectations which itself has been generated, whether consciously or not, by the mother (Benson 1968: 251–53). Consequently, it is possible to study fatherhood not only by interviewing or otherwise gathering data from fathers themselves, but also—and perhaps necessarily also—by speaking to mothers and finding out from them their conceptions of fatherhood in general and about their husbands in particular. The possible roles that fathers may play within a family, as we have now pointed out, are thus not only results of variations in the personality of actual fathers as well as of differences among subcultures within societies. Such differences in father roles as we find in a single community might also be attributed to the altercasting which the mothers perform (Weinstein & Deutschberger 1963). Whether father is seen as a retributive ogre, the source of punishment and of harsh discipline; whether he is seen as Santa Claus, whose main contact with the child is the showering of material gifts; whether he is viewed as a sturdy oak, in the classical phrase that was used for the Victorian father some years back; or whether he is considered by children to be a sleeping dog, who is best left alone so as not to cause trouble, is then the result of a complex of factors which interact in a given family context. It is thus being emphasized that we should not make the mistake of thinking that fatherhood as we find it in a given community is entirely determined by strictly cultural or societal factors.

These cautions about sources of variation within cultures or within communities do not, of course, negate entirely the proposition that a study of fatherhood can be extremely helpful in revealing what is distinctive about particular

1 For a discussion of a number of these father-role metaphors, see LeMasters 1970: 207–8, 213–22.