

IMAGINARY COMPANIONS: ARE THEY GOOD FOR CHILDREN?

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ABSTRACT

Early research on imaginary companions viewed the phenomenon negatively. Imaginary companions were often associated with psychopathology and an inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The prevailing view on imaginary companions has shifted in recent years with many studies focusing on the positive attributes exhibited by children with imaginary friends. Methodological issues which may lead to better insights into the phenomenon are highlighted by the author.

INTRODUCTION

Early studies on imaginary companions viewed the phenomenon negatively, often associating it with psychopathology and an inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Vostrovsky, 1895; Svendsen, 1934). This view has shifted significantly in recent years with studies focusing on the positive attributes exhibited by children with imaginary companions. Both early and more recent findings, along with methodological flaws in the literature, will be discussed in order to determine whether or not imaginary companions are good for children.

WHAT ARE IMAGINARY COMPANIONS?

First, though, it is important to provide a definition of imaginary companions. Svendsen (1934) defined imaginary companions as invisible characters with no objective basis with which children play for a significant period of time, at least several months. Svendsen's (1934) definition explicitly rejects personified objects or instances in which the child assumes the role of a pretend identity, phenomena which are often included in more recent studies (Taylor, Shawber, & Mannering, 2008). Researchers including personified objects and pretend identities within the definition of imaginary companions argue that these activities are similar

to those involved in creating and playing with an imaginary companion in that they involve role play (Harris, 2000). Support for this extended definition comes from the finding that children with invisible companions, personified objects, and pretend identities share similar abilities and personality characteristics that distinguish them from children without these forms of imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999).

Further support for the inclusion of personified objects within the definition of imaginary companions is the, perhaps surprising, finding that there is often no less imagination involved in the experience of playing with a personified object than with an invisible friend (Walton, 1990). The personified object's appearance to the child may have little objective basis as is clear from a study by Benson and Pryor (1973) in which a participant, showing her childhood personified object to the experimenters, reacted as if she had never before seen the object for what it was before stating "I never realised how tattered it was" (p.460). Whether the same can be said for pretend identities is difficult to determine as very little has been written about this phenomenon (Taylor, 1999). This essay will consider findings relating to imaginary companions that include both invisible friends and personified objects as often they are not separated. However, the author encourages a separation of these phenomena in future research following the finding by Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) that children form egalitarian relationships with invisible friends whereas relationships with personified objects resemble parent-child relationships to a greater extent and a more recent finding revealing distinctions in social development between children with invisible friends and personified objects (Gleason, 2004), findings which suggest that both phenomena may be carrying out different functions.

EARLY CONCERNS OVER THE PHENOMENON

Early research on imaginary companions exhibited concern over children's ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Vostrovsky, 1895). Researchers working in the early 1930s expressed concern that children with imaginary companions might be at risk for psychopathology (Singer & Singer, 1990). Thus, a negative view of imaginary companions and the children who create them pervaded early research. In order to establish whether or not imaginary companions are good for children, the evidence for the association between imaginary companions and the inability to

distinguish fantasy from reality, as well as the risk for psychopathology, will be explored.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY

Norsworthy and Whitley (1918) stated that the creation of an imaginary companion is the result of confusion between fantasy and reality. This suggested inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, Taylor (1999) suggests, is at the base of parents' concern over the presence of an imaginary companion. Children are quite adept at distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Children as young as three-years old perform well when asked to classify a variety of objects as real or pretend (Bourchier & Davis, 2000). Three-year olds also understand that knowledge reflects reality more accurately than imagination (Golomb & Galasso, 1995). There are a number of reasons that it is believed that children with imaginary companions have more trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality than children without imaginary companions. The emotional involvement of children with their imaginary companions and the fact that sometimes children with imaginary companions report not having control over their companions are two main findings present in the literature which potentially illustrate children with imaginary companions have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

Children can become emotionally involved in pretend play and can even become afraid by that which is not real (Bourchier & Davis, 2000; DiLalla & Watson, 1988). This has led researchers to believe that children experience confusion between fantasy and reality. However, adults also experience intense emotions during pretense. For example, Walton (1990) analyzed the emotional reactions of adults to films and found that, although adults experience real emotions towards the pretense of films, they do not lose their understanding of the distinction between fantasy and reality. Thus, children's emotional responses to their imaginary companions are not proof that they are confusing reality and fantasy, their reactions may be similar to that of an adult's emotional response to a film (Lillard, 1994).

Children's beliefs that their imaginary companions act autonomously and that they have little control over them is an interesting phenomenon. Approximately one third of children in a study by Taylor, Carlson, and Shawber (2007) described their imaginary companions as disobedient or unpredictable. Taylor (1999) provides other examples of children

describing unruly imaginary companions who talked too loudly, would not share, and would not do as they were told. This could be taken as evidence that children believe their imaginary friends are real. However, a line of research involving writers and the characters they create allow for a different explanation.

Watkins (1990) provides examples, using autobiographical accounts of famous writers such as Enid Blyton and Henry James, of writers experiencing their characters as having minds of their own. Enid Blyton, for example, wrote, in reference to her characters that she doesn't "know what anyone is going to say or do. I don't know what is going to happen" (Stoney, 1974, p.206). Watkins suggests that writers experience their characters as autonomous and Taylor (1999) relates this to the child's experience of a seemingly autonomous imaginary companion. We do not view writers who experience their characters as autonomous as unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality and, thus, the argument that children's experience of loss of control over their imaginary companions illustrates a confusion between fantasy and reality is problematic.

Thus, although children with imaginary companions engage in behaviours which may lead to the belief that they have trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality, engagement in these behaviours is not evidence for children's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Other researchers have noted that during interviews with children who have imaginary companions, children often stress that their imaginary companion is "just pretend, you know" (Taylor, 1999, p.112). A study by (Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993) found that, overall, children with imaginary companions appear to appreciate the fantasy status of their imaginary companions.

Thus, there is little evidence for the negative views of imaginary companions arising from the belief that they are associated with children's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Indeed, it is suggested that being adept at fantasy may aid children to master the relationship between mental life and reality (Taylor, 1999; Flavell, Flavell & Green, 1987), suggesting that imaginary companions may positively contribute to development.

IMAGINARY COMPANIONS AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Another belief at the base of the negative views of imaginary companions is that imaginary companions are associated with psychopathology.

Studies focusing on imaginary companions and pathology have focused on dissociative identity disorder (DID). Researchers have noted a high incidence of imaginary companions in individuals with DID (Hornstein & Putnam, 1992). A study involving both boys in treatment for DID and school boys found that less imaginary companions were reported among school boys than those in treatment and that all boys meeting DID criteria reported imaginary companions (Trujillo, Lewis, Yeager & Gidlow, 1996). Indeed, a model of DID development developed by Pica (1999) has imaginary companions at its core.

Pica (1999) proposes three stages in the development of DID. He states that children predisposed to create imaginary companions may develop DID if they experience trauma during a developmental window in early childhood. In the first stage, in which the child experiences trauma, aspects of the traumatic experience are deferred to the imaginary companion. In the second stage, the imaginary companion takes over for the child during times at which the child feels threatened or anxious. In the third stage, imaginary companions that have been filling in during anxious situations transform into distinct personality states and are now termed alter personalities. Thus, for Pica (1999), imaginary companions represent precursors to DID. This theory has certain flaws. For example, its assumption that DID will not develop in the absence of imaginary companions. Also, its focus on imaginary companions as precursors to DID fails to take other variables, such as high frequency of malevolent parenting and the associated chaotic environments (Klein, 1985; Singer & Singer, 1990), into account, variables which largely account for the lack of integration found in DID (Friedberg, 1995). These critiques, and recent evidence from a longitudinal study finding no evidence that having an imaginary companion is an early sign of DID (Taylor, Hulette, & Dishion, 2010), call for a reconceptualisation of the role of imaginary companions in DID and psychopathology in general.

Rather than being a cause of psychopathology, the creation of imaginary companions has been regarded as a coping response (Friedberg, 1995). Findings from the developmental literature on pretend play suggests processes through which imaginary companions may help in coping with trauma. For example, research has found that children often project their emotions and anxieties onto toy figures (Knell, 1998; Axline, 1969) and imaginative play can provide children with opportunities to play out and assimilate experiences (Piaget, 1962).

Indeed, there are many examples in the literature of imaginary companions buffering children from trauma. For example, Taylor (1999) provides the example of a woman who fondly remembers her imaginary companion helping her cope with her dysfunctional family environment by “giv[ing] [her] her undivided attention as [she] poured out all [her] hurts, all [her] betrayals, all [her] goodness and [her] badness” (p.78). Nagera (1969) presents an example in which a 5-year old girl created an imaginary companion at a time when her parents divorced and her mother was hospitalised for mental illness. Other children in the family responded to the difficult period with sleep disturbances, regression, and school difficulties. The 5-year old girl did not display these symptoms and Nagera (1969) attributes this to the presence of her imaginary companion.

A more recent study (Sadeh, Hen-Gal, & Tikotzky, 2008) assessed the effects of a Huggy-Puppy Intervention (HPI) on children’s reactions to war-related stress. The intervention was modelled according to the developmental literature on the benefits of pretence discussed above. The children were given a Huggy-Puppy doll which, the experimenter explained, was sad and scared and that the child is now responsible for caring for the doll. It was thought, following the developmental literature on play, that the children would project their feelings and anxieties onto the doll, to identify with those feelings, and to regulate those emotions while caring for the doll. The authors found that HPI reduced stress-related symptoms. Also of interest was the finding that the reduction in stress symptoms was associated with the level of adherence to the intervention and the child’s attachment to the Huggy-Puppy. Thus, imaginary companions may provide children with a way of coping with traumatic situations or events. In the case of individuals with DID, Singer and Singer (1990) state that it is likely that the creation of an imaginary companion occurred defensively as a result of abuse but, due to a lack of benign parenting, the imaginary companion could never be internalised and so formed a more permanent, alternative self.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Thus, research with a negative view of imaginary companions has been challenged and, though once the presence of an imaginary companion was believed to illustrate a child’s confusion between fantasy and reality and a precursor to psychopathology, it is now suggested that the presence of an imaginary companion is evidence for a nuanced understanding of the

distinction between fantasy and reality, and that imaginary companions may be a coping response to trauma and psychopathology. Taylor (1999) suggests that the negative view of imaginary companions arose from certain methodological issues with earlier studies. The fundamental flaw she identifies is that early studies failed to compare the characteristics of the children studied with those of children with imaginary companions. By comparing these groups it is possible to identify problems that may be more common among children with imaginary companions than other children, not simply the problems of children with imaginary companions.

Another problem that helps to explain the negative view of imaginary companions is the method of recruitment in earlier studies. For example, in a study by Ames and Learned (1946), which contended that all children with imaginary companions must have a personality defect, participants were recruited from the Yale Clinic of Child Development and also from the private practice of a mental health professional. When these methodological issues are corrected and when a nonclinical, random sample of children is studied, a different picture of imaginary companions emerges.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF HAVING IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

An unpublished doctoral dissertation by Jennifer Mauro (1991; as cited in Taylor, 1999) represents one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies on imaginary companions. Children with and without imaginary companions participated in Mauro's study and the results showed more similarities than differences between the two groups. Differences between the groups emerged in shyness and attentional focus and, in contrast to earlier studies, the differences were in favour of participants with imaginary companions with children with imaginary companions being less shy and better able to focus attention. Similar differences in performance in favour of children with imaginary companions have been reported in other socio-cognitive areas such as social competence (Seiffge-Krenke, 1997), theory of mind task performance (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), and language skills (Bouldin, Bavin, & Pratt, 2002).

Researchers have posited a number of potential reasons for the skills that children with imaginary companions are found to possess. Somers and Yawkey (1984) refer to the process of decontextualisation, which they define as "the use of real situations out of their contexts during play" (p.86), when discussing potential processes through which imaginary

companions may facilitate cognitive development. During decontextualisation, children may rehearse events that occurred during the day and this may help them gain an understanding of them (Taylor, 1999). The rehearsal of social interactions may also improve their social skills. The opportunity for the development of social skills, including narrative skills, may also be increased in children with imaginary companions as children may share details about their imaginary companion with interested adults (Gleason, 2004). The high-fantasy characteristic of the play involved with imaginary companions is also thought to allow children to practice and expand creative thought, thus promoting intellectual and creative growth (Somers & Yawkey, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Thus, having an imaginary friend can provide children with many opportunities for development in a wide range of cognitive domains. Imaginary companions can also, as discussed earlier, buffer children from trauma. The early negative views of imaginary companions explored above have been exposed as having little evidence to support them. Thus, it seems that imaginary friends are, indeed, good for children.

However, there are a number of methodological issues that need to be addressed before a satisfying conclusion about imaginary companions can be reached. For example, studies to ascertain whether or not having an imaginary friend leads to improvements in socio-cognitive skills should be longitudinal in nature, taking note of the level of skill exhibited at the beginning of the study as well as throughout. They should include both children with imaginary companions and children without them. The nature of the imaginary companions and the relationship between the imaginary companion and its creator should be examined. It is also important to include the presence of other forms of pretend play in both groups of children. Studies adopting this approach could potentially offer better insights into the question of whether or not imaginary friends are good for children.

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