Imaginary Friends: Outcomes for young adults

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between having 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 IF-child 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 differently 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

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 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; Winmer & 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 (Salz & 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

Hurlock’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.

Hypotheses

• Hypothesis 1: 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.

Discussion

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.

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

• Since >.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.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation for each observed measure

Table: 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength of IF relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>total</td>
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<td>39.77</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

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

• r (80) = .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.

• r (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.

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

• r (80) = .439, 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.

• r (76) = .175, 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.

• r (76) = 1.385, ns

References


