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Imaginary Companions: The children who create them and the adult response

An Honors College Thesis

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Psychology

Introduction

You overhear a child playing with a friend. Endless conversations and games are heard from the child. You cannot hear the friend, maybe the child has a quiet friend. You look at the child playing, and you are confused to see the child is alone. When the child sees you, they want to happily introduce you to the new friend. Pointing to what you see as nothing, the child introduces you to their imaginary companion. You cannot see nor effectively communicate with this friend, but the child does not treat an imaginary companion any differently than a friend who is physically present.

Imaginary companions (noted as ICs) were defined by Bouldin and Pratt as "...a very vivid imaginary character that does not actually exist but is treated as real by the child, who plays with it and refers to it in conversation through the day" (1999, 399). Although an imaginary companion cannot interact with a child in the physical world, they can aid with mental and emotional help for the child. ICs serve a purpose to children for companionship and to provide basic coping skills for their life. An alternate form of the imaginary companion is the personified object (PO), a toy or object that is given a personality through the imagination.

To a child, an imaginary companion can be the greatest friend the mind provides. Imaginary companions allow children to express themselves completely without judgment. To the adults involved in the child's environment, the reactions can vary. Some adults may fully support the companion and accommodate the figment of their imagination into their lives. However, other adults may feel differently and think of their child as either absurd or abnormal.

Review of Related Literature

Previous Perspectives

Although there were no in-depth studies about imaginary companions, imaginary companions were considered a gateway to the developing thoughts and ideas of a child. There were many views from past psychologists on imaginary companions. This section begins with the psychoanalytical theory developed by Freud, analyzing the subconscious by interpreting imaginary companions and symbolism. Transitioning from Freud's theory is the cognitive developmental theory created by Jean Piaget, who referred to child's imagination as "magic." Children use the magic of imagination to develop new skills and ideas, creating an environment they could understand. Finally, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective describes children using their imaginary companions as creative means into independent thinking and learning.

Every perspective provided gives a different type to definition to imagination and how it should be applied to everyday life. When analyzing imaginary companions for children, the subject did not receive attention until the 1980s (Klausen & Passman, 2006). Klausen and Passman (2006) analyzed the earliest studies that concentrated on childhood imaginary companions and their social development. One of the earliest mentions of researching imaginary companions was by Frances G. Wickes. "She noted that the way in which children use pretend companions to cope with internal and external demands mirror how the psyche later deals privately and personally with those elements" (p. 353). Wickes' idea of analyzing imaginary companions was the first mention of analyzing child thoughts and development. By focusing on the fantasy characters children interact with, psychologists found this as an opportunity to analyze the young mind. The following perspectives from famous psychologists reflected similar ideas to what Wickes said.

Psychoanalytical Theory

The psychoanalytical perspective was developed by Sigmund Freud in 1897. Psychoanalysis involves investigating the childhood memories and subconscious of a person's mental processes to find an explanation towards certain behaviors or problems (Elzer & Gerlach, 2014). This analysis of the subconscious could be from discussing dreams and previous experiences to find a correlation between the person's thoughts and problems. Freud created the fundamentals for therapy and helping others through analyzing subconscious thoughts. "Freud regarded make-believe play as a form of pleasurable wish fulfillment that allows children to act out uncertainties, anxieties, and hoped for outcomes and, therefore, to master frightening and frustrating events" (Berk, 2004, p.109). Freud saw imagination as a form of expression for children to understand their experiences and accomplish their desires.

Erik Erikson expanded on Freud's psychoanalytical theory and thoughts about child imagination. Taking Freud's idea about children using the imagination to process experiences, Erikson's theory about imagination was that children are learning about themselves. Children use pretend play to find their place in society. "And through observing and emulating admired adult figures, preschoolers internalize social norms and gain a sense of their future, of what they can become and how they can contribute to society" (Berk, 2004, p. 109). In other words, children apply the psychoanalytical perspective on themselves in processing imaginary experiences to understand their interests.

From the psychoanalytical perspective, children used imagination as a method for coping with the internal and external demands of their environments (Klausen & Passman, 2006). Freudians developed the perspective of imagination as "affective imagination." Affective imagination is defined as the subconscious expression of conflicts. Neo-Freudians described

affective imagination as having a core function to protect the child's inner personality and character and to atone for conditions that can negatively affect the subconscious. Children use affective imagination to actively express themselves. "Whereas positive emotions are associated with real events, in children's minds, they tend not to see the source of negative experiences, and this leads to the use of symbols to represent their negative experiences" (Diachenko, 2011). In affective imagination, children express their negative feelings and emotion through symbolism (e.g. drawing a dragon to represent a negative figure in the child's life). From the Neo-Freudian perspective, the affective imagination can have a negative effect for a child if left unsupervised. Depend on their imagination too much as a coping mechanism can have adverse effects in children's life in the future. "Affective imagination can lead to obsessive fears and anxiety, or lead a child to the creation of a substitution imaginary life without real creative products" (Diachenko, 2011). From the Neo-Freudian perspective, a child too dependent on their affective imagination will most likely develop mental issues such as social anxiety and may have the tendency to create a surrogate companion as a coping mechanism.

Cognitive Developmental Theory

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget studied child learning and developed the concept of "cognitive imagination." Cognitive imagination is perceived to be an aid to child development. Piaget defines imagination in this manner: "The main task of cognitive imagination is to represent the objective world and overcome any contradictions in a child's perception of reality, creating an integrated picture of the world" (Diachenko, 2011). Children can develop an understanding of their role in the world by applying their imagination to physical objects in the world. "Children use cognitive imagination when they reproduce actions with substitute objects (for example, feeding a doll) and affective imagination when they reproduce their own feelings"

(Diachenko, 2011). This states that, unlike affective imagination, cognitive imagination has more purpose for children to use in developing their understanding of the world. Children use their cognitive imagination to gain an insight to tasks they want to learn about in the future such as caring for another.

Piaget thought there was importance in children using toys and objects to learn. “For Piaget, people are of secondary importance, while the objects and the child’s actions on objects are of primary importance” (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 28). Piaget believed that children learned best playing alone to develop both mental and social abilities. Using toys or other objects to learn from, children will develop their own form of thought or skill without assistance from another person. From the interaction between a child and an object, the child will learn to develop more mature, logical form of thought. “Piaget believed that only the discoveries children make independently reflect their current intellectual status” (29). Children learning alone would benefit the most in their learning process. Following the idea of cognitive imagination, children are learning on their own using an object as a subject for practice to build on skills they know until they reach a level of mastery.

There are three versions of children engaging in their fantasies according to Piaget. The first version is what people know as imagination. In Piaget’s (1929/1979) *The Child’s Conception of the World*, Piaget refers to imagination as “magic.” Magic is defined as when, “...the individual believes he can make of such a participation to modify reality” (Piaget, 1979, p. 132). Piaget distinguishes between a child creating an imaginary companion and a child creating a personified object, the second version of fantasy engagement, known as animism. Animism is the concept of giving an object personified traits, characteristics, and a personality. The difference between magic and animism is the participation. “All magic supposes a

participation, but the reverse is not true” (132). Magic requires or assumes the user to participate in the world, but the interaction does not always require the use of magic. For animism, “...we shall be led to the conclusion that animism is derived from participation and not vice versa” (133). Animism is a form of participation, giving life and personality to an inanimate object. Children who create personified objects as their imaginary companions use animism to bring their toys and other inanimate materials to life. The third form of imagination children use is known as artificialism. Artificialism is when a child creates a story to explain natural phenomena such as the origins of the sun and moon. The origins of why children use artificialism are difficult to trace. Piaget raised the question: “Is this artificialism spontaneous or are the child’s conception of the origins of things to be attributed to its religious training?” (269). Piaget asks if children create these fictional concepts on their own or if they are retelling these stories from a religious education and someone else’s concept.

According to Piaget’s cognitive development theory, children develop in stages. These stages are the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. In the preoperational stage, children from the ages of 2 to 7 will experience egocentrism. Egocentrism is when children are unable to see the world from a perspective other than their own. From *The Child’s Conception of the World*, Piaget (1929/1979) states, “If his logic lacks exactitude and objectivity it is because the social impulses of mature years are counteracted by innate egocentricity” (Piaget, 1979, p. 33). In other words, young children cannot understand someone else’s thoughts and views of the world, so their interpretations are irrational. As children grow older and socialize with others, they will outgrow their egocentricity and learn to accept the ideas of others.

Using their imagination, children will take the experience gained with their practice object more seriously thinking of the work as more realistic than playing. In their 2006 analysis of Piaget's work, Klausen and Passman stated, "His recognition and inclusion of pretend companions fit seamlessly within his description of children's developmental transition from self-talk to social speech" (Klausen & Passman, 2006, p. 352). Piaget believed that imagination advanced his concepts of cognitive development and considered the idea as part of normal development. Children who interacted with imaginary companions were thought to be more social from early practice with their imaginary companions. "Piaget regarded conversations with pretend companions as retaining vestiges of self-talk, with the speech functioning as an accompaniment to children's actions, although without social functions" (353). Piaget thought of the communication a child has with their imaginary companion reveals a form of thought with the child's actions. Their self-talk helps direct the child to their goals without the assistance of social interaction.

The Sociocultural Theory

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky viewed child development from the sociocultural perspective. The sociocultural perspective is the concept that children develop cognitively from previous and current social interactions (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Vygotsky emphasized the idea of the social context in a child's life. "Each generation adds new things, and thus the cumulative experience and information of the culture are passed on to succeeding generations" (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 10). Vygotsky believed children are the outcome of past information and experiences that lead them to become successful in life. Culture encompasses the customs in a group of people that are passed down from previous generations. The people children interact with in their life are the ones who pass their knowledge onto the child as part of

their socialization. The sociocultural theory of development demonstrates the idea that children learn from interacting with other people and the mind of a child is the result of knowledge passed down from previous generations.

Vygotsky believed in the potential of “scaffolding,” a technique where children learn new skills with the guidance of a “teacher.” “With scaffolding, the task itself is not changed, but what the learner initially does is made easier with assistance” (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 42). The purpose of the teacher is to provide a child guidance through the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a concept of child learning and development. “What requires maximum support and assistance today will be something the child can do with minimal help tomorrow” (35). With a teacher guiding a child through learning and development, the child grows more independent. Applying the creative abilities of child imagination to their growth, children can develop with the help of another without someone being physically present to support them.

According to Vygotsky (2004), there are four basic ways in which the operation of imagination is associated with reality. The first association between imagination and reality is when certain events are thought to be created from religious beliefs or supernatural forces (Vygotsky, 2004). Vygotsky believed that the imagination is like having a religious or spiritual belief. “According to this view, it is gods or spirits who put dreams into people’s head, provide poets with inspiration for their work, and supplied lawgivers with the Ten Commandments (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 13).” This first view underscores the belief that phenomena is due to a higher power instead of by chance or from scientific verification. Vygotsky’s second operation is the reimagining of major historical events and their results. This version of imagination is rethinking past events to play out with a person’s ideals. “It does not reproduce what I perceived in my previous experience, but creates new combinations from that experience” (16). This form

of imagination cannot change what has already happened but can give someone the sense of what could have happened.

Vygotsky's third function of imagination is an internal expression of emotions, thoughts, and images. "Just as people long ago learned to express their internal states through external expressions, so do the images of imagination serve as an internal expression of our feelings" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 18). The imagination functions as a manifestation of internal feelings for the self. Children learning to develop independently begin to develop a variety of skills that will help them convey their thoughts to themselves. One of those skills is private speech as "it contains information as well as self-regulatory comments" (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 98). Private speech is a form of communicating to the self, condensed, and meant only to be understood by the user. "When we encounter an especially difficult situation, we turn parts of this mental dialogue outward, making our self-communication considerably more explicit and detailed than it ordinarily would be were we to speak to ourselves silently" (Berk, 2004, p. 76). This self-dialogue helps in processing when problem solving, and it is understood by the self. For children, private speech follows a similar concept. "Private speech, then, permits children to create self-directed instructions and, thereby, becomes the fundamental tool for managing the self's activities" (77). Private speech is a part of the intrapersonal plane of a child and shows a child moving away from the interpersonal plane. The intrapersonal plane of development is when a child becomes independent in thought. The interpersonal plane of development is when a child shares thoughts and mental processes with another person. "In Vygotskian framework, the words *shared*, *distributed*, and *interpersonal* all stand for the idea that mental processes exist between two or more people. As children incorporate the tool into their own thought processes, a shift occurs and the tool becomes *intrapersonal*, or *individual*" (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 18). It is

believed that children are using private speech when communicating with their imaginary companion. Private speech does not present itself as the most coherent form of communication and it is not supposed to be. “It is not necessary for private speech to be completely explicit since it must only be intelligible to the child” (98). Since children are using private speech to convey thoughts to themselves, they can use an infinite number of thoughts in their self-communication. Their self-thoughts are also a form of imagination and could be how children communicate to their imaginary companions.

Vygotsky’s fourth form of the imagination is the projection of a character people use to interact with (2004). This form is best described as the creation of an imaginary companion. From a Vygotsky’s perspective, imagination and creativity provides mental tools created by children for their development. One of these mental tools is known as a mediator- an aid in child development that makes it easier for a child to achieve a particular behavior. “In Vygotskian framework, mediators become mental tools when the child incorporates them into his own activity” (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 69). The mediator can be a verbal, visual, or physical in helping the child transition from needing the maximum amount of help to becoming independent and internalizing their lessons. Adults use internal and verbal mediators to organize steps such as mnemonics to organize steps. “Unlike adults, who primarily use internal, verbal mediators to direct mental processes and behaviors, children need something more concrete and tangible” (70). Since children are young, they require a more objective and material mediator than what adults use. An example of this is a child needing a certain pen when it is time to write. Children do not all use the same mediators. “As long as the child assign his own personal meaning to the mediator and uses it to guide behavior, the mediator will be useful” (71). The mediator should have some significance to the child to be used properly. Humans use their creative abilities to

propel themselves to future goals. Vygotsky stated, “It is precisely human creative activity that makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future, creating the future and thus altering his own present” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 10). According to Vygotsky, children are not the only ones who should be using their imagination. Everyone should apply their creative abilities to help them in development and growth as a person. This continues Vygotsky’s idea of the mediator, the aid in grasping new skills and ideas. An imaginary companion could be a mediator for development by helping people change their current thoughts and behaviors. Imagination motivates people to realize they can alter a present situation to their liking and have more drive to do better for the future.

A General Overview of Imaginary Companions

To compare the findings of all previous studies, Moriguchi and Todo in 2018 conducted a meta-analysis that defined the idea of imaginary companions and compared those of Western children and Japanese children. The comparison of previous studies identified consistent findings in relationships between the prevalence of imaginary companions and a child’s age, gender, and birth order. To find as many comparable studies as possible, the search for previous research was narrowed to studies that were conducted with children younger than 12 years of age. Using studies that were within a certain age range would yield greater accuracy to discuss the prevalence of imaginary companions in childhood and had a similar gender ratio. After analyzing a total of 33 studies from the United States, Europe, Oceania, and Japan, there were consistent findings to who would be more likely to have imaginary companions. “The fourth and fifth analyses revealed that sex and birth-order impacted the prevalence of ICs significantly. Girls were more likely to have ICs than boys were, and first-born children were more likely to create ICs than other children were” (Moriguchi & Todo, 2018, p. 473). A consistent result from the

analysis was girls and first-born children had a higher likelihood of having an imaginary companion. Imaginary companions were more prevalent among Western children than Japanese children. Japanese children were more likely to have a personal object as a companion than an imaginary companion or imaginary friend. “The second and the third analyses revealed that Japanese children tend to have POs instead of IFs, and therefore the total ICs may not differ across cultures” (473). Based on the reports given by children and their parents, imaginary companions seem to be more common in Western children than Japanese children. The Japanese children were more likely to build a character for a physical toy to become their personal object.

Conclusion

Previous perspectives see imagination as being favorable for a child. Freud and other psychoanalysts have seen the imagination as a gateway into the child’s subconscious. Children who use their imagination as a coping mechanism can process their experiences through a creative method. However, there is criticism regarding the usage of an imaginary companion. From the psychoanalytical perspective, children need to be limited with their interactions with an imaginary companion because the dependency may result in losing touch with reality (Klausen & Passman, 2006). From the cognitive developmental theory created by Jean Piaget, there are three forms of child creative abilities: magic, animism, and artificialism. “Magic” is the term Piaget gives imagination to explain a child creating something personal to them such as an invisible imaginary companion. Animism is the child giving a personality and character to inanimate materials such as creating a personified object as a companion. Artificialism is when a child creates a story to explain natural world phenomena. Young children were also seen to be egocentric according to Piaget and cannot understand another person’s viewpoint. Therefore, the imagination provides a child with a comprehensible environment to learn in (Piaget, 1929/1979).

From Vygotsky's perspective, everyone should be using their imagination for growth and development. The creation of an imaginary companion accompanies children through the zone of proximal development to grasp new skills and concepts without another person physically present (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective sees the imagination as a creative means to mediate learning (Vygotsky, 2004). Using imagination can also develop private speech where children can comprehend their own thoughts to set plans and goals for themselves on the intrapersonal plane.

Imaginary companions defined in the general sense, are more prevalent in Western cultures than Eastern cultures. Imaginary companions are also more likely to be created by females and first-born children. The children in an Eastern Asian culture such as Japan were more likely to create a personified object as an imaginary companion than an invisible companion (Moriguchi & Todo, 2018).

The Creation of an Imaginary Companion:

The imagination of children can vary due to multiple factors. From multiple studies, a pattern can be seen between whether children have imaginary friends and their environment. In a questionnaire analysis done by Bouldin and Pratt (1999), data from 478 children were analyzed about the characteristics of their imaginary companions. The responses of the children were analyzed based on their family dynamics (birth order, interaction with their parents, etc.). The results of this study revealed that the first-born children were more likely to create imaginary friends than children who were not the first-born of their family. An inference to this information could be that the IC is used as a coping mechanism to help children dealing with loneliness if

they do not have someone to interact with. “Children who create ICs, in creating imaginary social relationships, invent social contexts that afford consideration of all manner of interpersonal issues and their associated emotions” (Gleason, 2017, p. 435). From this quote, children who feel lonely will create their own social situation to cope for the one that is missing. First-born children may feel loneliness from the lack of peers or younger siblings.

Since a child’s imagination is the origin of the companion and the companion’s form is the idea of a child, it was believed that children create magical creatures or animals as their companions. Contrary to this belief, a study conducted by Baines and Majors’ (2017) asked children to describe what their imaginary companion looked like. The results indicated that most (67%) of the imaginary companions described in the study took a human form and very few (9%) were a magical entity. It is believed that children create an imaginary companion with a human form to have a friend that is physically relatable to them. The relation is more than what species the imaginary companion is; it is also relatable for gender too. “It was also notable that the majority of ICs [imaginary companions] were of the same sex of the child. Boys were less likely to have ICs of the opposite sex” (Baines & Majors, 2017, p. 51). The children created an imaginary companion that was physically like them and more relatable. This makes the imaginary companion easier to interact with and easier for the child to visualize.

Not all children have an imaginary companion. Not all friends with imagined origins are fantasy nor mythical creatures. Bouldin and Pratt (1999) analyzed the different variables in a child’s life that lead them to create an imaginary companion. From the study, children who are first-born in their families are more likely to create an imaginary companion due to loneliness and desire to interact with a peer. The form or species the imaginary companion takes is rarely a fantasy creature. Baines and Majors (2017) analyzed the forms children give their imaginary

companions. They found that most of the children created imaginary companions that are human and the same gender as their creator. Having an imaginary companion that is human and the same sex as their creator gives children something easier to visualize and relate to. This makes the imaginary companion easier to interact with the imaginary companion. From analyzing the creation of an imaginary companion, children make more than a fantasy character, they create both a friend and a peer to interact with.

The Role of Gender in Imagination

From the results of the following studies, children use imagination differently depending on their gender. Girls are more engaged in imaginary play than boys (Moriguchi & Todo, 2018). From previous studies that analyze the imaginary companion of a child, there were more girls involved in the study than boys. In a 2012 study conducted by McInnis about the relationship between a child and his or her imaginary companion, McInnis had 36 children participate with their stories about their ICs, 25 of the children were girls and 11 of the children were boys. Moriguchi and Todo (2018) did an analysis of the results from previous studies to create a general idea of who was more likely to have an imaginary companion. The study focused on the child's gender for children under the age of 12. There were significant results stating that girls were more likely to create an imaginary friend than boys. This implies that girls have a more creative nature and a tendency for interaction with an imaginary companion.

A significant difference between boys and girls when they created their imaginary friends was the form the imaginary companion took on. Coetzee and Shute (2003) analyzed the gender difference in children when they create and play with an imaginary companion. One of the

results of the study was a majority (83%) of the girls created an imaginary companion that took a human form and was acknowledged as their friend or sibling. “Another characteristic of the girls’ imaginary friends was that, in those cases where the friend was either rated as more or equally competent, that friend appeared to play a wish-fulfillment role, having desirable qualities such as pierced ears or long or curly hair...” (Coetzee & Shute, 2003, p. 257). This quote from the results of the studies states that girls create an imaginary companion to fit the role of a desired person. Most of the boys created a human imaginary friend too, but 45% of the boys said their imaginary companion was not human. Girls with a companion that has a more human form would have an easier interaction with their companion than a companion with a non-human form. Children can have a special connection with their imaginary companion, acknowledging them as their friend or feelings like they have a familial relationship. Boys may not want that same connection girls have with their imaginary companion. This may imply that boys do not have the same level of interpersonal skills that girls have.

The gender difference of child play in imagination can be more than having an imaginary companion with a different appearance. Some children use their imagination to embody a character. In a 2005 study by Carlson and Taylor, there was evidence that children have different types of imaginary play. “Between-sex comparisons, however, revealed girls were more likely than boys to have imaginary companions, whereas boys were more likely than girls to impersonate characters” (Carlson & Taylor, 2005, p. 93). The results of the study highlighted the differences between girls and boys in imaginary play. Boys were more likely to imagine they are a fictional character than to create their own imaginary companion. Girls can create their own imaginary companion to interact within the world. Boys interact with the world as they are embodying their own character from multimedia sources.

When using imagination, boys and girls will apply their creative abilities to their different needs. From the results of a 2007 study, a conclusion was made that “Boys, especially, demonstrate their strength and act out physically and verbally what it is like to be big and strong while girls spend much time negotiating roles” (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007, p. 287). Boys have more physical play and tend to be competitive. Girls have more interpersonal skills and will want to have their play include engaging with others. A 2003 study conducted by Coetzee and Shute examined the competence of imaginary companions that were created by children. After analyzing the results of this study, both boys and girls reported having a less competent imaginary friend. “Unexpectedly, the present study found that not only girls, but also boys, rated their imaginary friends as less competent than themselves, although there was a tendency for this to occur more frequently among girls” (Coetzee & Shute, 2003, p. 257). Most of the girls in the study created an imaginary friend for them to care for and teach about social norms or how to complete certain tasks. This promotes the nurturing nature girls have engaging with another. Boys may create less competent imaginary companions for another reason. “One possible explanation relates to the suggestion that boys have two alternative strategies for boosting their own competence, either by association with a stronger imaginary friend or by favorable comparison with a weaker one” (257). While girls create ICs to nurture, boys created ICs to compete against and boost their own ego and self-esteem. “It is also possible that even if the boys did have an imaginary friend who was more competent, some possibly did not want to admit this” (257). This quote from the study implies that some imaginary companions can be made stronger than their creator to give boys more of a challenge to compete against. The boys who did not want to admit that their imaginary companion was stronger than them did not want

to appear “weak.” This supports the ideas of boys being more competitive than girls and striving to be better.

Gender plays a role in imaginary companions. From previous studies, girls were more likely to engage with imaginary companions than boys (Moriguchi & Todo 2018, Carlson & Taylor 2005). Coetzee and Shute (2007) found gender differences in the creation of the imaginary companion and the way the child interacts with the imaginary companion. Most imaginary companions were of the same gender as the child who created them. Children give their imaginary companions different traits and personalities to fit their desires. Coetzee and Shute found that girls create their imaginary companions with a lower competency to have a character to nurture and care for, boys create their imaginary companion to compete with by creating physically stronger characters. When girls create a less competent imaginary companions, they are developing a nurturing personality while boys build their self-esteem from competitions to “win” against their imaginary companions. Gender and the imagination play a role in what a child will develop. “Thus, the sociodramatic play of boys is less dependent on having other characters in the scene, and girls’ fantasy roles might be more conducive to the creation of imaginary companions” (Carlson et al. 1993, p. 1183). Boys were more likely to use their imagination to embody character, building a more intrapersonal connection. Girls had imaginary companions to build a more interpersonal connection. Carlson and Taylor (2005) found imagination differences in children where girls were more likely to create an imaginary companion, but boys would envision themselves as a character. When girls are creating an imaginary companion, the companion is a figure used to interact and socialize with. When boys are impersonating a character, they are building their self-esteem and using their imagination to carry out their desires of being stronger or smarter than they are.

Relationships Between a Child and Companion

Children can have varying relationships with their imaginary companion. Most of the time, an imaginary companion provided what a child did not have. Mottweiler and Taylor (2014) analyzed the relationship between a child's imagination and their creative abilities. "Children with invisible friends provided the most creative solutions to drawing a pretend person, perhaps because inventing an invisible friend has some similarity to the task of drawing a person who could not exist, and both tasks involve visual imagery" (Mottweiler & Taylor, 2014, p. 284). Children who have not developed the abilities to draw what they wanted to express visualized it in the form of their imagination.

Imaginary companions are prevalent in children during the stage of early childhood, an age where children should be socializing with their peers. Gleason and Hoffman (2006) conducted a questionnaire study with children ages 3-5 years old to analyze the relationships young children have with their imaginary companions and compare the imaginary relationship with the relationship children have with their real-life peers. Children were asked what they appreciated from their imaginary friendship. Then, they were asked about the benefits of having a friendship with their peers. The social benefits of these friendships fell into five categories: companionship, emotional intimacy, reliability, affection, and the elevation of self-esteem. All five of these categories benefit the child in personal motivation and emotional assistance. From the results of this study, imaginary companions were rated higher than real life companions for the social benefits of their relationship with the children. When asked why the child liked being friends with their companion, most of the children who had imaginary friends could not provide a reason and did not know. When asked about their friends in real life, the children were able to

provide more concrete answers about why they liked their friendship including reasons of having common activities. When comparing the answers between children's imaginary and real relationships, an inference was made that children adapt imaginary experiences to their real-life experiences. "Children's relationships with their imaginary companions may be elaborations of their experiences in relationships with real friends, and reciprocal friends in particular" (Gleason & Hoffman, 2006, p. 137). Children's inability to describe what they enjoyed from their imaginary relationship may have stemmed from an idealized version of their real-life friendship. The reason why children enjoy the imaginary friendship could be that they the ability to control how the relationship with their imaginary companion proceeds. "Individual differences in children's enjoyment of their peers and orientation toward social interaction could illuminate the individual differences between children who do and do not create imaginary companions" (141). Comparing the information children provided of their relationships could highlight the social differences children have and why children create imaginary companions instead of interacting with their peers. From this study, it was found that children create these ideal imaginary relationships based on their real-life relationships and exaggerate the social benefits of these relationships to enjoy them more.

Since children are mostly seen using their imaginary companions for play, it is assumed that the relationship between children and their imaginary companion is positive. In a 2012 master thesis study conducted by McInnis, it was revealed that children can have negative relationships with their imaginary companion. Some can even be abusive. The study included data from 107 children, but just 36 of the children had an imaginary companion. Among those who had an imaginary companion, 25 were girls and 11 were boys. From the results of the study, some of the younger children (3-5 years old) experienced "mean" imaginary friends; some of

these “mean” imaginary friends exhibited physical violence. The older children of the study did not experience a negative relationship with their imaginary companion. McInnis interviewed the children in the study to understand how they were affected by the negative relationship they had with their imaginary companion. McInnis found that, when children were dealing with frustrations, they have projected these feelings toward their imaginary companion. “Thus, having a negative relationship with an imaginary companion might serve as an emotional outlet and proxy for real friendship in terms of socioemotional development” (McInnis, 2012, p. 15). In terms of social development, the social competence of the children seemed to be correlated with how positive their relationship was with their friends, both imaginary and physical. “Children with negative relationships, regardless of whether they were real or imaginary, had lower overall social competence scores than children with nice relationships” (36). McInnis analyzed the social cues the children utilized the emotional quality of their relationships with their friends. “Results confirmed that positive relationships with imaginary companions are related to better socioemotional development” (12). Children who had positive relationships with their physical and imaginary friends were found to have higher social competence. McInnis concluded that when discussing the topic of children with imaginary friends, parents or adults should not be wary about who their child befriended but the quality of the child’s relationship with the friend.

The foundation for positive relationships in a person’s lifetime originates from the social skills a person has. Children gain social competency from their interactions with another person. If someone cannot attend to the child, an imaginary companion is available to socialize with them. Gleason and Kalpidou (2014) analyzed the coping skills and the social competency of children with imaginary companions. Seventy-two children were interviewed along with 24 mothers and teachers. The children were categorized as having an imaginary companion,

personifying an object to act as a companion, having both, and having neither. “As young children develop their first egalitarian friendships, they must expand these initial relationship schemas to include typical features of friendship, such as negotiation and compromise” (Gleason & Kalpidou, 2014, p. 835). When children create these relationships with their imaginary companions, they appear to include the usual features that are associated with a normal relationship. These characteristics of the relationship will teach children how to interact when presented a similar situation with a person in real life. From the results of the study, there were no significant differences between the coping skills of a child with ICs and a child without ICs. However, it was theorized when children treated their imaginary companion as an equal, they had more social competency than children who saw their imaginary companions as inferior to them.

Social competency and relationships are different for all children. Children with a developmental disorder such as autism can experience more challenges than children without such ailment. In 2018, Davis et al. conducted a study analyzing the relationship between an imaginary companion and a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and a typically developing child (TD). The participants were 104 parents of ASD children between the ages of 2 and 8-years-old compared with 104 parents of TD children around the age of 5. The participants answered a questionnaire reporting whether their child had an imaginary companion and describing their child’s imaginary companion. From the results of this study, imaginary companions were more prevalent among the TD children than the children with ASD. Out of the ASD children who had imaginary companions, most of them were personified objects than invisible friends. This contrasts the TD group where almost half of the children had imaginary companions and most of them were invisible friends rather than personified objects. Although

there was no significant difference in social competency between the two groups, there was a difference in satisfaction with the imaginary companion. The parents were asked if their child was in any way displeased with their imaginary companion. “Significantly more parents in the TD group reported their children disliking things about their IC than in the ASD population” (Davis et al. 2018, p. 2794). The children with ASD were reported to have no dissatisfactions towards their imaginary companions. The parents of the ASD children were asked if the imaginary companion was used as a tool to communicate their needs. Three of the participants reported that their child used an imaginary companion for communication. A similarity between the two groups with respect to imaginary companions were the functions of the companions. “Thematic analysis identified two main functions of ICs: social and comfort purposes in both samples” (2797). Children from both groups used their imaginary companions to interact with and fully express themselves without negative repercussions for their behavior. For creating the “ideal” friend in an imaginary companion, the researchers believed there may be a difference in imaginative skills between children with ASD and those without. “Alternatively, children diagnosed with ASD may be spontaneously creating ICs that are qualitatively different from those of TD children and may thus engage with them in qualitatively different ways...” (2796). Due to the small sample size of children with ASD with imaginary companions, the relationship, or the type of play the child engages in, could not be tested to yield any significant results. From the study, few children with ASD interact with imaginary companions and are more likely to create a personified object than an invisible friend. Those who do create an imaginary companion are more likely to have a satisfying with their relationship with their imaginary companion than TD children.

Children outgrow their imaginary companions as they grow older. The study done by Fox and Kastebaum in 2007 analyzed how children lose their imaginary companions. For instance, the study examined whether imaginary companions actually “die” or whether there is a narrative created to explain their departure. Children are usually too young to comprehend the idea of death, which makes it interesting if the relationship between the child and companion was severed by death. After interviewing 37 individuals who outgrew imaginary companions, there were similarities to the interviews. Like the beginning of a dream, the manifestation of imaginary friends was not recalled. “Those who did remember the first meeting reported that their IF ‘just showed up one day on the playground,’ or ‘I came back from riding my bicycle and there he was’” (Fox & Kastebaum, 2007, p. 135). This finding demonstrates the idea that most imaginary companions are not created intentionally and may be a mental projection of the creator. When asking participants about the departure of their imaginary companion, there was more recollection among the participants. “Some endings were abrupt, definitive, and clearly recalled. Other endings were described as a fading or drifting away without incident” (137). Children with imaginary companions felt their relationship had come to an end. Stories were created to explain the end of this friendship. Some children appeared to know when it was time to move on from their imaginary companion and did. When asking why the child stopped their relationship with their imaginary companion, the common response was they grew up. “The children were feeling more grown up and moving on to more advanced situations in which new friends and activities would take precedence over their imaginaries” (138). As the children grew older, they decided to end their imaginary friendship. The children with imaginary companions found their purpose making real friendships and finding their role in society, no longer needing their invisible friends. Some children had their imaginary companions simply “drift” or “fade.” The

results of this study found that death of imaginary companions happened to a minority of children. “An unexpected gender difference appears in the relative frequency of fatal partings: males were more likely to have their IF die (140).” For the “death” of an imaginary companion, a gender difference was found where males were more likely to have their imaginary companion die suddenly while females created a narrative to explain the death. The narratives created to explain the death of an imaginary companion were based on both real and imaginary accidents. As children outgrow their imaginary companions, the stories they created were their explanation for the leaving of their imaginary companion. The “death” of the imaginary companion was dependent on the strength of the relationship the child had with their imaginary companion. “There was a tendency for the IF who was real enough to be part of the family to also be real enough to die (147).” For children to comprehend the absence of their friend, who felt “real” to them, they created the “death” of their friend to explain the permanent absence of the companion.

There is a lot of variation in the relationship a child can have with their imaginary companion. Some children use their imaginary companion as a friend or a surrogate sibling while other children use their imaginary companion as a bully. A child with an imaginary companion does not mean the child does not like their real-life peers. Gleason and Hoffman (2006) compared the relationships between children and their imaginary companions with the friendship between children and their peers. When asked which friend the child liked more, the child answered they liked their relationship with the imaginary friend more than a peer. Children said the reason why was because they felt more socially fulfilled in their imaginary friendship than their real-life ones. Since imaginary companions are a product of the mind, there is a possibility of the imagination producing an ideal friend for a child, and the child will prefer the

imaginary companion over their peers. Children may use an imaginary companion for friendship, but there are also those that use their imagination in a negative way. McInnis (2012) studied the imaginary bullies that children create. There was a trend of younger children having a more negative relationship with their imaginary companion than older children. McInnis learned that the children with a negative relationship with their imaginary companion were projecting their frustrations onto said companion through physical or verbal abuse. There was a correlation found between social competency and how positive a child's relationship with their imaginary companion was. There are two kinds of relationships children can have with their imaginary companions based on findings from Gleason and Kalpidou's 2014 study. Egalitarian relationships are when the child treats another as an equal. Hierarchal relationships are when the child gives themselves a higher "status" or standing compared to another. From the results of this study, children were found to be more socially competent when they had an egalitarian relationship with their imaginary companion. Social competency can vary from child to child. Children with a developmental disorder such as autism spectrum disorder may have a better relationship with their imaginary companions differently than typically developed children. From Davis et al. (2018) study, children with autism spectrum disorder were reported to never have a complaint about their imaginary companion. The children without autism spectrum disorder were reported by their parents to have a few complaints about their imaginary companions. There may be a difference in the creation of imaginary companions where a child will be satisfied with their companion or not. As children grow older, they will lose their imaginary companions. How a child loses their imaginary companion has some connection to the type of relationship they have. From Fox and Kastebaum's (2007) study analyzing if an imaginary companion "dies" in a child's mind or if these figments simply disappear discovered that children who created an

emotionally “real” relationship with their imaginary companion were more likely to create a narrative to explain the companion’s disappearance. The children who created a narrative for their imaginary companion wanted a believable story for closure. These narratives were either based on real or imaginary accidents to explain the permanence of the companion being gone. Although an imaginary companion is not real, the relationship a child can have with their companion feels real for them. The strength of the relationship children can have with an imaginary companion has correlations to social competency and how real the emotions the child has.

Benefits and Uses of an Imaginary Companions

Imaginary companions are more than a play pal for a child. Hoff conducted a 2004 study on 26 children at the age of 10 to discuss the uses of imaginary companions and the forms they take. “The five main categories were: comfort or substitute for company, motivation and self-regulation, self-esteem enhancement, extended personality, and life quality enhancement” (Hoff, 2004, p. 161). The main idea of the five categories of the functions of imaginary companions is that they follow the idea of preserving the child’s innocence and personality.

Because the imagination is mainly associated with play, most people do not think of the situation as a coping strategy for children. According to Hoff’s first category on the five functions of imaginary companions, children use their imaginary companions for comfort (Hoff, 2004). Children dealing with stress can turn to figments of their imagination as a method of coping. Stress is emotional strain or pressure exerted on someone by external factors. For children to deal with stress from the external factors, they find a way to cope by taking “control” internally. In a 1987 study by Feldstein, Weigel, and Wertleib that measured the coping

strategies of children. Some children used an imaginary companion to re-gain control of the situation. One child from the study said “When I go to play, I just make up an imaginary friend...not really nice to boss around your friend but when you have an imaginary one like you’re the one who is controlling it, like a robot” (Feldstein et al. 1987, p. 558). The statement from the child demonstrates how children find it easier to control imaginary situations than real situations. Children can use their imaginary companions to cope with more than stress. “The creation of a companion could also be a way to cope with loneliness, helplessness, feelings of being abandoned, fear of darkness, or the unknown” (Hoff, 2004, p. 173). Using their imaginary companion, they gain that sense of control than when they interact with another person in the physical world where the situation can backfire. The sense of control allows the child to feel more at ease with their situation knowing they can do something about it.

Before focusing on the benefits to children of having an imaginary companion, the discussion begins with the benefits of imagination or imaginary play. From Hoff’s main categories about the functions of imaginary companions, the fourth category notes that children use imaginary companions as an extension of their personality (Hoff, 2004). “Individuals, including children, are active constructors of the social ‘reality’ in which they find themselves” (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007, p. 285). According to the results of this study, after analyzing the narratives told by each child, there seemed to be references to the life of the child. “We use narrative to guide and shape the way we experience our daily lives, to communicate with other people, and to develop relationships with them” (286). Our social interactions are created through these narratives that help us develop our own identity. Children do the same in imaginary play with their peers because it gives themselves a sense of individuality through creative abilities. Child psychologist Tracey R. Gleason theorized that children create imaginary

companions to practice their social skills without the threat of offending another person. Children utilize the creation of an imaginary being to practice interacting with. This theory was tested in Gleason and Kalpidou's 2014 study. "Possibly, imagining a friend, in particular, might have given children practice in constructively and pro-socially handling the social situations tapped by our coping measures" (Gleason & Kalpidou, 2014, p. 828). From Gleason's perspective, children use their imaginations to cope with social situations. Children construct new problem-solving methods for social problems or how to interact with another person. The purpose of the imaginary companion helps teach children how to solve such problems.

Imaginary companions can be more than a simple playmate. The most common reason why children need an imaginary companion to interact with is loneliness. Some imaginary companions are used as surrogate peers to a child when they have none close by. It was indicated that children tend to lose their imaginary friend when they were in a new social situation where they did not require imaginary situations. "Of the 41 parents, one *sic* parent said that the imaginary companion was given up when the family moved to a new house, and one *sic* parent reported that the child gave up the imaginary companion when he was feeling more settled in a new home and had more real friends" (Carlson et al. 2004, p. 1177). This 2004 study from Carlson et al. is a follow-up study from a 1997 investigation involving 100 children who had imaginary companions as toddlers. Some of the children have lost their imaginary companion between the years of the two studies. The parents of the children reported the status of their child's imaginary companion. One family said their child lost his imaginary companion after making new friends. This report indicates that the child was lonely and needed an imaginary companion as a temporary solution for the lack of social contact. As the children from the first

study grew older and found more suitable friends, they stopped using their imaginary companion and socialized more with their peers.

Learning new skills has always been a critical part of child development. Children can hone their skills to apply to the real world by practicing. The imagination constructs a more desirable social situation for the child to engage in than what reality provides. In 2017, Gleason continued the theory of children practicing social skills in another analyses. It was theorized in the article that imaginary companions were used to explore social relationships and the emotions associated with such interactions. Gleason stated, "...like other social mammals, humans have evolved neurobiological system that promote the formation of social bonds" (Gleason, 2017, p. 438-439). This theory notes that humans are naturally born to socialize with others. Children strengthening their social skills through practice helps them create stronger social bonds and make the natural social connections they want to make. "Within this framework, play with ICs could be conceptualized as a forum for exploring the nature and function of social relationships and their associated emotions, again within the safe confines of the play context" (435). Children can use imaginary characters to practice their social skills due to the ease of the practice. Since imaginary figments do not interact with other people in the physical world, they are good partners for practice. When children interact with their imaginary companion, the children can have no fear of offending their companion nor a fear of their companion relaying their experience to other people that the child interacts with. These interactions help children adjust to social situations and interact with others during their childhood. Furthermore, these interactions help children develop skills to take with them into adulthood. "This extra practice, albeit imagined and only a simulation of reality, might help children develop the social skills and relationship-related cognitive abilities necessary for successful adaptation in adulthood" (439).

The stronger the social skills children create, the more likely these skills follow them to adulthood as they mature. Children understand how to interact with another or how to have emotional control with understanding of how they are affected by social exchanges. There is no need to be shy or embarrassed when interacting with a figment of creativity. With an imaginary companion, children can fully express themselves without any limits.

In most situations, children are taught to follow their environment and the people around them. They follow what the older children or adults say because that is who they look up to for authority. “The richest presentations of proposed functions of imaginary companions come from clinical psychodynamic research, according to which the companion can have the function of an *id impulse*, a *superego* or *ego support*, but also the function of different kinds of *defense mechanism*” (Hoff, 2004). From the results of the interviews, the most common impetus for the creation of the imaginary companions was to cope with loneliness. Children also mentioned that imaginary companions helped a child “escape” reality and brought the child to a more controlled environment to satisfy the child’s needs. When children are given the power of being the leader, there is more satisfaction for them and the actions they take. One of the reasons Hoff indicated why children have imaginary friend was the ease of the interaction. “It seemed easier for these children to enjoy themselves if they were in full control of their games” (Hoff, 2004, p. 174). Having control in what they do puts them in a position they are not normally in. This can help a child gain more confidence and understand their desires. The imagination provides a child the environment they can grow or expand in without the judgement of another or any given guidelines to follow.

Children use their imaginary companions in many ways to benefit them. From Hoff (2004), there are five categories of benefit from imaginary companions. The five functions of

imaginary companions are to cope with loneliness, self-motivation, building self-esteem, expression and to improve their lives. Most of the benefits of having an imaginary companion are social. Children use an imaginary companion as a peer to cope with loneliness or to build on their current social competency. From Carlson et al. (2004) children were found to use their imaginary companion as a peer to cope with loneliness. The children stopped using their imaginary companion when they found new friends to socialize with. Children can fully express and improve themselves with imaginary companions. Gleason (2017) found that imaginary companions helped children gain better social skills. Children who interacted with an imaginary companion were more socially competent because they used a mediator to help build their social skills without any risks. These children could also express themselves with their imaginary companions without any judgement. The concept of enhancing a child's life is to improve on problems that may cause stress in a child. An imaginary companion is also used as a coping mechanism for stress. When dealing with stress, children use their imagination to gain control over a problem (Hoff, 2004). Children cannot control everything in their external environment, but they can control what they create. Imaginary companions are easy for children to control and help children when in stressful situations (Feldstein et al. 1987). The functions of imaginary companions provide children benefits for themselves as a positive coping strategy

The Effect of Imaginary Companions

There are people who do not agree with the idea of children benefitting from having an imaginary companion. It is believed from the psychoanalytical perspective that children who utilize their imagination too much become dependent on it and will lose touch with reality (Diachenko, 2008). Studies have been done to demonstrate how children are affected by their

imaginary interactions. “Overall, high-fantasy children are more like other children than they are different from them” (Carlson et al. 2004, p. 1179). Carlson et al. (2004) found that the children with imaginary companions in the study did not have any highly significant differences from children without imaginary companions. The following are studies analyzing the effect of imaginary companions on children.

A common belief among adults observing their children’s imaginary play is that children will not be able to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Children’s differentiation between fantasy and reality was analyzed by Carlson, Cartwright, and Taylor in 1993. The participants of this study were total of 27 preschool-aged children. Twelve of the children had an imaginary companion and the other 15 did not. The parents of the children were also involved in the study to provide information about other fictional characters their child believed were real. The children were interviewed about their imaginary companions and were also provided a toy phone for the child to contact their imaginary companion with. “Only 3 children (all in the IC group) reported that the way they saw and touched their friend was not the same way they saw or touched the experimenter” (Carlson et al. 1993, p. 280). 25% of the children in the study who had an imaginary companion could differentiate the imagination from reality. “Children without ICs were clearly not confused about whether their friend was actually present” (282). In the results of the study, children who did not have an imaginary companion had a low level of pretense. The children who had an imaginary companion had a high level of belief that their imaginary friend was real. Although most of the children in the study who had imaginary companions insisted that they were real, the age group of the children put them in the preoperational stage of cognitive development. In this stage described by Piaget, children are in an egocentric thinking pattern, making children have difficulty thinking from another person’s

perspective. Although the children in this study believed that their imaginary companion was real, it could have been because they have not achieved the stage of their development where they cannot understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

With an older age group of children, a similar study was conducted to analyze the differentiation between reality and fantasy in children with imaginary companions. In the 2001 study conducted by Bouldin and Pratt, the abilities of children to differentiate between reality and fantasy were analyzed. The participants of this study were 80 children between the ages of 4 and 8, half of whom had imaginary companions and the other half did not. Each child was put in a room with a researcher who did not know which group the child was from. The researcher asked the child to describe a monster for a story. After recording the child's response, the researcher directed the child's attention to a tent behind them. A silhouette of a monster was projected into the tent for 3 seconds. The children were then interviewed about what they saw in the tent behind the researcher and if they believed the monster was real or not. From the results of this study, children with imaginary companions were more likely to respond that the monster was real and would avoid the tent. "Children with these companions more often reported that they daydreamed, experienced mythical scary image content, and felt that the people and things they daydreamed about seemed so real they could almost see them in front of them" (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001, p. 123). Children with no control of their imagination let their fantasies coexist with their realities. The children who did not have imaginary companions showed no significance in their belief that the monster was real. "These findings suggest that children with imaginary companions may entertain the possibility that imaginary representations can be reflected in reality" (122). The children of the study who believed they saw a monster, a fantasy created by the researcher, also wanted to believe their imaginary companion was real, too. If the researchers

could make the children believe that the monster was real, the children were likely to believe that their imaginary companion was also real. This study, however, does not provide substantial evidence that children confuse their fantasy with reality. The study at best demonstrates the desire children have for their imagined reality, not confusing the dreamt environment with the physical real one.

Children can be affected cognitively from having an imaginary companion,. Private speech is a part of cognitive development that benefits the growth of problem solving and planning as a form of self-guidance. In the 2013 study, Davis, Fernyhough and Meins, analyzed the relationship between a child's private speech and their imaginary companions. The study used data from 148 children, all 5-years-old. Each child was observed in a free play session with his or her mother for 90 minutes to assess their private speech. "Anecdotally, several examples of covert private speech in children with imaginary companions were clearly dialogic in nature, and one child was observed to have a one-way covert 'conversation,' complete with facial expressions and hand gestures, with an imaginary being" (Davis et al., 2013, p. 566). In the study, the children with an imaginary companion engaged in private "conversations," demonstrating an early form of private speech than the children without imaginary companions. Some children conversed with their imaginary friends internally in their minds. The internal conversation is a demonstration of internal private speech. "The results of the current study suggest that having an imaginary companion is associated with greater internalization of private speech" (569). The children who had imaginary companions appeared to engage more in private speech compared with children who did not have an imaginary companion. The children who are in "conversation" with their imaginary companion are conversing with themselves. When there is a problem and the child turned to his or her imaginary companion for help or guidance, the

advice is coming internally, making such private speech helpful to children learning to solve problems on their own. Using imaginary companions, children demonstrate their first signs of private speech.

To determine how children are affected by their imaginary interactions later in life, a study was done with university students to analyze how having an imaginary companion affected them. Cheek and Gleason (2003) asked 102 female college students aged 18-21 years old to describe their experiences in their current life after childhood interactions with their imaginary companions. They were asked about their focus in classes, how vivid their interactions were with their imaginary companion, and how well they remembered their companions. From the results of this study, there were few significant differences between the two groups. The group that had imaginary companions had higher scores of self-consciousness, more frequent use of imagination skills and more vivid dreams at night. “High-vividness participants, who reported seeing and hearing their companions and believing they were real, had significantly higher imaginative involvement than did either low vividness participants or women who had not had imaginary companions as children” (Cheek & Gleason, 2003, p. 725). The students who were highly involved with their imaginary companions were more involved in using their imagination in their daily life. Applying visual ideas to conceptual learning helped students in understanding their lessons, acting as a mediator. “The strength of this difference appears to be moderate in childhood but to either increase with development or be stronger in adults, especially women, who remember their childhood companions” (731). As the children with highly vivid imaginary interactions grew older, their imaginative abilities grew stronger. The children who had imaginary companions in their childhood did not experience any significantly negative effects and only grew to be more creative and imaginative than their peers.

Having an imaginary companion was thought to negatively affect a child. Imaginary companions were thought to give children a false perception of reality and make children too dependent on their imagination (Diachenko, 2011). From previous studies, these claims were demonstrated to be false. The children in Carlson et al.'s (1993) study, were insistent that their imaginary companions were real. The children could have had trouble differentiating their reality with imagination due to their young age. The children at the young age with imaginary companions are still in the egocentric stage and cannot understand that people do not have the same perspective they have. With older children, Bouldin and Pratt's 2001 analysis of children with imaginary companions, demonstrated that children with imaginary companions have a strong desire for their imagination to be real. Communicating with an imaginary companion has a beneficial effect for children. Davis et al. (2013) found that children with imaginary companions develop private speech more quickly than children without an imaginary companion. The development of private speech indicates that the children are becoming more independent thinking to themselves when communicating with their imaginary companion. From Cheek and Gleason's 2003 study of university students who had imaginary companions as children, the participants were not negatively affected. For the effects of imaginary companions, the participants grew to be more creative and daydream more in their everyday life (Cheek & Gleason, 2003). Imaginary companions do not have any significantly negative effects on children. The beneficial effects of having an imaginary companion are children having higher imaginative and creative abilities and more independence using private speech to communicate thoughts to problem solve on their own.

Imaginary Companions in Other Regions of the World

When focusing on one ethnicity of children, their view of play and creativity may be different than it is in diverse countries such as the United States and United Kingdom. This section explores the studies done in Eastern Asian cultures and their perspective of imaginary companions.

Japan

Moriguchi and Todo conducted a study in 2019 to see how prevalent imaginary companions were among Japanese children since most imaginary companion research is conducted in the United States. The participants of this study were 800 children aged between 2-9 years old and their parents. Children and their parents were asked to complete an online questionnaire describing the child's experience with the imaginary companion and how often the child engages in fantasy play. Children were asked to specify if their imaginary companion was a personified object or an invisible friend. From the results of this study, imaginary companions appear to be rare in Japanese children. More children (350) had personified objects as imaginary companions than invisible friends. There was a trend in the age children had their imaginary companions. "That is, the proportion of children who had an IC increased between 2 and 4 years of age, but after 4 years of age, the proportion linearly decreased until 9 years of age" (Moriguchi & Todo, 2019, p. 273). After the age of 4, the Japanese children begin to outgrow their imaginary companion, and it becomes rare for a child to have an imaginary companion at the age of 9. A result inconsistent from other studies was the relationship between birth order and having an imaginary companion. From this study, Japanese children were shown to have imaginary companions, but they were more likely to have a personified object to be their imaginary companion than an invisible friend.

China

One of the main benefits of imaginary companions for children is to have a companion available to practice social competence. In 2018, Fu et al. did a replication study of Gleason's 2000 study analyzing the peer relationship and social competence of children with imaginary companions. Focusing on a group of Chinese children aged between 5 and 6 years old, this study analyzed the relationship between a child and his or her imaginary companion. The relationship between children and personified objects was also analyzed for being a hierarchical or egalitarian relationship. Children and their parents were interviewed to provide information on the child's imaginary companion. From the 160 participants in the study, 55 children had imaginary companions. The personified object imaginary companions were more prevalent in the children than invisible friends (Fu et al., 2018). The results of this study did not support Gleason's (2000) results that children with imaginary companions were more socially competent than those without. Fu et al. found no difference in social competence between children with imaginary companions and children without. There was also no significant difference in social competence between the children with personified objects and the children with invisible friends. The authors believed limitation of this study was the low prevalence of children with imaginary companions compared to the other studies with a larger sample size to derive more significant results from.

To review the findings of previous studies, Fu, Lin, and Zhou conducted a study in 2020 to compare the results of the previously done studies with young Chinese children. There were four investigations analyzed. The first was the relationship between gender and imaginary companions, with girls being more likely to have an IC. The second was the relationship between birth order and ICs, with first-born children being more likely to having imaginary companions. The third was whether a household with a higher annual income would have a child engage more with an imaginary companion. The fourth investigation was whether the relationship the child

has with their imaginary companion is hierarchal or egalitarian. The hypothesis for the fourth investigation was that type of IC did not affect the kind of relationship the child has with the IC. From a questionnaire analysis, 266 children with ages ranging from 4-6 years old participated in the study with their mothers. The children were asked if they had imaginary companions and what the relationship was like. Mothers were asked about the children having imaginary companions and what kind of relationship the child had with their companion. From the outcome of this analysis, not all results from previous studies supported the researchers' hypotheses. The first hypothesis, addressing the relationship between gender and prevalence of imaginary companions, was supported. Girls were more likely to have an imaginary companion than boys were. Boys were more likely to impersonate characters during imaginary play, supporting Carlson and Taylor's 2005 study about the gender differences in imaginary play. The third hypothesis supported households with a higher annual income were more likely to have a child that engaged with an imaginary companion. "As mentioned in the introduction, we anticipated that children from households with higher annual incomes may have access to more toys, picture books, animated movies, and other materials to stimulate their imagination; thus, they would be more likely to engage in IC play" (Fu et al., 2020, p. 7). Due to a higher annual household income, such household can afford various types of media and activities that can fuel creativity in a child, allowing the child to have the creative abilities to develop an imaginary companion. With respect to the fourth hypothesis of this study, the type of IC did not determine if the child had a hierarchal nor egalitarian relationship. Although not significant enough to reject the hypothesis, some of the children in the 5-year old group had a hierarchal relationship with a personified object and an egalitarian relationship when they had an imaginary friend. "Thus, we speculate that a weak link may exist between POs [personified objects] and hierarchical

relationships, and between IFs [imaginary friends] and egalitarian relationships” (5). The link between a child and their imaginary companion may be egalitarian because the child can view their friend as an equal unlike having a personified object where the child can see their PO as an object. The one hypothesis that was not supported in this study was the idea that first-born children were more likely to have an imaginary companion. This was an inconsistent finding compared to the results in Bouldin and Pratt’s 1999 study defining an imaginary companion. However, this lack of relationship between birth order and having an imaginary companion supports Moriguchi and Todo’s 2018 study analyzing the prevalence of imaginary companions in Japanese children. With this replication study, children of Chinese and Western cultures seem to have similarities when it comes to imaginary play.

In Summary

Although not as frequent as Western cultures, children in the East Asian cultures do use imaginary companions. The children in the Eastern Asian cultures were more likely to have a personified object as their imaginary companion than an invisible friend (Moriguchi & Todo, 2019, Fu et al. 2020). The Japanese study of imaginary companions conducted by Moriguchi and Todo (2019) discovered little prevalence in invisible friends and children using their imagination were more likely to create a personified object. By the age of 4, most of the children have outgrown their imaginary companion (Moriguchi & Todo, 2019). In China, Fu et al. (2018) analyzed the social competency of children with an imaginary companion. The researchers wanted to compare their results with Gleason’s (2000) study determining that children with imaginary companions were more socially competent than those without. From the results of the study, there were no significant differences in social competency between children with imaginary companions and those without (Fu et al. 2018). In a later study conducted by Fu et al.

(2020) compared children that had imaginary companions with children from America. Parallel to the American studies, most of the children who created imaginary companions were girls and children who lived in households with a higher income. Unlike the American participants, in China, there was no relationship between birth order and likelihood of having an imaginary companion (Fu et al., 2020). When analyzing the type of relationship between the child and the imaginary companion, children with a personified object were more likely to have an egalitarian relationship than a hierarchal one. Although there is little prevalence in imaginary companions in Eastern Asian cultures, some children did create personified objects as their companions. This might be from the cultural differences between the Eastern Asian and American values.

The Adult Response to Imaginary Companions:

When it comes to imaginary companions, parents have different processes that they apply in working with their child and their companion for the best outcome. Some parents tend to express negative attitudes towards imaginary companions. These negative attitudes are often attributed to children spending more time with their imaginary companion than with their real-life peers and accommodating the imaginary companion into their routines. Most parents advocated for the imaginary companion, seeing it as boosting the creativity in their child.

Baines and Majors (2017) analyzed the relationship between children and imaginary companions. They also analyzed the attitudes that children's parents had towards their imaginary companions. The conducted study was done through a questionnaire and asked the children about their companions' gender, form, and purpose. Results of this study showed that most children who had imaginary companions were the first-born child of a family or an only-child and the average age for a child to develop an imaginary friend was 2.80 years-old. The responses

of the parents' attitudes towards the imaginary companions of children were mixed. A negative attitude towards the imaginary companions is how the parents must change their lives to accommodate an imaginary companion. "Several parents commented, for example, that it could be time-consuming and frustrating when the parents were in a rush and the imaginary friend had to be strapped into the car seat" (Baines & Majors, 2017, p. 48). Due to the child being the only one who interacts with an imaginary companion, parents are unaware of the needs of the imaginary companion unless the child tells them what demands need to be met for their invisible friend. The unknown adaptation parents must make for their child's imaginary companion adds more stress to the parents' lives and causes disliking towards the concept of imaginary companions. For the parents who support the idea of imaginary companions, there were many reasons for them to entertain the idea of their child's companions. "Parents perceived their child's ICs to primarily support fantasy play, provide supplementary friends and playmates and also to help children make sense of and cope with events and feelings in their lives" (50). Parents who support imaginary companions perceive imaginary companions as a way for their child to express inner thoughts and feelings in a creative outlet. From analyzing the functions of a child's imaginary friends, the core actions ICs provide to children is the reason why parents advocate for them. "The principal components analysis identified what appeared to be five distinct purposes ranging from the IC acting to enable problem-solving and the management of emotion, to enable the exploration of ideals as a companion to overcome times of loneliness and to allow children to explore behaviours and roles" (53). When parents find themselves busy and unable to attend to their child's need for a playmate, the imaginary companion comes in to entertain the child. Parents advocating for their child to have an imaginary companion also see the creative benefits of their child engaging in fantasy play. They believed children who expand their creative abilities

develop in a healthy balance between independence and dependence. Although there are many benefits to a child having an imaginary companion, some parents still think of the need to adapt their lifestyles to accommodate both their child and the imaginary companion.

Gender has influence on how parents raise their children. The parental reaction to a child's imaginary figments may also be influenced by gender. Gleason conducted a study in 2005 to focus on the attitudes of parents towards their child's fantasy play with imaginary companions. Gleason hypothesized that the attitudes parents had towards imaginary companions was dependent on the gender of the child, the gender of the parent and if the child of these parents had an imaginary companion. Gleason hypothesized that parents were more open to the idea of imaginary companions if their child was a female with an imaginary companion. "The authors postulated that mothers deliberately participate in pretense to encourage it because they believe pretense is educational and beneficial to development" (Gleason, 2005, p. 415). It was also hypothesized that mothers would be more open to the idea of imaginary companions than fathers. Parents were asked to complete a survey explored their attitudes towards imaginary companions and the type of environment they provide for their child to play in. From the survey, parents who had daughters were more open to the idea of their child having an imaginary companion. Parents who had sons admitted they would be more open to their child having an imaginary companion if their child were female. This result signifies that parental attitudes can be dependent upon the gender of their child. There is more preference to a girl having an imaginary companion than a boy having an imaginary companion due to creative play being associated with girls. This demonstrates a concept of girls being more socially acceptable for having imaginary companions than for boys.

The gender of the parent can also be the reason for the various reactions parents give to their child's imaginary play. Continuing from the results of Gleason's 2005 study, mothers had a more positive attitude about children playing with imaginary companions than fathers, confirming one of the hypotheses in the study that women are more supportive of imaginary play than men. However, it seemed that mothers were more likely to support the imaginary play when they had a supporting partner than the mother without a supporting partner who put limits to their child's imaginary play. The peers of the child will also play an influence on the attitude of the parents. "If these children are indeed engaging in more intense pretend play than their peers, then mothers may wish to curb such behavior in formal situations" (Gleason, 2005, p. 425). Mothers are influenced by the social environment of their child and will adjust their child to follow similar behavior as their peers, comparing the interactions of their child with others. That fathers support imaginary companions in their children did not limit the time children spent with imaginary play. Another significant result is the attitudes parents had towards imaginary companions is also dependent on the gender of the child.

The lack of prevalence of imaginary companions from children may be from the upbringing received by their parents. From Moriguchi and Todo's "Prevalence of imaginary companions in Japanese children" (2019), noted that there was little prevalence of imaginary companions in children. Through a meta-analysis interviewing parents, Japanese parents did not have a problem with pretend play. "However, the Japanese parents may be specifically negative about IFs and, therefore, *sic* the proportion of IFs in the Japanese children may be lower than the proportion in the Western children" (Moriguchi & Todo, 2019, p. 474). Although Japanese parents support their children participating in imaginary play, they have negative views towards imaginary companions. The negative views could discourage Japanese children from creating

imaginary companions. The cultural differences in raising a child could also play a role in the low prevalence of imaginary companions. “In Japan, infants and young children co-sleep with their parents, mostly with mothers” (474). One of the reasons children create imaginary companion is to cope with loneliness. In Japan, the children get to spend a lot of time with their parents. The level of comfort in having another person gives a child dependency on that parent to be a comforting factor with a strong parental relationship. The child has no need to create an imaginary companion when there is a strong relationship with the parent. This analysis can indicate that there is a difference in attitudes parents have towards imaginary companions depending on cultural background.

Parents have mixed opinions about children having imaginary companions. In the study conducted by Baines and Majors (2017), parents with negative attitudes expressed annoyance in accommodating an imaginary companion into their everyday lives. The constant frustration of working their lives for the imaginary companion created negative feelings towards the imaginary companions. Most parents from the study did have positive attitudes toward imaginary companions. Parents can see their imaginary companions as a way for their child to develop more creatively. Children who create imaginary companions also provide themselves with a playmate and the parent does not have to set aside the time to get involved. Gender also has a role in the attitude parents have towards imaginary companions. From Gleason’s 2005 study, mothers were more likely to support imaginary companions than fathers. However, mothers would restrict the play time children had with their imaginary companions dependent if they were in a public setting or not. Fathers would not restrict children’s play time regardless of environment. The attitudes people have towards imagination can also be dependent on the person’s culture. Japanese children are less likely to have an imaginary companion than children

from a Western culture. Moriguchi and Todo's (2019) study suggested that the difference in upbringing influences the child having an imaginary companion. Parents in Japan create a stronger bond with their child from their methods in child rearing by bed sharing and helping children overcome loneliness. Japanese parents were found to support their children participating in imaginary play, but they do not support their child having an imaginary companion. There were no reasons given why. Parental opinion and support do have a role in the child having an imaginary companion, but the thoughts of a caregiver are affected by many factors.

Conclusion-

Some children have imaginary companions, a make-believe character to interact with every day. To some people, having an imaginary companion is "weird" or "embarrassing." Children do not see that when they use their imaginary companions. Imaginary companions provide children with understanding about themselves, other people, and how to widen their creative capabilities. After my analysis, imaginary companions have a positive outlook from most parents and benefit children.

From previous perspectives, the imagination was defined to be a gateway into the thoughts and development of the child. In the psychoanalytical perspective by Sigmund Freud, the imagination was regarded as method to identify problems and fulfill desires. Imaginary companions were the key to learn how children process their experiences and express their needs. Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, children use the imagination to learn new skills in a personal environment created by them. The sociocultural perspective created by Lev Vygotsky believed that the imaginary companion was a method to learn new skills

independently. Children with the imaginary companion are learning on the interpersonal plane and can develop their thought processes by using private speech to guide themselves through challenges.

From the general overview of imaginary companions, children most likely to create them are girls and first-born children. (Moriguchi & Todo, 2018). Imaginary companions are “born” to have similarities to their creator. Children are more likely to create their imaginary companion that are the same gender as their creator. Most imaginary companions are also humans, not a fantasy or mythical creature (Baines & Majors, 2017). Children are creating a relatable character to interact with as their imaginary companion. Most of the children that create an imaginary companion are first-born children who need a companion to cope with loneliness. As an imaginary companion, children can create the ideal friend for themselves.

Imaginary companions also demonstrate the gender differences in children. Girls were found to be more likely to create an imaginary companion than boys. There is also a difference in how children play with their imaginary companions found by Coetzee and Shute (2003). Girls will create a less competent imaginary companion for the purpose of having someone to nurture. Boys will create an imaginary companion that could be stronger or weaker than them to have someone to physically compete against. In Carlson and Taylor’s (2005) study, children use imaginative skills differently depending on their gender. Girls were more likely to create an imaginary companion while boys were more likely to impersonate a desired character. This indicates that girls could have more interpersonal skills and boys more likely had intrapersonal skills.

Although an imaginary companion does not exist, they can be real to the child. Children can create strong relationships with their imaginary companions. The relationships children have

with their imaginary companion are positive. Some relationships between an imaginary companion and a child are negative (McInnis, 2012). The stronger the relationship a child has with their imaginary companion, the harder it can be for the child to let their imaginary companion go (Fox & Kastenbaum, 2007). Children with strong relationships with their imaginary companion create narratives and stories to explain the absence of their imaginary companion. Since the imaginary companion gave the child a “real” emotional connection, children create a story to sever the connection with the imaginary companion as they grew older.

Some people believe there are negative effects on a child from having an imaginary companion. This is not true. After analyzing a child’s competency between reality and imagination, children were found to desire their imaginary companion, but do not believe their companion is real (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001). More positive effects have been found for imaginary companions than negative. People who have grown out of having an imaginary companion use their creative abilities to grasp concepts better in learning (Gleason, 2017). There are multiple benefits of having imaginary companions. Children mainly use their imaginary companion as means to cope with external stressors or loneliness. Other children use their imaginary companion as an extension of their personality (Hoff, 2004).

Imaginary companions are found mostly in Western cultures. From other regions of the world, there are differences about having imaginary companions. Imaginary companions are not as prevalent in Asian cultures. Children who do have an imaginary companion in countries such as Japan and China were more likely to create a personified object than an invisible friend. There is disapproval of imaginary companions in Japanese cultures (Moriguchi & Todo, 2019).

Parents have differing attitudes about imaginary companions. Some parents find having an imaginary companion as a good opportunity for their child to develop more creatively and independently. Those that dislike their child having an imaginary companion found frustration to accommodate the needs of the companion (Baines & Major, 2017). Mothers were more likely than fathers to support imaginative play for their child but will restrict the child when in a public setting (Gleason, 2005). There may be a gender difference for parents that affects the attitude parents can have for imaginary companions.

The subject of imaginary companions is moderately new to the field of psychological research. There is still more to discover. More research can be done in analyzing the forms of the imaginary companions. With the quick progression of technology in a child's life, does that affect the form the imaginary companion takes? Not many children create imaginary companions that are fantasy creatures or animals. Another area of research is how children react to their parents' attitudes towards their imaginary companions. Children may also be discouraged from making an imaginary companion from negative attitudes displayed by their parents. What if a child needs their imaginary companion to cope with loneliness and other stressors, but is afraid to create one because of the disapproval of their environment? What else is there to explore with these figments of the mind? The world of imaginary companions is only as big as your imagination.

After getting to know the child's imaginary companion, you have gained more understanding towards the invisible friend. It was not odd for the child to pretend to talk to an invisible friend. The friend understands the child perfectly and is always willing to play. You thank the child for introducing you to this wonderful friend of theirs. You leave the room and let

the child and friend continue their fun games. You smile because you know the child is happy with the perfect friend.

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