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CROSS - NATIONAL COMPARISONS OF  
ATTITUDES TOWARD DIFFERENT AGE -  
RELATED ROLES, e.g. - THE MOTHER - IN - LAW.

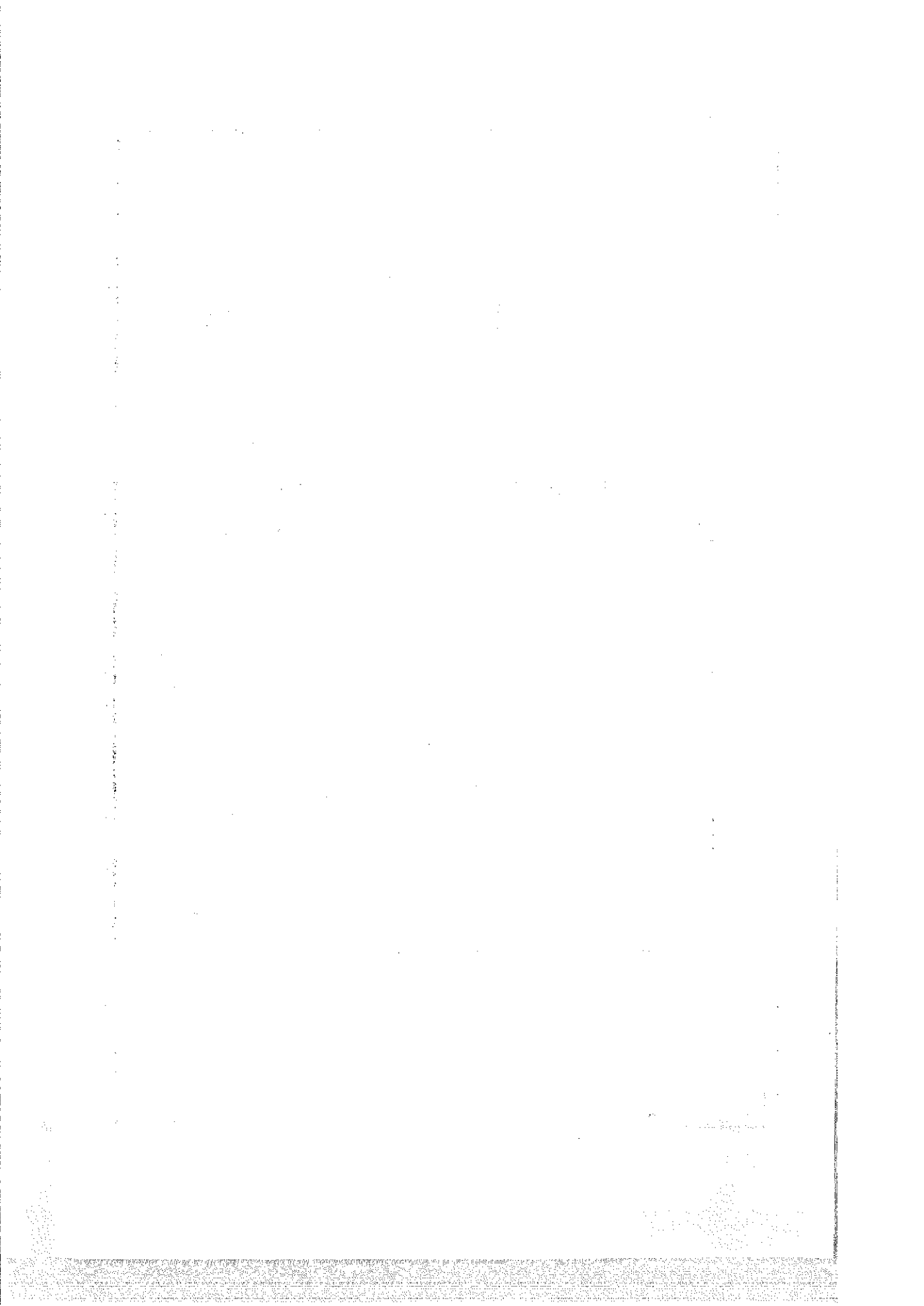
BY

**Ramadan A. Ahmed**

Cairo Univ. Khartoum Branch,  
Cairo, Egypt.

& **William M. Davis**

Institute For Cross-Cultural  
Cross-Ethnic Studies Molloy  
College-New York, U.S.A.



In a recent paper Usha Kumar (1984) discussed the relationship between mother-in-law, son and daughter-in-law and described the triadic relationship in an Indian Hindu joint family. While in North America, Great Britain, and other Western societies jokes about the mother-in-law are common, Kumar (1984) noted that such jokes are extremely rare in Hindu society, where such relationships are considered as serious business. On the other hand, Radcliffe-Brown (1950) had observed that research on the relationships of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law interactions had been neglected across cultures. Yet surveys in Western societies reported that the mother-in-law was the most disliked of all relatives (Duvall, 1984). In more recent years, Fischer (1983) compared the interpersonal relationships of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law with to those of mother/daughter with regard to the orientation around the child (i. e. how the birth of a baby affected these relationships). However, even before the birth of the grandchild strained relationships with in-laws were apparent.

In the Hindu family there existed, in the present setting, a coalition of the mother with her son against the daughter-in-law Kumar (1984) wrote that "the basic assumption of the triad theory is that the relationship between any pair of actors can best be understood by examining their conjoint relationship with a significant third party. In the relationship between affinal relatives, the connecting spouse is likely to be the significant third party. Thus we may understand the relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law by examining the relationship of each to the man between them." (p.11) These reports are examples, which illustrate some sources of the negative reputation of the image of the mother-in-law.

The question that arose was concerned with attitudes toward the mother-in-law. It asked whether these negative images of the mother-in-law were the same across cultures? In order to arrive at an answer, it was decided to use a figure-placement task. (Adler, 1978; Graubert & Adler, 1982) to measure projected social distances as an indicator of the respondents' attitudes. It had long been established that interpersonal space could serve as a protection against threat, either to the subjects' physical integrity or to the self-esteem (Dosey & Meisels, 1969). On the other hand, Little (1965) and Merhabian (1968) found that distance was a significant index of the subject's positive or negative attitudes toward a specific object. In addition, in a study by Adler and Iverson (1975) it was verified that there was a clear parallel between the physical interpersonal spacing in the laboratory situation and the projected social distances in response to ascriptions of the stimulus persons.

The present study examines the schemata relating to several members of a family, such as "Mother," "Father," "Mother-in-Law" and "Father-in-Law." Data by subjects from different parts of the world are compared to those by US subjects. The present paper reports the comparisons of the responses by Kuwaiti, Sudanese and US-participants. In these countries different patterns of mate selection exist. For example, it is frequently the custom in Arab countries for parents to select the spouses for their children, while in the US men and women choose spouses for themselves. Would these behavior patterns influence attitudes toward family members? In the present paper the comparisons not only involve an overall analysis, but focus on comparing the data from only two countries at one time for a more precise evaluation.

Following the pattern of previous studies (Sechrest, Fay, Zaidi & Flores, 1973) the subjects were students who attended psychology and science classes at various

universities. While in most previous studies the students were responding to English instructions (Adler, 1978; Graubert & Adler, 1982) some Indian students were tested either in English or in Hindi (Kumar, Adler, Stevens, & Mrinal, submitted for publication). Also, as in former investigations, both the gender of the subjects (i.e. men and women) and the sex of the stimulus items (i. e. mother-in-law and father-in-law) were included in the design to test the schemata.

The following Hypotheses were advanced:

- H 1. Participating subjects, both men and women from all countries will place greater projected distances between themselves and the ascription of the stimulus object of "Mother-in-Law."
- H 2. The closest projected distances by all subjects will be observed between themselves and the ascribed stimulus object "Mother."

## Method

### Subjects

A total of 260 undergraduate students participated in this research. Most of these college men and women attended science and psychology classes at their respective colleges. The majority of the students were between 18 and 23 years, though some were older and a few were 17 years old. There were 22 male and 43 female students from the USA; 39 male and 67 female students from the Sudan, and 37 male and 52 female Kuwaiti students. All were tested in their native tongue.

### Figure - Placement task

Projected interpersonal distances were measured (in millimeters) by means of a figure-placement task

similar to that used by Adler (1978). Originally this measuring technique was called "the figure-placement test." However, since students sometimes felt some apprehension with the word "test," it was changed to "figure-placement task." All participants were given a test booklet of 25 pages, with one item per page. There was a face sheet with room for the name and some demographic information, besides the instructions. The translation into Arabic was necessary for the Sudanese and Kuwaiti students. [This translation was carried out by the senior author] In the center of each page (21.6 x 28 cm = 8.5 x 11 in.) of white paper a round sticker (dot) (1.9 cm = 3/4 in. in diameter) was attached. The stickers were color-coded for different countries (i.e. green, orange, etc.). Across the top each page was a typed sentence identifying the sticker. Four items are discussed in the present paper. These are: "The sticker below represents a middle-aged woman, a mother," "a middle-aged man, a father;" "... a middle-aged woman, a mother-in-law;" "... a middle-aged man, a father-in-law." The practice item "... your bed," was always the first item, but all the other items were presented in randomized order. Each test-booklet had a card attached with an equal number (i.e. 25) stickers also in the same size, shape (i.e. round), and color as those on the test booklet's pages. The instructions identified the stickers on the card as "your self." The participants were also advised by the instructions to place the "self" sticker "anywhere on the page." They were also told not to change their responses, nor to leaf back through the test-booklet. Usually the data were collected during class time from all the students in a group. Completion of the entire task took about 10-15 minutes.

### Results and Discussion

For the analysis of the data the three populations from Kuwait, the Sudan, and the USA were divided by

gender. Then the countries were paired for the ANOVAs and the Newman Keuls tests of significance as follows: Kuwait & Sudan, Kuwait & USA, Sudan & USA. Table 1 presents all the means of both genders and the three countries. Figures 1-6 show the projected social distances to the four test items, "Mother," "Father," "Mother-in-law," and "Father-in-law," for each of the comparisons by countries.

Table 1  
Cross - National Comparisons of Attitudes toward  
Different Age-Related Roles, e . g. the Mother-in-Law

Means of items by college students:  
Projected social distances ( in mm)

Country	<u>n</u>	Ma/ Law	Pa/ Law	Mother	Father
Men					
Kuwait	37	52.22	40.76	31.54	26.46
Sudan	39	34.51	25.62	22.90	28.76
USA	22	44.39	56.68	26.71	45.00
Women					
Kuwait	52	46.02	39.00	22.15	32.44
Sudan	67	26.32	29.61	20.52	38.55
USA	43	30.62	30.85	18.37	20.30

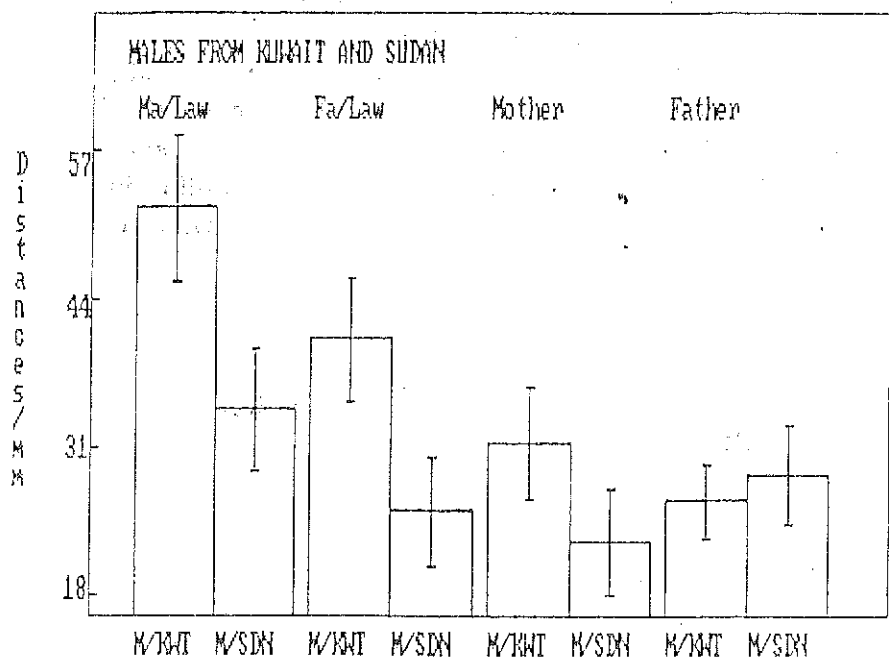


Figure 1

Male Ss - KUWAIT & SUDAN

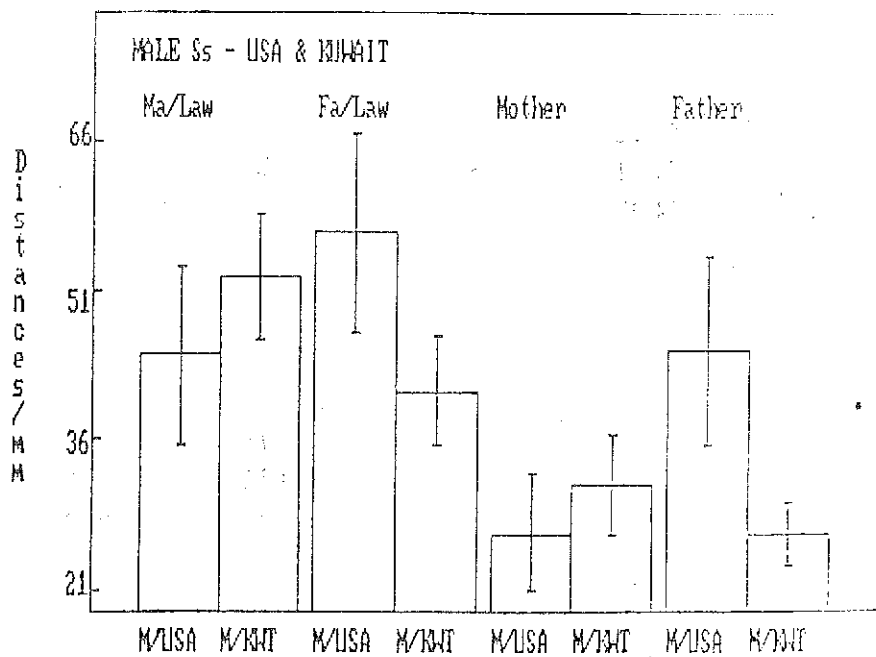


Figure 2

Male Ss - USA & Kuwait



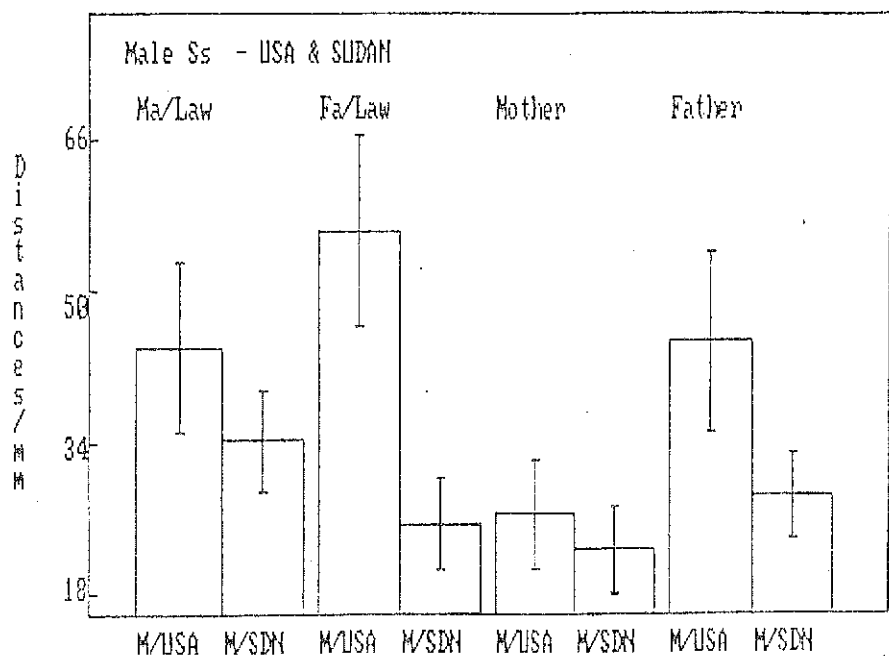


Figure 3 Male Ss - USA & SUDAN

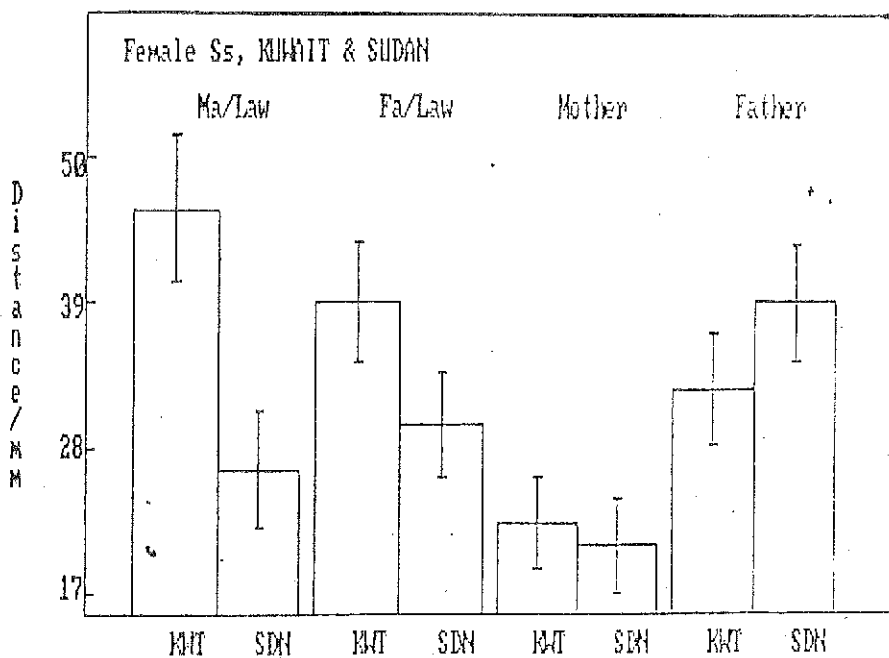
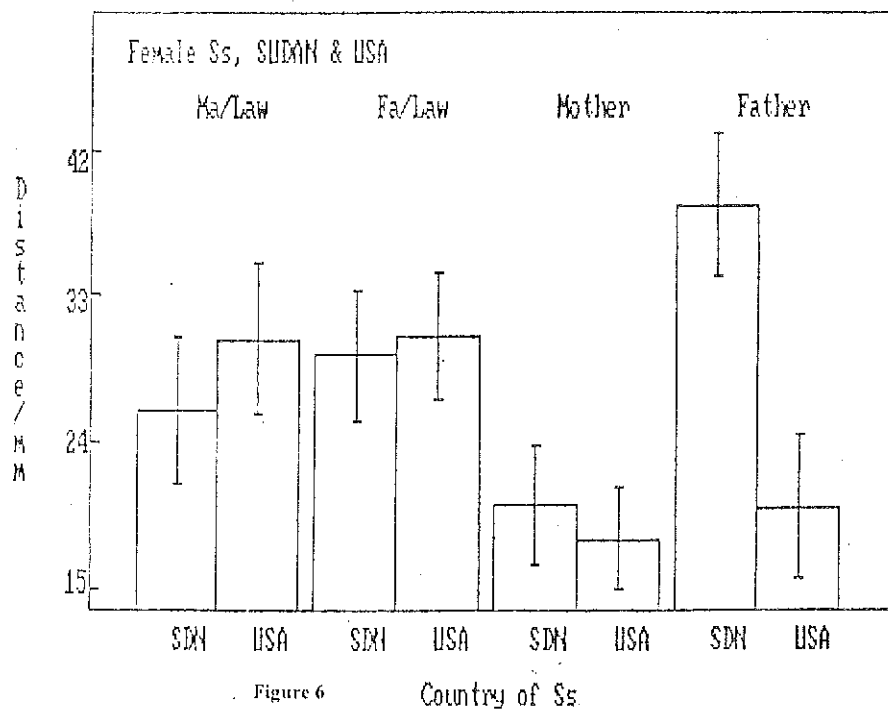
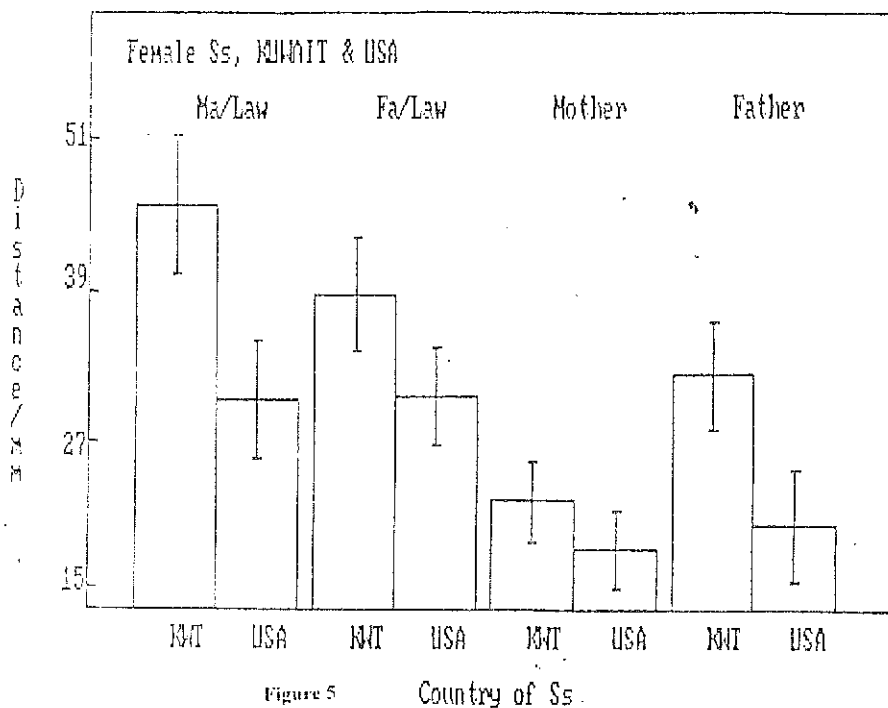


Figure 4 Country of Ss



By observing the responses of the college men from Kuwait and the Sudan, a similarity between these two groups exists, except with the ascribed stimulus figure "Father." (See Table 1 & Figure 1.) The Kuwaiti men's "Self" stickers were placed closer to "Father" than any other stimulus figure. On the other hand, the Sudanese men placed the "Self" sticker closest to the stimulus object "Mother." This pattern was also true for the US men, though they placed "Father" at a greater distance from "Self." They gave the same spacing also to the stimulus figure "Mother-in-law." However, the farthest projected distances were found by this group in the responses to "Father-in-law." These results were a complete surprise and were absolutely unexpected. No explanation for these effects can be offered at the present time. The greatest distances in this study for the Kuwaiti and Sudanese college men were observed with "Mother-in-law" for each group. (See Figures 1-3) On the other hand, it can be pointed out that in all three countries the men responded with closer interpersonal projected distances toward their own parents than their parents-in-law. One exception may be found with the Sudanese men. By inspection, the projected social distance toward "Father" was greater than toward "Father-in-law." However, the difference was not significant and therefore could be interpreted as the same. (See Table 1.)

Similar schemata were found with the Sudanese women, who placed significantly greater projected distances between their "Self" and the "Father" stickers. (See Table 1 and Figures 4 & 6.) A similar trend in schemata was found with Kuwaiti women. (See Figures 4 & 5.) Yet, no explanation can be advanced. However, the causes for these responses might be found in the family hierarch and family interactions.

In all three countries the stimulus item "Mother" received the closest spacing by the college women. (See Table 1 & Figures 4 - 6.) This finding bears out the common belief that the mother/daughter relationships are very close in general (Fisher, 1981). However, the US-women seem to be very close to the "Father" stimulus item, since no significant differences in spacing existed between the two parent items. The same was true for "Mother-in-law" and "Father-in-law," which were held equally far from "Self." (See Table 1 and Figures 5 and 6.) One interesting finding emerged in this research. The women's responses were less negative (i.e. less distanced) than their male counterparts results. Since these were only small samples, no conclusive statements can be made at this time, except to say that the results of large projected distances toward the stimulus figure "Father-in-law" was an unexpected finding. Perhaps the causes could be found in family interactions of "in-groups" and "outsiders?" However, no father-in-law jokes existed in Western cultures. In all three countries the present results revealed a negative attitude toward "Father-in-law," which shared the dislike toward the "Mother-in-law." Perhaps the answers to these findings could be found in the processes of mate selection, affiliation, and expression of affection, that could influence the attitudes toward individual family members. Future research may find the explanations. In summary, it can be stated that the present research revealed that "Father-in-law" shared the negative attitude which surrounded the "Mother-in-law."

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