
“HE MADE ME SPECIAL”: IMAGINARY COMPANIONS, FUNCTIONS AND PARENTAL ATTITUDES¹

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ABSTRACT. Imaginary companions are one especially elaborated form of pretend play, so frequent in their creators' daily lives that they can actually serve the function of keeping them company. The characteristics of these types of fantasy creations, as well as their possible functions, were investigated in a sample of 18 children between 6 and 7 years of age ($M = 85$ months, $SD = 4,82$; range = 76 – 94 months; 10 girls e 8 boys) who had imaginary companions. These children participated in a larger study that aimed at comparing sociocognitive and language development in children with ($n = 18$) and without imaginary companions ($n = 22$). In order to investigate parental attitudes toward the phenomenon, parents/caretakers of children (from both groups) from the first study were invited to participate, and 11 (10 mothers and 1 grandmother) accepted the invitation. The reported characteristics of imaginary companions were diverse (i.e., physical appearance, type, age, for how long they have been friends), and their functions were associated with different needs, such as company, fun or emotional comfort. Whereas the majority of parents associated the phenomenon with an exercise of imagination, some believed the experience could be indicative of problems, for example, a loss of contact with reality or the influence of evil entities. The findings of the present research are consistent with international studies on imaginary companions. We hope these results may contribute to advancing this line of investigation in Brazil.

Keywords: Imaginary friend; pretend play; parental attitudes.

“ELE ME DEIXAVA ESPECIAL”: AMIGOS IMAGINÁRIOS, SUAS FUNÇÕES E ATITUDES PARENTAIS

RESUMO. Os amigos imaginários são uma forma elaborada de faz de conta, tão presentes no cotidiano de seus criadores que eles podem, inclusive, assumir a função de companhia. As características dessas criações de fantasia, assim como as suas possíveis funções, foram investigadas em uma amostra de 18 crianças entre seis e sete anos ($M = 85$ meses, $DP = 4,82$; variação = 76 – 94 meses; 10 meninas e 8 meninos) que possuíam amigos imaginários. Essas crianças foram participantes de um estudo mais abrangente que comparou o desenvolvimento sociocognitivo e da linguagem de crianças com ($n = 18$) e sem amigos imaginários ($n = 22$). A fim de investigar as atitudes parentais em relação ao fenômeno, os responsáveis pelos participantes (de ambos os grupos) do primeiro estudo foram convidados a participar, sendo que 11 (10 mães e 1 avó) aceitaram o convite. As características reportadas dos amigos imaginários foram diversas (i.e., aparência física, tipo, idade, há quanto tempo são amigos) e as suas funções estavam associadas a diferentes necessidades, como companhia, diversão ou conforto emocional. Embora a maioria dos responsáveis tenha associado o fenômeno ao exercício da imaginação, alguns acreditavam que a experiência poderia representar

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problemas, como, por exemplo, a perda de contato com a realidade, ou a influência de entidades maléficas. Os achados da presente pesquisa são consistentes com os estudos internacionais. Espera-se que esses resultados possam contribuir para o avanço dessa linha de investigação no país.

Palavras-chave: Amigo imaginário; brincar de faz de conta; atitudes dos pais.

“ÉL ME HACÍA ESPECIAL”: AMIGOS IMAGINARIOS, FUNCIONES Y ACTITUDES PARENTALES

RESUMEN. Los amigos imaginarios son una forma elaborada de hacer de cuenta, tan presentes en la vida cotidiana de sus creadores, que ellos pueden, incluso, asumir la función de hacer compañía. Las características de esas creaciones de fantasía, así como sus posibles funciones, fueron investigadas en una muestra de 18 niños entre 6 y 7 años ($M = 85$ meses; $DP = 4,82$; variación = 76 – 94 meses; 10 niñas y 8 niños) que poseían amigos imaginarios. Estos niños eran participantes de un estudio más amplio que pretendía comparar el desarrollo socio-cognitivo y del lenguaje de niños con ($n = 18$) y sin amigos imaginarios ($n = 22$). Para investigar las actitudes parentales con relación al fenómeno, los responsables de los participantes (de ambos grupos) del primer estudio fueron invitados a participar, siendo que 11 (10 madres y una abuela), aceptaron la invitación. Las características informadas de los amigos imaginarios fueron diversas (i.e., apariencia física, tipo, edad, cuánto tiempo son amigos) y sus funciones estaban asociadas a diferentes necesidades, como compañía, diversión o bienestar emocional. Aunque la mayoría de los responsables haya asociado el fenómeno al ejercicio de la imaginación, algunos creían que la experiencia podría representar problemas, como, por ejemplo, la pérdida de contacto con la realidad, o la influencia de entidades maléficas. Los resultados de la presente investigación son consistentes con los estudios internacionales. Se espera que estos resultados puedan contribuir para el avance de esta línea de investigación en el país.

Palabras-clave: Amigo imaginario; hacer de cuenta; actitudes parentales.

Introduction

The first manifestations of symbolic or pretend play can be observed in children as early as at 18 months of age. During this type of play, children manifest their knowledge about the world around them, and, although they may not represent reality accurately, they are able to create coherent scripts, which present causal relationships in their fictional structure (Harris, 2000). In the literature, pretend play has been associated with several advantages in child development, as in perspective taking, empathy, emotion regulation, and language (for a review, see Lillard et al., 2013).

Role play, in particular, can be defined as a type of pretend play, during which the child temporarily expresses through action the role of another person, animal or invented entity. It is impressive as it leads children to get involved with the pretend character to the extent that they are able to express the most adequate emotions and needs to this other entity/person (Harris, 2000). In the rich universe of role play, imaginary companions (ICs) are an especially elaborated, vivid, and lasting form of fantasy, that is, stable identities who participate in the daily lives of their creators, and who may even become companions. There are two types of IC: the invisible one, who does not need any type of physical support, and the projected one, which is based on real objects, as special toys (Harris, 2000; Mottweiler & Taylor, 2014; Taylor, 1999).

Functions of Imaginary Companions

Descriptions of ICs provided by children may represent an important source of information for the study of self-development, and they may also help unravel the main functions of this type of fantasy (Harter & Chao, 1992; Hoff, 2005b). ICs may take up a similar role as children's real friends, generating care initiatives and attention toward them (Gleason, 2002). In fact, an important function of this type of pretend play is being a source of company and of emotional support (Hoff, 2005a; Taylor, 1999).

More recent research on the phenomenon has yielded different results from those previously predicted for IC creators. For example, the stereotype of a lonely child, who is not accepted by peers,

has been challenged by Gleason's (2004) findings, which suggest that children who have pretend company may have as many real friends as those who do not engage in this type of fantasy. Other evidence has revealed that such children, in contrast to their peers with no imaginary companions, are more likely to highlight mental characteristics when describing their best friends (Davis, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2014). These results suggest that children who engage in this sophisticated type of pretend play tend to be sociable individuals, with a particular interest in social interactions, which is reflected in their symbolic play. When there is nobody around, they create an imaginary companion (Taylor, Shawber, & Mannering, 2009).

The creation of an IC can also represent an adaptive response from a child who is facing difficulties in life, given that fantasy allows her to cope with emotional problems, and in particular with fears (Taylor, 1999). There is further evidence suggesting that the creation of imaginary companions may function as a resilience mechanism. For example, Taylor, Hulette and Dishion (2010) conducted one study with 12-year-old children at risk. Participants included 13 children who had an IC at the time. Although these children presented low preference for peers and were rated as more problematic by their parents, they presented more positive coping strategies, and, at the age of 18, the majority of them (72.7%) presented a positive developmental outcome, which was the case of only part (27.5%) of the group of children who did not have an IC.

Other evidence on resilience was provided by an experimental study, conducted with children who lived in a war zone. Sadeh, Hen-Gal, and Tikotzky (2008) examined more specifically the role of IC creation in the reduction of stress symptoms (e.g., anxiety, fear, and excessive crying). Children from that experimental group received a teddy bear, described as lonely and sad, and were, then, encouraged to take care of him. After two months, reports from these children's parents revealed that the experimental group had significantly less symptoms of stress, in contrast to the ones in the control group. The researchers concluded that attachment to the fantasy companion had contributed in an efficient and low-cost manner to an increase in quality of life for these children.

Harter and Chao's (1992) results, in turn, suggest that the main function of an IC is to help children to deal with competence issues, strengthening their perception of domain – and yet the mechanisms used tend to vary according to gender. Boys create ICs who are very competent, gifted physically and cognitively, and popular, whereas girls create ICs who are not very competent, lack several skills, and who need to be taken care of, and be instructed. One possible explanation for such difference is related to the fact that children from early on are sensitive to gender stereotypes.

Gleason and Kalpidou (2014) investigated the effect of IC creation in coping strategies and social competence in 3- to 6-year-old children. Significant and yet modest differences were found in constructive and prosocial strategies, as well as in social competence, favoring children who had egalitarian relationships with their ICs, in contrast to those who did not have an IC or who presented a hierarchical version of the imaginary friendship. Majors (2013) conducted a qualitative study with 5- to 11-year-old children who had an IC. Findings suggest that their creations are a source of friendship and companionship during play, in addition to offering support in the face of adversity. For some children, fantasy may also help coping with unfulfilled wishes, such as having siblings or pets.

Additionally, Hoff's data (2005a) further suggest that pretend companions function primordially as internal mentors who help children in their task of forming an identity. More specifically, this researcher found five main categories associated with ICs: (a) source of comfort and company; (b) self-regulation and motivation support; (c) increase in self-esteem; (d) expansion of personal potential; (e) and finally, increase in quality of life. In sum, ICs can acquire diverse functions for children, which are associated with several benefits and gains in their development.

Parental Attitudes and Imaginary Companions

Taylor (1999) argues that there is great variation in how adults react and interpret children's fantasy activities, and in particular the creation of an IC. In fact, Taylor and Carlson (2000) suggest that although some parents have a very positive view of the phenomenon, including making associations with the development of intelligence and creativity, others have a very negative view towards it. Parents

in this last group fear that the manifestation of the phenomenon may be associated with emotional problems, risk of developing psychological disorders, and difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality.

One of the very few Brazilian studies on the topic investigated the perception of 100 mothers of preschoolers regarding IC creation (Bittencourt & Blanco, 1996). Data from this study suggests that 79% of participating mothers knew what an imaginary companion was, and 42% reported their children had an IC. Of all mothers of children with IC, 83.3% declared having favorable reactions (e.g., encouraging, interacting, and finding it funny), whereas 16.7% reported having a negative or unfavorable reaction towards it (e.g., worrying or being scared). Many mothers reported that they were initially worried about the fact that their children had created an IC, but the feeling changed after they searched for more information regarding this issue. Thus, these researchers concluded that mothers who present a more favorable attitude are those who have more knowledge on the phenomenon of IC.

Following in this direction, Jellesma and Hoffenaar (2013) conducted a study investigating messages about IC in online forums created by parents in English, German and Dutch. Their analysis of posts indicated that half of these parents were worried about this type of fantasy, in particular, when the child was over 4 ½ years of age. Perhaps invisible friends trigger more worry than personified objects, as is evidenced by the number of references to this type of fantasy. These researchers concluded that if these parents could review the literature, they would be able to understand that this fantasy is a frequent and healthy experience in childhood.

Studies conducted in the U.S.A. suggest that the majority of middle-class parents present positive views of IC creation (Taylor & Carlson, 2000). Taylor (1999) suggests that some parents, who have an extremely positive attitude towards IC, may even attempt to introduce the idea of an IC to their children. Although most North-American parents do not go that far, many support them and may even get involved in the pretend play games when they find out their children are engaging in this fantasy,.

Nonetheless, when parents have a negative attitude toward IC creation, it generally occurs in a context in which the phenomenon is considered to be inconvenient for their routine, or inappropriate for school-aged children. However, a few parents, who show an intense negative attitude, seem to have a very distinct perception, associating the IC with something real, for example, with the devil's influence, and with spiritual damage. This view seems to be frequent in some religious communities, such as the Mennonites and Fundamentalist Christians (Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 2000).

Religious beliefs have great influence on parental attitudes toward children's fantasy behaviors, given that what is considered real or fantasy may vary across different religious groups. More specifically, religions differ in their perspectives on the existence of entities, their nature, as well as on the types of possible interactions with spiritual beings. For example, Hindus believe that the invisible friends of children up to the age of 7 are spiritual entities and regard them as positive influences, given that they can even be part of a child's past life (Taylor & Carlson, 2000).

Another relevant aspect that should be considered is how parental attitudes affect children's play behavior. In a longitudinal study, Motoshima, Shinohara, Todo, and Moriguchi (2014) investigated factors that could influence IC creation during preschool. Results suggested that maternal language about mental states at 6 months predicted IC creation, at age 3. The same did not occur for children's temperament. On the other hand, an intrusive maternal style was negatively correlated with the phenomenon, possibly because these mothers did not allow their children to play freely.

In this sense, one could argue that the form pretend play will take, solitary or group play, or how much it will be expressed publicly or privately depends on the cultural perspective of the child's community. For example, there are studies reporting that there are children who engage in pretend play or even IC creation privately, hiding their fantasy from their parents (Taylor & Carlson, 2000), which suggests that parents' attempts to stop such play may not always be effective.

Justification

Research on IC may bring two important contributions: (a) it can lead to a better understanding of the relationship between engagement in fantasy and children's cognitive and emotional development (Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993); and (b) it can reveal its potential value for socioemotional

adaptation extending beyond childhood. In Brazil, pretend play has been widely investigated. However, the number of studies on IC creation is still limited (Velludo, 2014; Velludo & Souza, 2015).

The goals of the present study are: (a) to explore the characteristics of ICs reported by a group of Brazilian children of school age (6- and 7-year-olds), as well as its possible functions or roles in children's lives; (b) to investigate parental attitudes toward the phenomenon. The age range chosen for this study can be justified by the reduced number of studies investigating the phenomenon in school-aged children (Velludo & Souza, 2015) and by the expectation that, at this age, they would be able to produce more elaborate reports.

Method

Participants

The present research is part of a broader study (Velludo, 2014) conducted with 40 children between 6 and 7 years of age, which investigated their sociocognitive and language development which investigated sociocognitive and language development in children with ($n = 18$) and without imaginary companions ($n = 22$). All participating children were recruited from a public state school located in the state of São Paulo. In order to investigate parental attitudes toward the phenomenon, participants' parents (or caretakers) from both groups in this first study were invited to participate. Due to difficulties in scheduling meetings with caretakers, only 10 mothers and one grandmother participated in the present study – other reasons for not having more participants included the lack of contact information, and the unavailability of parents.

The 18 children identified as creators of IC in preschool or later presented reports rich in detail, which were confirmed in a second interview. The mean age of children in this group is 7 years and 1 month ($M = 85$ months, $SD = 4.82$; range = 76 – 94 months; 10 girls e 8 boys) and it included five 6-year-old children ($M = 79$, $SD = 2.70$) and 13 7-year-old children ($M = 87$, $SD = 3.42$). Parents presented consent for their children to participate in the study and children provided verbal assent before data collection started. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universidade Federal de São Carlos.

Instruments

Children's interview. One interview was conducted with each child aiming at assessing children's general engagement in fantasy as well as their IC creation. Firstly, the experimenter asked questions in order to assess their predisposition to engage in imaginative fantasy (Singer, 1961), for example, what the child likes to do when she is alone, or what is her favorite game or play. Subsequent questions assessed children's preferences with regard to four different categories: children's stories, TV shows, toys and group play (Taylor & Carlson, 1997).

Next, the experimenter presented a definition of real friends (e.g., they are made of "flesh and bones", can be seen and touched) in contrast to imaginary friends (e.g., they are made up, "not real"). If the child reported having an imaginary companion, a set of questions was then presented about: (a) their name; (b) gender; (c) age; (d) physical appearance; (e) if it was a toy, or an entirely imaginary creation; (f) where the IC lived and slept; (g) what the child did in his company; (h) what the child liked and did not like about him (Taylor et al., 1993).

Supplementary questions were added, such as a question on what the child talked about with her IC, or who else knew about her special friend. In order to help identifying spontaneous creations during the session, the following questioning procedure was adopted: (a) "Have you ever played or talked with him/her?"; (b) "I'm afraid you're telling me about someone with whom you could or would like to play and talk to, right?".

Caretakers' interview. The script used to interview children's caretakers included: (a) questions about the family and the child, (b) one interview about the IC and (c) one interview about parental

attitudes toward this type of fantasy. Some open questions were made in order to characterize the child's family, play partners, her toys, activities of preference, in addition to investigating whether the child had already presented behavioral or emotional problems, and whether she had already received any psychiatric or psychological treatment (Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wilson, 1973).

In order to assess whether caretakers recognized that their children engaged in IC creation, the experimenter provided a definition of this type of fantasy, and subsequently, she asked whether they could remember any episode during which the child had mentioned having an IC. The same supplementary questions were made to parents who acknowledged their children's IC. Finally, the questions intended to characterize parental attitudes toward the imaginary companion assessed: (a) what the caretaker thought about children's IC creation; (b) if he/she could raise positive aspects or advantages of having an IC; (c) if he/she could raise any negative aspects or disadvantages.

Procedures

As part of a broader study, children were interviewed about their fantasy engagement in two individual sessions. During the second session, questions about their pretend companions were repeated. Meetings occurred in classrooms previously designated by the school's principal, which were well illuminated and had a table and chairs. Sessions lasted an average of 20 minutes and were recorded by an audio recorder and a video camera. Part of caretakers' interviews were conducted in person and part via telephone, and in that case, the experimenter used the speaker option on the telephone, so she could record the audio using the audio recorder.

Coding and reliability. Based on the procedure adopted by Taylor and Carlson (1997), children were classified as creators of imaginary companions if they mentioned the same companion in both interviews. In order to obtain a reliability measure for the analysis of IC functions, a sample of 22% ($n = 4$) of the interviews (audios and/or videos) was coded and analyzed by a second rater and data was compared to that analyzed by the principal investigator. Cohen's Kappa statistics, a measure of interobserver agreement, was calculated and revealed agreement level above chance. More specifically, the value of Cohen's Kappa was 0.56, $p = 0.08$, which is considered moderate (Landis & Koch, 1977). Eventual doubts or disagreements were discussed with the second author of this paper, until consensus was reached.

Results

A descriptive analysis of the interviews conducted with children who had reported having an IC will be presented. In particular, the goal was to examine: (a) the frequency distribution of responses provided by participant, in order to have an initial characterization of IC reports; (b) an analysis of reports focused on IC functions; (c) the frequency distribution of responses provided by caretakers (mother or grandmother) during the interview, in order to have a characterization of parental attitudes toward the phenomenon.

Three children showed some embarrassment or hesitation in reporting they had an IC. However, the feeling did not stop them from providing details of their creations throughout the interview. Other difficulties emerged when the child was interviewed: (a) she could get a real and an imaginary friend confused; (b) she declared that the IC was her favorite character in a TV series or soap opera for children; (c) she declared her IC was a toy; (d) she reported an IC that had just been invented during the interview. In all these different situations, the interview script was effective as it provided sufficient evidence when the report was poorly elaborated, and, thus, it was not representative of the phenomenon being investigated. When necessary, the experimenter would ask control questions.

Who are the imaginary companions?

Amidst the 40 children who participated in the initial sample, 18 participants (45%) were classified in the group of children with imaginary companions. Thirteen participants (72.2%) had created imaginary

companions during school age, three (16.3%) had an IC since preschool, whereas two (15.4%) had stopped having imaginary companions after preschool.

With regard to the number of ICs, most participants (66.6%) reported having had only one up to that moment, whereas 16.6% had three or more friends and 16.6% of the sample had created companions who never reoccurred. For example, Helena (all participants are presented with fictitious names), 7-years-old, said she created every day at least two new ICs, who widely varied in characteristics.

The majority of creations (88.9%) were invisible friends, given that there were only two friends who were projected into toys. Vitor's ICs (6 ½ -years-old) were his super heroes action figures who, according to him, "were like his brothers" – although he does not have any real brothers. Mateus' (6 years and 4 months) imaginary companion, in turn, Lantern-Spider, was projected into a wrist lantern, which was similar to the device that transforms character Ben 10 in creatures with super powers. He told the experimenter that, depending on his own will, his creation could transform himself into either Green Lantern or Spiderman.

Of all ICs, 72.2% were human, whereas 22.2% were action figures (cartoon/comics characters or superheroes) and one (5.5%) was a cat. The gender of imaginary companions tended to be the same as that of their creators, except for Luciana (7 ½- years-old), whose IC was a pretend brother. The majority of children (66.6%) invented their creations entirely; two were based on real persons, and another was a fantasy version of an artist (i.e., Lady Gaga). Three creations were inspired in cartoons or comics, like Tiago's (7 years and 3 months) friend, who is a modified version of the character *Franjinha*, from *Turma da Mônica*.

The Functions of Imaginary Companions

Participants' reports provided insights into the functions ICs can take for their creators. In the case of those participants whose caretakers were interviewed, it was especially interesting to cross reports in order to gather more clues about which roles were attributed to their fantasy creation in children's lives. In all situations, imaginary companions are depicted in reports as a source of company and fun, when the child is alone, or when she would like to have someone to watch television with, talk to or play with. In general, all children's descriptions revealed that their pretend companions were friendly, although seven children reported different negative characteristics, such as: (a) complaining and refusing to play; (b) using swear words; (c) hitting others; (d) cheating in a game; (e) ruining something; (f) being mean; (g) getting irritated and contradicting.

The function of emotional comfort was present in four (22.2%) reports, given that the IC shows up when the child is sad, as Mateus reports: "When I cry, I put him on my back". Dealing with fears was present in the report of two children (11.1%), explicitly or implicitly. For example, Mateus reports: "I am afraid of the dark, so I have my own lantern" – when referring IC prop (support object).

Pedro's report (7 years and 10 months) and his mother's complemented each other, suggesting the function of dealing with fears and bullying at school (insults and physical aggression). The participant's mother, Beatriz, reported that two teachers had advised her to take her son to psychotherapy, given that he was very insecure and because he had had an episode of uncontrollable crying in the classroom. The fantasy created by Pedro included three ICs with different versions of his own name: Pedrinho [Little Pedro] (the fearsome or "wooz"), Pedrão [Big Pedro] (very brave and strong) and Pedro Tron (very smart). The play included some "running" (as defined by him), during which one IC tried to beat another, at the same time he tried to run away from the others. The only thing he did not like in his creations is when one effectively starts to hit another, and he puts an end to it immediately.

The function of bargaining was present in the report of two children (11.1%), that is: whereas one uses his IC to convince his dad to let him play with videogame, the other takes advantage of the fact that his sister is afraid of his creations to push her away, when he wants. Attribution of guilt for wrong doing to the imaginary friend was reported by Bernardo (7 years and 1 month). Fulfilling the wish of having siblings was present in the report of three participants (16.6%). Vitor's report is suggestive: "I am sad sometimes because I don't have a brother", "my action figures ... are like brothers; they are very cool!".

The internalization of parents' opinions was presented as a function only in Tiago's report, in which he said he used to punish his IC when he used swear words. According to his mother, he is very sensitive to criticism and always cries when he is reprimanded. The function of dealing with issues of adequacy and competence was evidenced in Tiago's and in other two children's reports (16.6%). In Tiago's case, his IC had many skills, such as reading and speaking fast, besides jumping from and reaching high places he could not reach himself. Similarly, Pedro reported having very competent companions, but one was fearful and not very competent. Finally, Iris (7 years and 4 months) said she used to read to her imaginary friends, even before she could read, and that she would put them to sleep every night – something her mother did.

Imaginary Companions: Sharing or Hiding?

Of all participants, seven children (38.8%) declared they had never told anyone about their imaginary companions, whereas the remaining nine (61.2%) had told at least one person, more specifically, a family member. With respect to how the person reacted when the child mentioned the imaginary friend: (a) five children said the family members' reaction was positive, some even interacting with the IC; (b) one said the relative laughed; (c) another reaction was neutral; (d) another reaction was mixed: the father pretended to kill the IC with a knife, but the mother offered a handshake so they could be friends; (e) the remaining three did not inform the type of reaction. Several children seemed to fear that other individuals, either from family or school, would eventually find out they played with an IC. One of them asked the experimenter directly not to tell anyone she had a pretend friend.

Parental Reports and Attitudes Toward Imaginary Companions

Eleven caretakers were interviewed, 10 mothers and one grandmother. Seven caretakers said their respective children and grandson did not have an IC, whereas four said they were unsure, saying it was possible their children had one. There was correspondence between parental and children's reports in five cases, in which children did not have imaginary companions. In two cases, mothers were unaware their children had an IC. In the case of one participant, his creation (a duck) was reported only during the second interview, which did not meet the criterion of imaginary friendship used in the present research.

Finally, in three cases of mothers showing doubt, children had, in fact, reported having pretend company. Although the mothers of two children believed it was possible, given that children engaged in pretend play and talked to themselves, Tiago's mother thought her son's report about the IC could be a result of being invited to participate in the study.

All of the interviewed caretakers declared they were familiar with the idea of imaginary companions. Some mothers said they did not have an opinion on the matter for lack of knowledge. The remaining caretakers' responses varied a lot, from possible explanations of the phenomenon to emphasizing positive and negative aspects. Questions about the positive and negative aspects of ICs provided evidence on parents' attitudes toward the phenomenon. Four caretakers presented a clearly positive attitude, given they did not believe there were disadvantages, only listing positive aspects, such as the child expressing herself via imagination. The other two caretakers mentioned as a possible negative outcome the fantasy generating isolation. However, many advantages were listed: (a) filling a void; (b) developing imagination, in addition to calm and attention.

Finally, four mothers presented clearly negative attitudes toward the phenomenon of IC creation. Two of them declared they only found disadvantages: the influence of evil spirits, for one, and the child's fixation on the companion, situation during which the child only speaks and thinks about the IC – according to what she saw in a movie. The remaining two mothers presented similar arguments.

One of the mothers, Julia, said IC creation is a result of the influence of bad things on the child, but added it could also be a protective spirit. She declared she did not have an IC during childhood, because her mother was very present, and said her son did not have one either. In her opinion, if parents fail to provide enough attention and to talk to their son, the child can be exposed to such influence. As an adept of Spiritism, Julia believes an IC can be a child's protector. She emphasizes,

however, the negative aspect of the experience when she reports two cases of what she considers to be example of evil influences, treating as ICs as spirits.

Paula is also afraid of spirits' influence, and dislikes the child's fixation on the IC and the lack of contact with reality. Her attitude toward lasting fantasies seems to be a result of her experience as a mother of children who engage in IC creations (the daughter, from 3 to 7 years of age) and in personification (in preschool, her son said he was Spiderman). The oldest daughter's fantasy led to embarrassing social situations and criticism from family members, especially when the son got seriously hurt trying to climb up some furniture. The parents' attempts to repress led to rebellious behavior. At the end of preschool, he stopped personifying and eventually lost the exclusive interest in the character. Paul was unsure whether the phenomenon was a manifestation of fantasy or spirits.

In sum, nine out of 11 parents were able to list positive aspects or advantages associated with the creation of imaginary creations, whereas seven raised possible disadvantages or negative points. In fact, as this is a peculiar expression of fantasy, the creation of imaginary companions seems to trigger very different parental attitudes.

Discussion

The data collected with Brazilian children seem to confirm findings from the international literature that the creation of imaginary companions is not limited to early childhood and is a frequent phenomenon during school age (e.g., Hoff, 2005a; Majors, 2013). Children who have ICs seem to be willing to report on their fantasy companions and even to interact with them in the experimental context, as can be observed in the Taylor et al.'s study (1993). However, children don't seem to feel encouraged to report they have ICs to those around them. When they choose to tell, they share it with someone they trust. A possible explanation is that pretend play is discouraged after preschool (Taylor & Carlson, 2000), and children become aware of negative attitudes toward pretend play as they realize the reactions of their spectators (Taylor, 1999).

The Nature and Function of Imaginary Companions

The nature of children's IC creations was very diverse. This fact seems to corroborate data from the international literature suggesting there is no typical IC (Taylor, Carlson, & Shawber, 2008). The content of descriptions provided by children is a source of relevant information, given that such fantasies are created as they like and to serve their specific needs (Harter & Chao, 1992; Taylor et al., 2008). Therefore, these descriptions can offer important clues on the possible functions of such fantasy (Hoff, 2005a).

For all children, ICs were presented in the reports as a source of company and fun (e.g., Taylor, 1999) when the child would like to have someone by her side to watch television with, talk to or play with. The function of emotional comfort, one of the main taken by imaginary companions (Hoff, 2005a), was evidenced in four reports, as the friend would show up when the child was sad. The function of dealing with fears was present in the report of two children, explicitly or implicitly.

According to Harter & Chao (1992), several psychological theories suggest that the primordial function of IC creation would be to help children to overcome or compensate feelings of inadequacy or incompetence, which was evidenced in the report of three children. The authors argue that the mechanisms used to strengthen the perception of dominance tend to vary according to the child's gender. In fact, one male participant had an IC who was very competent physically and cognitively – the stereotypical male figure – whereas another female participant played the role of caretaker and protector of her ICs (all girls), which suggests once more the influence of gender stereotypes.

The function of being a reference to bargain with parents was present in the report of two children, whereas the function of attributing guilt was reported by one boy, a similar finding to Taylor's (1999). The same participant punished his IC, which seems to demonstrate the internalization of parental opinions, which is also consistent with previous findings (Singer and Singer, 1990, cited by Hoff, 2005a).

Some ICs descriptions were extremely affective, to the point that three children would make their creations resemble the siblings they did not have, suggesting the function of wishing fulfillment (Majors, 2013).

The descriptions of ICs provided by seven children revealed some negative characteristics, which is confirmed by the literature. For example, Taylor et al. (2008) found children who do not have full control of their ICs, which are experienced as entities with some degree of autonomy. McInnis, Pierucci and Gilpin (2013) found that imaginary relationships can be positive or mixed, varying in a continuum, and confirming that children do not always realize that ICs are controllable – which occurs especially in friendships with more negative characteristics.

Taylor and Aguiar (2013) argue that research conducted with children who have an IC suggest that this relationship can function as a high quality real friendship, given the fact that it involves affect, company and support, and is associated with resilience. The authors add that, like real friends, the imaginary versions can behave in a provocative manner, can challenge, infuriate or neglect, but they always enrich children's lives.

Parental Attitudes Toward Imaginary Companions

One important limitation of the present study is related to the fact that it was not possible to interview all of participants' caretakers, as originally planned. The literature, however, suggests that parental report is not an unequivocal source of information, given that parents are rarely unaware that their children have an IC. This is especially true for children of school age (Taylor, 1999), period during which symbolic play is even more discouraged and becomes more private (Smith & Lillard, 2012). In fact, Taylor (1999) argues that some parents show great uneasiness when the IC creation occurs after preschool, which reflects their beliefs on the types of behavior that are deemed appropriate for each age.

In only five cases, there was correspondence between parental reports and those of children who did not have an IC. And, in three cases of mothers being unsure, children reported having pretend companions. Although these three children had reported telling their mothers they were playing with an IC and introducing him, these episodes may have not been clear enough for them to understand, which can also reflect the lack of interest from parents or their fear of encouraging them to search for more information. The way in which caretakers considered IC creation varied significantly.

Reports are perfectly representative of the diversity of parental attitudes found by Taylor & Carlson (2000). Although some parents have a very positive view of the phenomenon, others hold very negative views, fearing an association with emotional and psychological problems, as well as confusion between reality and fantasy.

Additionally, although it has not been explicitly investigated, religious beliefs seem to explain part of the variability in parental attitudes toward IC creation – in this case, a more negative view, associated with markedly negative spiritual influences. According to Taylor & Carlson (2000), religious belief is a source of significant variability in parental attitudes toward IC creation. And, as the authors argue, the association between IC and the devil or evil entities made by parents possibly reflects a perception that is different from an understanding of ICs as a type of fantasy, treating the activity as something real and negative.

Final considerations

As predicted, the reports of imaginary companions were rich and revealed similar functions to those found in international studies (i.e., company, fun, emotional comfort, etc.). The analysis of parental attitudes suggested differences concerning the amount of knowledge on the topic and the influence of cultural and religious aspects. Although the sample of the present study was small (18 children and 11

caretakers), the results presented here can contribute in a significant manner to the advance of Brazilian research on imaginary companions, and more broadly, on symbolic play. The number of national studies on ICs is still very limited. Both the production and dissemination of knowledge on the topic can help to eliminate myths, which are still very present in the country, regarding the role of this type of pretend play in child development.

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