

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**PARENTAL INSIGHTS AND
ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDREN'S
IMAGINARY COMPANIONS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for a degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University

Sarah Mary Morris

1995

"How few would believe that from sources purely imaginary such happiness could be derived!"

Charlotte Bronte's diary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor Professor Andy Lock who has invested his valuable time into this project. He has also contributed with his much appreciated encouragement and enthusiasm for the topic.

I would also like to acknowledge the help of Ross Fleet whose expertise was invaluable.

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine parental attitudes and conceptualisations of the function of imaginary companions. Fourteen parents with children who have imaginary companions and sixteen parents whose children do not have imaginary companions, were given one of two questionnaires to complete. The posted questionnaires differed only in regard to those questions directly related to personal experience. Parents in both groups described their children similarly in regard to family composition, competency levels, social activities and behaviour problems. Parents of children with imaginary companions indicated that not all companion's play the same role or function in their creators life. Parental attitudes toward imaginary companions were predominantly negative regardless of whether their child had had an imaginary companion. Attitudes varied in regard to, the age of the child, the length of time they had the companion, the perceived depth of fantasy and the function that the companion served.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
Acknowledgements	I
Abstract	II
List of Tables	VI
List of Figures	VI
Chapter One. Introduction	1
Chapter Two. Literature Review	12
Chapter Three. Present Study	22
Age	22
Sex	23
Ethnicity	24
Competency	25
Characteristics of Imaginary Companion	25
Parental Knowledge	27
Parental Theories and Insights	28
General Attitudes	28
Duration	29
Function	30
Influence or Effect on Child	31
Depth of Involvement	32
Behaviour Comparison	33

Chapter Four.	Method	34
	Design	34
	Subjects	34
	Instruments	35
	Procedure	38
Chapter Five.	Results	43
	Age	43
	Sex	43
	Ethnicity	44
	Social Activities	44
	Competency	45
	Behaviour Problems	45
	Characteristics of Imaginary Companions	47
	Parental Knowledge	49
	Parental Theories/Insights	49
	General Attitudes	50
	Attitudes in Relation to Age	51
	Attitudes in Regard to Child's Sex	52
	Attitudes Toward Duration	52
	Parental Insights and Theories Regarding Function	53
	Attitudes in Regard to Influence or Effect on Child	55
	Attitudes in Regard to Function	55
	Attitudes in Regard to depth of Child's Involvement	55
	Comparison of Attitudes to Different Imaginary	57
	Companion Variables	
	Attitudes Toward Imaginary Companions in	57
	Comparison to other Behaviours	

Chapter Six.	Discussion	59
References.		68
Appendices.	Appendix 1.	73
	Information Sheet	
	Appendix 2.	75
	Consent Form	
	Appendix 3.	76
	Questionnaire for Parents who have encountered Imaginary Companions in their own Children	
	Appendix 4.	93
	Questionnaire for Parents that have not encountered imaginary Companions in their own Children	
	Appendix 5.	106
	Reminder Letter	

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Sociability and social behaviour of children with (IC) and without (NIC) imaginary companions as rated by their Parents.	44
Table 2: Mean, standard deviation and Chi square scores for problem behaviours as rated parents of children with (IC) and without (NIC) imaginary companions.	46
Table 3: Descriptions of imaginary companions.	48
Table 4: Average parental responses to how they "Feel" and would "Act" in regard to four characteristics of a hypothetical imaginary companion's interaction with their child.	57

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Attitudes toward children having imaginary companions at four different ages (4, 8, 10 and 12 years).	52
Figure 2: Parental Ratings of the function of their child's imaginary companions.	53
Figure 3: Attitudes ratings for four different functions of imaginary companions by parents whose children have had imaginary companions (IC) and whose have not (NIC).	54

Figure 4: Parental attitudes toward children's level of fantasy involvement with their imaginary companion, by whether or not their own child has had an imaginary companion. 56

Figure 5: Parental ratings of four types of children's behaviour by whether their child has had an imaginary companion. 58

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Between the ages of 2 1/2 and 9 many children engage in long-term interaction with one or more fictional creatures - imaginary companions. Imaginary companions have two defining characteristics. Firstly they exist only in the mind of their creator; secondly they can be distinguished from simple imaginative play in regard to their temporal and spatial qualities, which restrict imaginary companions to those that last across time and in more than one place.

Despite existing only in the imagination of their creators imaginary companions do have a basis in reality. It was Aristotle who first observed that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses, and so it is with the imagination. That is, we draw on our previous experiences to create the images that constitute the imagination and consequently imaginary companions. Heinz Herska, a Swiss anthropologist, applies this perspective to children's play, stating that in play children's real experiences become the stimulants for what he calls the imaginative consciousness. Herska explains that "the dialogical union of both forms of consciousness prevents imaginative consciousness from being severed from reality" (cited Singer & Singer, 1992, p. 209).

The premise that imaginative behaviour is rooted in reality is illustrated by anecdotal information that demonstrates that children often draw their inspiration for their imaginary companions from television or story characters or indeed real people. For example Newson and Newson (1976) tell of a boy whose imaginary companion is "just like Peter Pan". This work is written from this perspective, at the same time

however it is understood that others view this differently and consequently their attitudes are effected.

Hilgard (1977) concurs with Herska's view stating that the substance of the imagination is made up "of fragments from the past no matter how bizarre the combinations or distortions" (p.100). However, Hilgard goes on to make the comparison between the imagination and hallucinations, such a comparison may contribute to the negativity often ascribed to imaginary companions, rather than illustrating their normality.

Imaginativeness, especially that which does not physically aid in the production of something, such as having an imaginary companion, is viewed by much of society as undesirable. Much of society, unlike Herska and Hilgard, views imaginative behaviour as representing a shift away from reality. This view has been expressed clearly in the past by such respected theorists as Maria Montessori. Montessori believed that fantasy had no basis in reality and as such only succeeded in divorcing the mind "from its normal function of developing the intellect" (cited Standing, 1984; p. 261).

Modern theorists have altered their view of imaginativeness, seeing it as a vital ingredient in healthy development, but whether this change has been reflected in public opinion has yet to be seen. Pearse (1992) puts great emphasis on the significance of the imagination in the development of the child, stating that "nature has not programmed error into the genetic system and that the child's preoccupation with fantasy and imagination is vital to development" (p. 117). Woolley and Phelps (1994) take an interesting view of children's imaginativeness, arguing that holding "magical beliefs" is not unique to childhood. They maintain that the traditional view that children become more rational and less credulous with age can be countered by the view that "children and adults both engage in seemingly magical thinking; the degree to

which they do so depends on the domain, and in part on their perception of the costs and benefits of doing so in the particular situation in which they find themselves" (1994, p. 65). Such a view is perhaps a good way to normalise having an imaginary companion.

Beyond the obvious function of a playmate, there are, it appears, other reasons for a child to create an imaginary companion. Such reasons or functions may shed some light on the question of whether imaginary companions are positive or negative additions to children's lives. From the literature there emerge three general classifications into which theories pertaining to why children create imaginary companions fit, these are psychoanalytic, ecological and developmental. Each is similar in that they view imaginary companions as fulfilling a need or function, however, they differ either by the way in which they fulfil that function or by what that function or need is.

The most widely offered explanation of why children have imaginary companions is that which states that imaginary companions aid the development of self-consciousness in the young child. This view originated from psychoanalytic theory, and in recent years has had little attention from the main theorists in this area. The egocentric child that relentlessly looks for the fulfilment of his or her most basic needs eventually according to Erikson (1963), must weather the crisis of "autonomy versus shame and doubt". The result of the child's successful solution of this crisis is the ability to distinguish between "I" and "you" - that is the first step toward self-consciousness. Similarly Piaget (1957) explains that once a child achieves the intellectual level of concrete operations it is possible to ascribe "equivalent personal value" to others, thus moving away from the egocentric social interactions of the preoperational phase. According to Erikson and Piaget, then, the young child is capable of, from a psychological and intellectual perspective, distinguishing between themselves and

others. The way in which the child achieves this transition is not made clear in Erikson's and Piaget's work. However, according to some theorists children develop self-consciousness through the use of an imaginary companion.

Psychoanalysis provides the most comprehensive investigation of this view. The most recently proposed psychoanalytic theory pertaining to imaginary companions was proposed by Bruce Klien in 1985 and is somewhat more complex than those that came before. Central to his approach is the concept of splitting. Splitting involves an individual separating personal characteristics and behaviours which they, or society, consider undesirable, from their desirable and acceptable side, thus polarising rather than integrating aspects of their personality (Klein, 1985).

The child with an imaginary companion generally intrajects the good side and projects the bad, although there are cases where the opposite happens. Thus the imaginary companion is the embodiment of either a positive or negative aspect of the child's personality. Such splitting is evident when children use their imaginary companion as a scapegoat, blaming any of their wrong doing on their naughty friend. Alternatively when the child intrajects the bad feelings and traits, they often look to their good companion to "straighten them out" (Klein, 1985).

From a developmental standpoint the psychoanalysts view splitting as a developmental stage that precedes the major developmental task of separating self from object relations. This involves the child learning to differentiate between themselves and others, before finally integrating their good self/bad self split (Klein, 1985). Repression takes over the role that splitting had previously played, by repressing unacceptable impulses, instead of allowing them into consciousness. Klein (1985) explains that this transition is not an easy one and that the imaginary companion aids this change. He considers it as "not only normal, but also necessary for ego

development to create the subjective/objective world where object constancy and narcissistic expansion are enriched" (p.281).

Selma Fraiberg's book "The Magic Years" offers some of the most insightful psychoanalytic writing on this topic. Her views are more concrete than Klein's and tend to rely more on observed behaviour rather than mental process. Fraiberg (1959) highlights four important functions of the imaginary companion, and in particular the scapegoat. Firstly, the child tries to avoid the criticism of adults by blaming his/her faults on someone else - the imaginary companion. Secondly, the child avoids accepting this naughty/bad side as a characteristic of him/herself, thus maintaining self love. Thirdly, by externalising his/her negative characteristics the child is able to remove them out of the abstract arena of his/her mind and thus creates "an objective opponent with whom he can more easily do battle." (144). The battle she talks of involves the child who takes on the role of a parent in rebuking his/her companion for its naughty behaviour, however as the companion is actually an extension of themselves, the rebuke is thus a form of self criticism. Self criticism she explains is the first major step toward impulse control and the development of a conscience. Lastly, the imaginary companion serves to aid the integration of the child's good and bad side, so that the child can accept his/her bad side and take responsibility for their actions.

From a different and perhaps unexpected quarter comes another theorist who believes imaginary companions aid the development of self-consciousness. The philosopher George Herbert Mead wrote in 1934 that all children in one form or another had an imaginary companion as they are essential to the development of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, he said, requires reflexivity so that the child is able to be an object in his or her own experience. This reflexivity relies on the child's ability to be able to structure the various roles of others into an organised structured whole. For example he explains that to attempt any co-operative task the child must have an understanding

of the role of others, their own role, and their role in relation to that of the others, so that the group can function effectively as a whole (1934). The child with an imaginary companion is calling out in themselves those responses which might be elicited in other people, thus using the companion to practice differentiating their roles and those of others. This view is similar to that of Bretherton (1989) who stated that children that engaged in pretence have to take on multiple roles learning a "surprisingly sophisticated repertoire of stage management devices" (p.10).

A number of developmentalists view imaginary companions as important in healthy childhood development, included in this is the development of self-consciousness. Singer and Singer (1990) who have worked widely in this area believe that imaginary companions and the imagination in general can be used in the absence of peers to master social skills. Newson and Newson (1976) explain "in their main role as playmate, however, they have particular virtues of patience and amiability which can ease the child very gradually into the social relationships which eventually have to be worked out on a reality level with his less tolerant peers" (p.154-155). Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson (1973) claim that although most children will learn such skills, they will do so at a much slower rate than those who have imaginary companions. Supporting research indicates that children with imaginary companions are less competent, and may have fewer peers as only and eldest children are over represented among children with imaginary companions. Harter and Choa (1992) have also found evidence to suggest that children's imaginary companions increase a child's competence by one of two means, firstly by creating an "ego ideal" to which the child aspires, or secondly by creating an incompetent companion, which makes them feel superior and confident in comparison (p. 360). In this way the child not only learns social skills but also gains self-esteem and self confidence in that they can either enlist the help of their imaginary companion or can feel confident in the knowledge that at

least they are smarter than their companion. This creates an atmosphere that is conducive to the acquisition of cognitive skills as well.

Developmentalists essentially view imaginary companions as providing a way of ensuring normal social development which, if not accomplished via an imaginary companion, would be accomplished through some other means. In contrast those that take an ecological viewpoint stress that imaginary companions are the result of environmental deficiencies and are the child's attempt to compensate for them. Unlike the developmental view, the ecological one is that the child utilises their imaginary companion to cope with unexpected hurdles in the form of environmental deficiencies that are not common to all children. This theory thus makes it clear why not all children have such companions. Such deficiencies include a lack of social interaction causing loneliness, a lack of affection or positive attention, and insufficient mental stimulation. This view proposes that imaginary companions are "healthy reactions to an unhealthy situation" (Bettleheim, cited Pines, 1978, p. 42), thus suggesting that by manipulating the child's environment the companion may be rendered unnecessary.

This view has not received much attention, this may be due to its negative nature and tendency to blame the child's parents. This aside there is some supporting evidence. The research which attests to only and eldest children being over represented in studies of children with imaginary companions was earlier used to support the view that imaginary companions are a tool used to develop social skills. However, this may also be construed to mean that such children are deprived in that they have limited social interaction and are thus lonely. Manosevitz et al (1973) have found support for this interpretation as their study indicates that children with imaginary companions are more likely to initiate play while also participating in more activities with their families, than children without imaginary companions.

One of the more obscure theories proposed has come from Julian Jaynes who wrote "The origins of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind.". Jaynes proposed in his book that the ancient Greeks did not have consciousness as we know it today, but instead were directed by hallucinated voices of the Gods. The bicameral mind is one where behaviour is governed not by conscious thought but by the direction of the Gods via the hallucination in the wernics region of the brain. Then, over time, the conscious mind took over the role of the hallucinated Gods, rendering the bicameral mind unused in the modern mind, bar several exceptions.

One such exception according to Jaynes is the imaginary companion. Jaynes explains his theory of imaginary companions in children as "my thinking here is that by some innate or environmental predisposition to have imaginary companions, the neurological structure of the general bicameral paradigm is exercised." (1976, p.397). That is to say the child's companion is hallucinated in much the same way as the Greeks hallucinated their God's.

He also claims that hypnosis engages the bicameral mind which allows for a more absolute control over behaviour than is possible with consciousness. On the basis of this claim he suggests that people that have had imaginary companion should thus be more susceptible to hypnosis in later life. He goes on to state that research does indeed indicate that those who have had imaginary companions are easier to hypnotise. He does not cite the research which has led to this conclusion. It is accepted by other researchers that there is a link between imagination and hypnosis. However as Hilgard (1977) explains "the role of imagination in hypnosis apparently requires some ability to make use of the images that are present in some special manner if imagery ability is to lead to hypnotisability" (p. 100). Thus, it is not enough to be effective at using the imagination: to be readily hypnotised the individual must also have the ability to utilise that skill in a certain, thus far undetermined way.

Although somewhat obscure in nature Jaynes theory does go some way to explaining the mechanism which allows children to have imaginary companions. However, it does not address the question of what function they serve for those children that have them, nor does it provide an answer as to why not all children adopt imaginary companions.

Researchers and theorists alike have overwhelmingly come to the conclusion that children with imaginary companions are better off for the experience (e.g. Taylor, Cartwright & Carlson 1993; Singer & Singer 1990; Harter & Choa 1992; and Klien 1985). However, as stated earlier, this has not translated into positive attitudes in parents as indicated by the only two studies which have looked at parents attitudes. Manosevitz et al. (1973) conducted a study in which they questioned parents on all aspects of imaginary companions, only briefly touching on the subject of attitudes toward imaginary companions. In their study "the attitudes of the parents toward their child's imaginary companion were described as 'good for the child' by 62%, and as 'having no effect' on the child by 42%, although 4% of the parents felt the imaginary companion had a 'harmful effect' on the child" (1973, p. 76). While 50% of parents encouraged the imaginary companion, 43% ignored it and 7% discouraged it. Although these results are not entirely negative the manner in which the questions were asked may have had some influence on parents ability to distinguish encouraging behaviour from discouraging behaviour. Secondly, a particular attitude does not necessarily translate into a corresponding behaviour.

The other more comprehensive study on parental attitudes toward imaginary companions was carried out by Brooks and Knowles (1982). They set out to find how having an imaginary companion compared to other childhood behaviours, while also establishing how parents thought the issue should be approached, that is with

encouragement, neutrality etc. They found that in comparison to other behaviours imaginary companions were seen in a neutral manner. They concluded that "provision for constructive make-believe play in the child's life seems to be restricted by the attitude held most typically by the parents in our study". They go on to say that the reasons for this concern are "worthy of exploration"(1982, p. 32) and from this grew one of the major aims of the current study.

Personal experience as a general rule tends to influence the attitudes we hold on those experiences, thus it may be that parents whose children have not had imaginary companions may well hold different views than parents that have experienced them in their own children. It is the aim of this study to make such a comparison not only in terms of attitudes but also in terms of their respective conceptualisations of the functions they perform, as no other study has made such an attempt.

The research into the function of imaginary companions has tended to assume that all imaginary companions perform the same role in their creators lives. This assumption denies all evidence that would suggest that children create imaginary companions for a variety of reasons. Thus it is another aim of this study to establish what, if anything, parents feel is the function of their child's imaginary companion is. The research done thus far has essentially focused on one of four functions, those being, a scapegoat goat as described by Selma Fraiberg (1959), a teacher as proposed by Harter and Choa (1992), a guardian angel or protector as Singer and Singer (1990) outlined, and lastly as someone to look after as Harter and Choa (1992) illustrated as an alternative to a teacher. These four functions will all be incorporated in the study, making it a deductive rather than inductive approach to the question of function.

The literature which relates to imaginary companions in regard to incidence, characteristics, characteristics of their creators, and parental response will be outlined

in the next section. The following section will address the main aspects of investigation this study will undertake, before the outline of how it was undertaken is presented, along with the respective findings.