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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between having had an imaginary friend (IF) in childhood and its possible positive outcomes in young adulthood. To investigate this, the current study focused on whether the following positive traits hold true in adulthood: creativity, coping skills, perspective taking, and cognitive abilities. We hypothesized that participants who report having had an IF in childhood would score higher on the observed measures. Additionally, we hypothesized that a high child-IF relationship strength score would positively correlate with each of the observed measures. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between the groups, and there were no significant correlations of strength of IF with the measures. Similarly, participants with an IF did not score significantly different than participants without an IF on any of the observed measures. Our hypotheses were therefore not supported. It would be interesting to explore in future research why certain children have IFs while others do not.

Introduction

Imaginary Friends

- Due to past research almost exclusively focusing on whether having an IF in childhood is a positive or a negative thing for young children, it is imperative that we look for overall positive outcomes in later development for those who had an IF.
- Even though, children who create IFs have been regarded as having psychotic-like thoughts in the past, research has found that showing some dimensions of schizotypy may be informative for healthy cognitive functioning (in terms of creativity) (Mohr & Claridge, 2015).
- It has been shown that children with Ifs have higher performance in verbal intelligence tasks. Children with Ifs have a tendency towards being more creative relative to their counterparts (Firth et al., 2015; Hoff, 2005; Taylor 1999).
- Previous research has also shown that a child-IF relationship may be indicative of more advanced social function such as constructive coping and cognitive competence (Gleason & Kalpidou, 2014).
- Children with IFs have also been shown to have a more advanced theory of mind relative to children without IFs (Taylor et al., 2004; Wimmer & Perner, 1983).
- Aside from performing better in the former concepts, children with IFs have also been found to do better in memory, storytelling, attention, and self-entertainment tasks (Saltz & Johnson, 1974).

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Participants reporting having had an IF would score higher on each of the measures observed in comparison to participants that report not having had an IF.
- Hypothesis 2: Those that score a stronger relationship with their IF would positively correlate with each of the measures observed.

Method

Participants

- Albright students who were enrolled in a psychology course received extra credit for their participation. Participants were also recruited by posting the study to social media.
- $N = 85$ participants (15 Males and 67 Females)
- Age range: 18-29 ($M = 20.30$, $SD = 1.887$)
- Ethnicity: 43 Caucasian, 16 Hispanic, 21 African American, 2 Asian, 2 mixed

Materials and Procedure

- Hurllock's Imaginary Playmate Questionnaire was used to create to collect information about participants imaginary friends and to assess the strength of the relationship between the imaginary friend and participant.

Cognitive

- The Creative Cognition scale (CCS) was used to assess participant engagement in creative behaviors.
- The Magical Ideation scale was used as an indicator of schizotypy.

Emotional

- The Prototypic Coping Pattern scale was used to indicate what participants generally do and feel, when they experience stressful events.
- The Boredom Coping scale was used to determine the capacity of each participant to cope with boredom.

Social

- The Interpersonal Reactivity Index-Brief form was used as a measure of dispositional empathy.
- The Social Perspective taking Propensity scale was used to assess participant engagement in the acts described and at which frequencies.

Procedure

- Participants specified how they heard about the study and if they had an imaginary friend in childhood or not.
- If participants indicated that they did have an imaginary friend in childhood, they were then asked to answer questions about that imaginary friend. If they indicated that they never had an imaginary friend, the questions about imaginary friends were bypassed and they were directed to the other assessment questionnaires to answer.
- Then, participants answered demographic questions (age, gender, ethnicity, SAT score, and overall GPA). Lastly, a debriefing form was provided.

Results

Are young adults who had an IF during childhood better than those without an IF in coping skills?

- $t(80) = 1.439$, ns
- Participants who had an IF did not significantly differ from participants who did not have an IF in childhood in the boredom coping scale.
- $t(81) = .754$, ns
- Participants who had an IF did not significantly differ from participants who did not have an IF in childhood in the prototypic coping patterns scale.

Are young adults who had an IF during childhood better than those without an IF in creativity?

- $t(81) = .846$, ns
- Participants who had an IF did not significantly differ from participants who did not have an IF in childhood in the creative cognition scale.
- $t(76) = 1.385$, ns
- Participants who had an IF did not significantly differ from participants who did not have an IF in childhood in the magical ideation scale.

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Table 1. Mean and standard deviation for each observed measure.

	IF in childhood	N	M	SD
Strength of IF scale total	yes	34	36.97	7.313
	no	0 ^a	.	.
Participant GPA	yes	30	3.06	.671
	no	45	3.26	.484
Participant SAT	yes	20	1193.00	222.595
	no	31	1169.84	278.617
Prototypic coping: utilize support total	yes	34	42.47	13.011
	no	49	42.71	13.870
Prototypic coping: overwhelmed total	yes	34	20.41	4.554
	no	49	19.53	5.657
Prototypic coping: distance total	yes	34	19.09	3.888
	no	49	17.71	4.477
Creative cognition total	yes	34	17.74	3.360
	no	49	17.08	3.529
Interpersonal reactivity index total	yes	34	56.97	8.844
	no	49	53.71	9.511
Social perspective total	yes	34	25.18	4.549
	no	48	23.23	5.605
Magical ideation total	yes	34	12.68	7.138
	no	44	10.66	5.730
Boredom coping total	yes	32	4.44	2.154
	no	50	3.72	2.232

Does having a stronger relationship with the IF lead to higher scores on each observed measure in adulthood?

Since $p > .05$ for all of the Pearson correlation results, we can accept the null hypothesis and we can conclude there is no significant correlation between child-IF relationship and each of the observed measures.

Discussion

Hypotheses:

- First hypothesis that children who had an IF would score higher on each of the measures relative to children who did not have an IF was not supported.
- Second hypothesis that those that score a stronger relationship with their If would positively correlate with each of the measures observed was not supported.
- Implications:
 - Children with an IF are no worse or no better than those without an IF on any of the abovementioned scales confirming similarities between the two groups.

Limitations:

- Sample size
- Instrumental error: strength of IF relationship scale not validated
- Reminiscence study: correlational data
- Conclusion and future directions:
 - Considering the amount of participants who reported having an IF, future research should focus on asking the question of why some children create/have Ifs and others do not.
 - Further aims are to develop a more developed scale to measure the strength of the child-IF relationship and have it validated since both elements are critical to research.

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