



See-through Knowing **Learning from Children and Their Invisible Friends**

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Meet Quack Quack, a 4 year-old imaginary Duck. The drawing is provided by Nathan, himself 4 years old and Quack Quack is one of five of his current imaginary friends (IFs). The names of the children discussed here are made up to protect anonymity; the names of the IFs, paradoxically, are real. Other IFs of Nathan are Tadpole—who is 1 year old, Jump Jump and Jump Jax—brothers who are 8—and Daisy, a robin who is 100 and Nathan's favorite, his best

imaginary friend.¹ Nathan was kind enough to draw pictures of his companions, and to take a few minutes to talk with our research team about these special friends that nobody else can see.



Nathan is a bright, outgoing boy with a near constant smile, and he was delighted to talk with us, as were his parents. He is the younger brother of Sam, 7 years old, who also has IFs but declined the invitation for an interview. According to his parents, Sam is a bit shy about his friends; yet Nathan, we discovered, has a reserved side as well. He revealed to his father on the way to our interview that he has five more friends that he wasn't going to talk about. "Why not?" his father asked. Nathan said, "They told me not too."

Nathan is one of 37 children between 2 and 9 years old that our research team interviewed, children recruited from local schools and churches where I live in Louisville, Kentucky. While the interviews are part of a larger empirical study presented elsewhere (Wigger, 2010; Wigger, Paxson, & Kilchenman, under review), here, in this essay, I simply want

¹ For more drawings go to <http://seethroughknowing.com>.

to lift up the phenomenon of imaginary companions and highlight some of the ways they manifest themselves in the lives of children and their families, placing the stories we have heard from children and parents against a larger backdrop of research. The question of course is why? Why interview children about such a wild aspect of their minds? Here are three reasons addressed in this essay:

- 1) They are inherently fascinating.
- 2) They provide insight into children's minds.
- 3) They raise questions about religious knowing, whether there is a connection between an invisible friend and an invisible God.

Inherently fascinating

One reason for studying the phenomenon of imaginary companions is that they are inherently fascinating. From the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip depicting a stuffed animal coming to life, to the Jimmy Stewart film *Harvey* featuring a six foot imaginary rabbit friend, from the film *Lars and the Real Girl* to a show on the Cartoon Network called *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, popular culture has long taken interest these special companions. (Many forget that *Winnie-the-Pooh* was himself the come-to-life character of a stuffed animal, Edward the Bear.)

I personally became intrigued with the phenomenon of imaginary friends when I first met Crystal Malaver. Crystal joined us not quite 20 years ago, and though she has since moved on, she certainly became an important part of our household. Crystal was our daughter Cora's

invisible friend when Cora was 3. A stay-at-home dad in those years, I had lots of time with Cora and Crystal, and remember many a snack break when we would pull up an extra stool at the kitchen table for Crystal, and pour some invisible milk in an invisible glass, and yet pass the real dish of cookies. It was a wonderfully strange mixture of things anyone could see and things most could not. The name is revealing—Crystal, like the glass, something transparent, something to see through. And contrary to many popular images of such friends, Crystal was rarely, if ever, a source of mischief or blamed for misbehaviors. The best I could tell she was a friend, a companion, someone to play and chat with, like her visible friends from preschool, the neighborhood, or church. Cora, now a young adult, remembers her this way, fondly, and so do I.

The friendship with Crystal faded, none of us can remember when or why, like so many things of childhood. But in the years since, whenever the subject of imaginary friends came up—with other parents, in books or films—I would remember Crystal and think about that special kind of see-through knowing, that ability to interact with characters unseen, that intense form of play that many young children engage in. How is it, after all, that a child can so easily invest that much personality in something or someone nobody else can see? Cora had no other friends named Crystal, let alone Malaver. And many of the parents we have interviewed report a similar befuddling over the names, if not the presence of these companions. These friends are, for the most part, not cultural figures like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. While the companions of a few children we interviewed were originally inspired by story characters (e.g. Cinderella, Curious George)—or in one case by a good friend (after a move)—more often than not we found these to be spontaneous and unique figures who make themselves known without outside help.

In fact a young man I spoke with, hearing about this research, told me his “imaginary friend story,” as he called it. He shared how one day when he was a young child, he complained to his mother “there’s no one to play with” and so she suggested that he make up an imaginary friend for company. He tried; he pretended someone was there with him playing with Legos, but, in his words, “it just didn’t work.” He explained, “It was boring; he never built anything.” These companions are not easily ordered into being by parents or by will. Their origin seems to be more from somewhere deep within the child than from without.

Even so, it would be misleading to ignore the many ways the outer world, the physical and cultural environments of the child, intersect with the imaginative world and its made-up characters. Consider He-tome and Bu-gong, IFs of David, 4 years old, whom we interviewed. He-tome and Bu-gong are 909—70 years old (spoken as “nine hundred nine seventy”) and they celebrate Halloween and Hanukkah. (The family is Catholic, but the child goes to a Jewish preschool). David’s mother was as puzzled as anyone over the names. There were other friends as well, with names a little less curious—Coco, Deepery, and Penguiny—but He-tome and Bu-gong (who are always named together) are the main friends and have been around the longest. They live at Salmon Lake (which turned out to be an actual vacation spot for the family, in another state). He-tome and Bu-gong get to David’s house by flying on an airplane, sometimes; other times they just appear. For example, early on in our conversation, He-tome and Bu-gong were at Salmon Lake but later in the conversation, they were right there with us, under the table where David was drawing their pictures. One moment the imaginary friends are hundreds of miles away, the next they are right here as if, with all due respect to Madeline L’Engle, there

were a “wrinkle in time.” Strange names, the loose understanding of time and numbers, the even softer understanding of space—the longer I listened to David’s descriptions, the more I felt I was listening to a dream. The familiar and strange presented all in one breath.

In addition to the dreamy or fantasy novel quality of these descriptions, one of the most intriguing discoveries with David is one that his parents made earlier in the week of our interview. David had informed his mother and father that He-tome and Bu-gong not only play with him (David), but they are friends with Jo Jo. And who is Jo Jo? Jo Jo was the imaginary friend of David’s father, when the father was a child. David’s invisible friends and Dad’s invisible friend are friends. Jo Jo, by the way, is 99.

Like a dream, like snack time with Cora and Crystal, there appears a strange blending of the visible and invisible, of imaginary friends with real life relationships, of particular times and places with their wrinkling.

Fascination with a pinch of anxiety

Accompanying the fascination is also a touch of fear and trembling. Along with the sweet images of Winnie-the-Pooh or Harvey there are, in popular culture, more sinister depictions. The films *Donnie Darko*, *Fight Club*, *The Shining*, or even *A Beautiful Mind*, for example, draw out a potentially shadowy side to this imaginary world, and *The Oprah Show* recently featured a very disturbed little girl with countless invisible companions that continuously, with little relief, taunt and disrupt her and her parents’ lives.

Though less severe, numerous episodes of television dramas, from *The Waltons* and *The Medium*, to *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* tend to depict imaginary friends as a way of compensating for some kind of loss or challenge, such as a loved one who died or loneliness. As Marjorie Taylor (1999) points out in her book on the subject, Dr. Benjamin Spock though wary of invisible friends in general, did think that an “imaginary father,” for example, might be helpful to a child who has lost a real father. I do not recall whether I ever consulted our copy of *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care* (1985 edition) when Cora had her friend Crystal, but if I had, the advice offered there was that if a child “is spending a good part of each day telling about imaginary friends or adventures, not as a game but as if he believes in them, it raises the question whether his real life is satisfying enough.” The remedy, according to Spock, would have been to find my daughter more children to play with and to develop a more easygoing relationship with her, sharing more “jokes and friendly conversations,” more “hugging and piggyback rides.” For Dr. Spock “a little imagination is a good thing,” but clearly a lot is dangerous, an unhealthy compensation for something the child lacks. (p. 439)

Almost by definition, the parents we interviewed are more comfortable with the invisible friends than not—otherwise they would not likely have volunteered to be interviewed. Recruitment occurred, without remuneration, primarily through schools and churches, not through counseling centers or hospitals for example. Even so, many of the parents speculated about the reasons for the presence of these IFs, often reflecting this compensation approach: “Well he’s the oldest,” “We recently moved,” “She’s an only child,” “He’s the youngest child,” “She really likes cartoons,” “He’s not allowed to watch television,” “His father had a pretend

friend too.” Though mild, we could among some parents detect a whiff of nervousness; they were not exactly worried, but more like they were worried that maybe they should be—perhaps an expression of the perennial parental question: Am I doing this right? Grown people do not have imaginary friends and if they do (as *Harvey* or *A Beautiful Mind* portray) they are going to find themselves alienated from the rest of the social world.

Paul Harris, the Oxford, now Harvard, developmental psychologist, worries that a certain intellectual trend may contribute to the general anxiety about fantasy, play, and the imagination, if not invisible friends (2000a, 2000b). He offers a powerful critique of the general bias against the role of the imagination in the human mind. The general developmental picture is that children start out unable to distinguish reality from fantasy and mature into people who can, and then are oriented toward the real world and the logic pertaining to it. In general, cognitive development moves from magical thinking, as Jean Piaget called it, to scientific, logical, real-world oriented thought. And while Piaget did not invent this idea, he certainly nourished it. Play and imagination are essentially egocentric distortions of reality, assimilation into conceptual schemes driven by wishes, desires, and unfulfilled needs. Piaget’s daughter is told not to play with the water tub so she compensates with pretend movements, saying through gesture, “I’m pouring out the water” (Harris, 2000a, p. 5, Piaget, 1962, p. 131). Thinking about the “non-actual” or “counter-factuals” as they are sometimes called is, bluntly, something to be outgrown, a “regressive mode of thought” (Harris, 2000b, p. 161).

Importantly, as Harris keenly sees, bound up with such an attitude toward the developing mind is a suspicion not only of the imagination, but of religious or metaphysical thinking as well.

In this view animism, myth, fantasy, religion, and imaginary friends are cut from the same bolt of cognitive fabric, primitive thought to be left behind with our teddy bears. In other words, suspicion of the imagination that can see invisibles—in favor of a hard-boiled realism—may be bound up with suspicion of religion and the ability, as William James (1982/1902) once put it, to see “something there,” that something which is irreducible to the bodily senses, the awareness of “more” (pp. 58, 511). The mature, healthy mind does not work this way.

And yet, fascination with the imagination persists, not only among romantics, artists, parents, or a handful of quirky scholars. Harris represents another school of thought, even among the followers of Piaget, that is re-thinking this thinking about the role of fantasy, and things unseen or friends we can see through. As Harris’ own work demonstrates, the idea that young children do not differentiate fantasy and reality is questionable (an issue I will return to when discussing the children we interviewed). In fact, the ability to engage in pretense does not emerge until the second or third year of life—first come real world experiences through the senses, then come the representational and imaginative. In addition the inability to play, pretend, and imagine is actually a sign of trouble for children (Harris, 2000a). Alison Gopnik, whose research with children spans some three decades, is another important figure re-thinking the role of the imagination for human knowing. As she points out (2009), from an evolutionary point of view human imagination may be one of the most unique and significant aspects of our species.

If our nature is determined by our genes, you would think that we would be the same now as we were in the Pleistocene. The puzzling fact about human beings is that our capacity for change, both in our own lives and through history, is the most distinctive and unchanging thing about us. Is there a way of explaining this flexibility and creativity...? (p. 7)

Her answer: the imagination. Our imaginations allow us to pose alternatives to that which is, let us imagine counter-factuals, and even the means for bringing about those alternatives whether in ourselves or in the world around us. In addition, because we are, relatively speaking, such intensely social creatures, much of our imagination focuses upon the world of relationships.² Why do others behave as they do? What are they thinking? If I do this, that will happen, if I do that, this will occur. The imagination allows us to see and play out all kinds of alternatives without having to suffer the consequences through trial and error. In other words, the imagination may not only be something to be tolerated among young children, but key to being human, allowing us to imagine possibilities and improvise our lives.

Perhaps then, this renewed interest in the imagination, is something of a “return of the repressed.” That is, rather than suspicion and distrust, maybe fascination is leading the way to appreciation and learning more.

Learning from children themselves

Whether we should be more appreciative or suspicious of them, another reason for studying imaginary companions is that they may be able to help us better understand the minds of children in general.

For all the corrections and critiques of Piaget, he provided the world a powerful way of better understanding children’s thinking—first and foremost, by working with them directly. Talking with them, observing, offering simple challenges, and paying attention to their

² See primatologist Michael Tomasello (1997, 1999, 2008) for a powerful account of human sociality, rooting language, culture, and human cognition in general.

behaviors; these are the bread and butter of cognitive psychology and, in the end, have provided the means for critiquing Piaget's theories themselves. As for imaginary friends, Piaget (1962, pp. 129-132) describes his daughter Jacqueline having one, but he did not systematically study them among other children. In fact, surprisingly, very few studies of the phenomenon have actually been carried out with children while they have them.³ The lack of research seems all the more odd when considering that, based upon the studies that have been done, some estimate that as many as 65% of all children have an imaginary companion at some point in their lives (Singer and Singer, 1990, Mauro, 1991, Taylor, 1999). This may be a bit high, because, as our own efforts have revealed, nailing down specifically what an imaginary friend is, in the end, is a complex issue if not an exercise in interpretation. Do you count stuffed animals and playing with dolls? What if they seem to take on a bigger than life personality as is depicted in the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip? What about when a child impersonates, regularly, a character—a princess or a superhero or a favorite animal? All of these, of course, are signs of a vivid imagination and lively play, but still, there is something uniquely fascinating about a child's ability to make up whole cloth characters nobody sees and then interact with them. Even so, a conservative estimate would still be around 40% of children have, at some point in childhood, had a companion that is completely invisible. (Taylor, 1999)

Even with this frequency, there are multiple challenges and practical issues making research difficult. Though so many children will or have had IFs, catching them while they do is another matter; and relying upon the memory of older children, teens, or adults reflecting back

³ The major studies and work over the past 30 years are, Singer & Singer (1981, 1990), Mauro (1991) Taylor and Carlson (1997, 2000), Taylor (1999).

on their younger childhoods is dicey. So do you simply ask children? If you know anything about 3 and 4 year olds, for example, you know that if you ask them a question, smiling, like *do you have a pretend friend or a friend that nobody but you can see*, the young children might readily say “yes,” even if they do not, just to please you. The point is, studying imaginary companions is not easy, so it may be a little less surprising that there has not been a lot of research carried out.

But some important work has been done, and by far the best to date comes from Marjorie Taylor, who teaches developmental psychology at the University of Oregon. Taylor’s work—especially studies she did in the 1990’s with Stephanie Carlson—is one of the major streams of influence on our own. As Taylor’s book *Imaginary Companions and the Children who Create Them* (1999) summarizes their research, the picture of these children as loners, socially maladjusted, and poor at differentiating reality from fantasy is a picture turned on its head. While she acknowledges how a child in extremely troubled circumstances may engage in “splitting” or rely upon a made-up friend for help and survival, the truth appears to be that troubled children and those at-risk are actually much less likely to have much of a play life. Play, pretense, and imagination, tend to thrive (like children themselves) where there is an abundance of security and care.

Taylor (1999) estimates that about 28% of children up to 4 years of age have imaginary companions, but the figure jumps to 63% when including those up to age 7, with 43% being completely invisible. While other studies have found that young girls tend to have them more than boys, when you study a wider swath of childhood, boys tend to catch up. The children who

have them tend to be highly social, so much so that they just make up friends when there are none around. In terms of IQ they seem to score no higher or lower than children without. At the younger ages they may be a bit less shy and a little better at focusing attention, but “not much different from other children in most respects” (Taylor, 1999, p. 61). There is one area, however, one type of cognitive task, that children with IF’s did better than those without, that is, theory of mind tasks.

Theory of Mind

What is a theory of mind task? Theory of mind tasks (or tests or questions) derive from Piaget’s work with children on perspective taking (Piaget & Inhelder, 1967). The issue is trying to determine the point at which a child realizes that another person has a different mental angle on something from the child’s own. Piaget would set up a mountain display and place a doll at some point around the mountain, and then ask the child to imagine what the doll sees. Piaget found that young children have difficulty differentiating their own perspective from that of another’s. There have been many variations since Piaget, the false belief and appearance/reality tests, partially occluded pictures or “doodles,” background knowledge challenges, and other ways of checking a child’s perspective, but the basic question is at what point does a child realize that another’s knowledge or perspective is different from the child’s own knowledge or

perspective (see Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001; Moses & Chandler, 1992; and Avis & Harris, 1991, for overviews and examples of cross-cultural studies).⁴

For example: show a 3 year old a crayon box and ask, *what do you think is inside this box?* The child answers *colors*. Then, say to the child: *Now I'm going to show you and only you what's inside the box*. You do, revealing that there are rocks inside the box. The child is surprised: *What are rocks doing inside the box—that's funny!*⁵ Then you replace the rocks and close up the box. Next is the key to the test: ask the child: *If your mom (or dad or friend or a puppet) came into the room now and I showed this box to her, what would she say is inside the box?* If you ask adults or older children, they are likely to say: *Oh my mom will be fooled by the box and she'll think there are crayons inside*. In other words older children and adults, ordinarily, understand that others can have a different perspective, a different knowledge, or even a false belief, here, about the contents of the box. But this is not so easy for young children. The 3 year old is much more likely than not to answer the question, *Rocks—my mom will say there are rocks inside the box*. In other words, these young children are not very good at disentangling what they know from what others know. They do understand that others have minds, but are not good at seeing from their point of view. That is why 3 year olds are bad liars.

Over the past few decades and across cultures, a very persistent pattern has emerged from these kinds of tests—3 and 4 year olds do not have very robust theories of mind; in general it is

⁴ For a thorough description of the varieties of theory of mind tasks, go to the University of Oxford site: <http://www.cam.ox.ac.uk/research/cognition-religion-and-theology/archive-of-cognitive-science-of-religion-methods/theory-of-mind-tasks/>

⁵ See a video clip taken from our interviews, demonstrating the task: <http://seethroughknowing.com/about/>

around 5 or 6 that children begin to better disambiguate their own knowledge from that of others, that they will say Dad or friend or puppet or Mom will think crayons are in the box. And here is where the Taylor and Carlson study (1997) is relevant. They studied 4 year olds, a threshold age for theory of mind. They found that those with imaginary friends performed better at these tasks—in effect more likely to say “crayons” (though they used slightly different props in conjunction with a variety of tasks). Children who were 4 with imaginary companions, statistically speaking, had a more robust theory of mind.

Depending upon your opinion of imaginary friends, this either makes lots of sense, or it can be very surprising. If you think of these friends as signs that a child is out of touch with reality, or cannot differentiate reality from fantasy very well, then the result is surprising. How could such a confused child get perspective-taking so well figure out? On the other hand, with a more favorable view of imagination, the result could make perfect sense. The child with an imaginary friend is adept at imagining the perspective of another, even another that nobody else can see. Taking another’s perspective, after all, is really an act of the imagination.

This finding, at the least, makes the phenomenon of imaginary friends interesting in relation to the cognitive development of children. And because perspective taking is itself so entangled with empathy, or a kind of social intelligence, there could be implications for the moral life if not religious life as well.

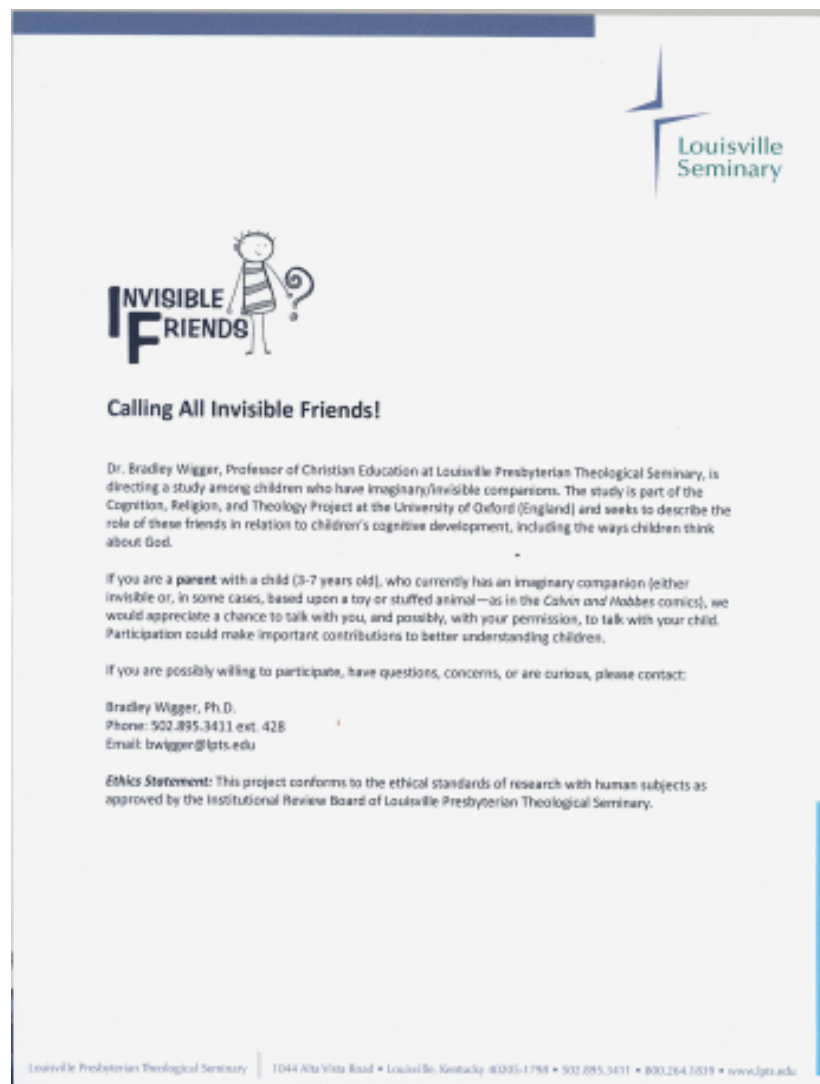
Our Study

The first part of our study involved gathering the stories from children and parents about imaginary friends. Whereas Taylor and Carlson (1997) started with a sample of 4 year olds and differentiated children with and without these companions, in order to compare them, we went directly after the households “with” (and are not trying to compare to those “without”). Taylor and Carlson did not count a stuffed animal or toy unless it did seem to possess its own personality, but as they admit and we have discovered, such a determination is still a judgment call in some cases. In our research, we started with parents’ own judgments, and when in doubt (because the friend is based on a stuffed animal) one of our clarifying questions was: *Does the stuffed animal talk back to the child?* This question of the friend’s agency has worked well for us—we were willing to include something like “Absolutely, she tells us what Teddy bear says,” but not something like “No, he just takes it everywhere.”



We developed a flyer (*Calling All Invisible Friends*) distributed to dozens of preschools, congregations, and private/Catholic elementary schools and posted in multiple commercial and

public spaces. The flyer addresses parents “with a child (3-7 years old), who currently has an imaginary companion (either invisible or, in some cases, based upon a toy or stuffed animal—as in the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic)” and says “we would appreciate a chance to talk with you, and possibly, with your permission, to talk with your child.” In light of the wording of this invitation, along with the logo heading below, virtually all (with a couple of ambiguous exceptions) the interviews involved children with friends who are completely invisible (i.e. not based upon the presence of a toy/stuffed animal or doll).



In addition to Quack Quack and He-tome and Bu-gong, introduced earlier, some of the other friends we have met are:

Leah and Coda: Leah and Coda are brother and sister and part of the imaginary family of Nicole, one of the youngest children we interviewed at 2 years, 11 months. Nicole's mother told me that Coda had died a few weeks earlier but has been back "for a while now." Nicole herself, hearing her mother tell us, confirmed the death saying that Coda took "too big of a bite" (of what he bit we never got an answer). Not only are time and space loose, so, apparently are life and death.

Deen, Elisabeth, and Paw-Paw: Debbie was one of our older interviews at 7 years, 11 months, when she told us of her imaginary friends Deen (who turned 8 earlier that week) and Elisabeth (only 7). But, her mother reported, she also "gets visits from Paw-Paw Jim" (Debbie's grandfather who died when Debbie was only 1). "When she's sad, he always comes to visit her," the mother said. Debbie has had several imaginary friends since she was 2, that come and go, but Deen is the most enduring and favorite, and he lives in a brown house in "an imaginary world" according to Debbie, and they like to play "hide and seek" together. The invisible friend, Elisabeth, came back from vacation with invisible friend, Deen, one time, and so they all play together at times, but at other times she plays with each individually. Elisabeth had babies, but they have since left.

Cinderella: When we interviewed 4 year old Katrina, Cinderella was her imaginary friend, representing one of the few figures whose name is readily apparent and one of the few instances in which a child only had the one companion. When asked to draw a picture of her she

first grabbed for a white crayon, and started drawing her, but she did not show up, so she switched to pink. In the picture Cinderella, on that day, was a little girl (back home in Katrina's bedroom), but Katrina's mother told us that earlier in the week Cinderella had been a dog, a blue dog.



Cinderella



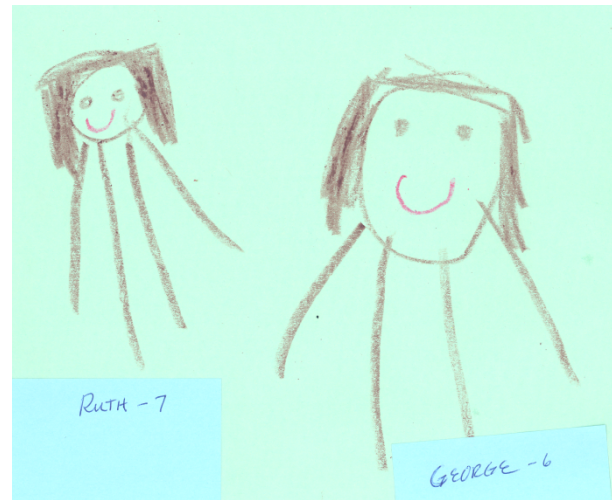
Deen and Elisabeth

In some cases the friends were relatively steady figures—e.g. always a little dog, or a 100 year old Robin, or a little girl—but for other children, the imaginary friend, even a singular one, would take a variety of shapes or looks. Several months after the interview, Katrina's mother reported that Cinderella "has left the building." The day she graduated from her preschool, Katrina announced that "Cinderella was gone now that she had graduated." She said, "Cinderella will not go to kindergarten and so she has gone to the beach."

Ruth, George, and Sally Monster: George and Ruth are the imaginary friends of Ruth, 5 years old. That is, one of Ruth's invisible friends is also named Ruth, except that the invisible Ruth is 7, two years older.⁶ George, the other companion is 6. The intriguing thing is that Ruth's younger sister, Eve, 3 years old, also has an imaginary friend George. In other words they share the imaginary companion, sometimes playing together, sometimes they each play with their own. The same was true of another pair of siblings, 4 and 2 years old, who share Sally Monster.



Flower Barbie



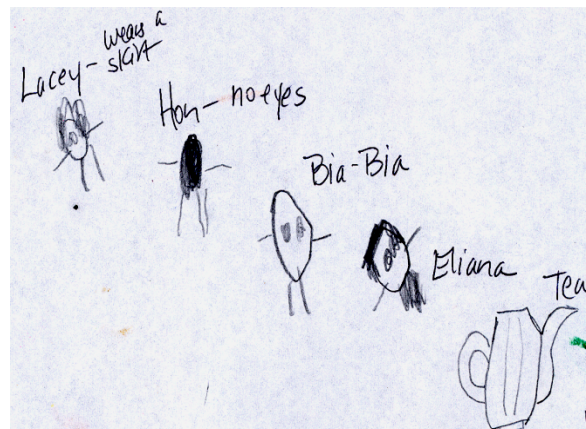
Ruth and George

Flower Barbie: Flower Barbie is Alicia's friend, with whom I made a near disastrous mistake. In one of our first interviews I referred to Flower Barbie as a "pretend friend." This interview occurred immediately following the one with Nathan, above, who did call his companions "pretend friends." But when I used the term with Alicia's mother (in front of Alicia) the mother informed me that the last time anyone used that term, "there was a meltdown." Alicia herself was considerate enough to ignore that I said it. While other children, besides Nathan, also

⁶ In this case the name of the invisible friend was changed since it was the same as the child's.

referred to these as pretend or invisible friends, after this incident we made it a practice to find out the names from the parents and always refer to the friends by name.

Others: There is Dowey and Sammey, friends of 7 year old Olivia; they have been around since Olivia was 3. There is Lucy, another shape-shifter, who is sometimes a baby, a Mom, a tiger, lion, mouse, and at the time of the interview Lucy was a rabbit. This is from the imagination of a girl, 3. But another shape-shifter comes from Kent, who was nearly 8. His friend, Dino, is usually an animal of one sort or another, but sometimes a space alien. His older sister, who is 11, still had friends until around 9, and she called them her “angels.” There is 4 year old Sarah’s friend Jacob. Jacob likes to play downstairs at Sarah’s home, but he lives four miles away in his own house. He was coming over that day at 3:30. And the mother reports that after watching a video of their wedding, Sarah and Jacob began planning their own wedding. From Kathryn we were introduced to Hon, Bia-Bia, Eliana, Lacy, and Tea, who looks like a teapot and may have been inspired (according to the mother) by the teapot character in the film *Beauty and the Beast*.



Reality and Fantasy?

Our work has indeed found, as Marjorie Taylor (1999) put it about these special friends: “What stands out most to me is how extremely varied they are” (p. 32). But the question remains as to whether or not children believe these companions are “real.” Sidestepping debates about the ontological status of the imaginary, can children differentiate these fantasy friends and their houses and babies and shape-shifting forms from those in the everyday physical world? For example, when Alicia gets upset over calling her companion “pretend” does this mean she could not tell the difference between visible and invisible friends, that she confuses fantasy and reality? I am not convinced. I believe rather that it reveals she is indeed emotionally invested in the relationship, perhaps akin to the way adults can be emotionally invested in fictional characters in a novel or a movie. Imagine the main character of the novel you are reading dies, you cry, and someone says “come on, it’s just fiction.” Pretend through fiction, stories, films and the like can indeed evoke real attachments and feelings that themselves are quite real.

In the end however, the best answer to this question comes from 2 year old Nicole, described above, with her friends Leah and Coda. When asked where they were, Nicole pointed across the room (a church Sunday school room) and said, “Leah’s over there.” “And where’s Coda?” With this question Nicole got up from her chair and ran to the door and stood at the threshold looking up and down the hallway; then she started waving her arm, as if beckoning Coda to come join her. Next, she came back into the room, crouched down in a huddle with her friend. And she started talking to him in whispers, her head nodding and hands expressive in an intense conversation. After all this, Nicole came back to her seat with us and declared, “Now

Coda's here too!" I said, "Oh that's great." We had already given Nicole some stickers for talking with us, but when she said this I asked, "Would Leah and Coda like stickers too?" And with that Nicole looked up at me, stared for a moment, then declared, "They're pretend!" (The look in her eye was adding "silly.") Not even 3, this little girl knew the difference and was startled when I seemed to not. She then added, cleverly, "But I'll take them for my parents."

Religious Knowing

In one of the few attempts at a cross-cultural study of imaginary companions, Antonia Mills (2003) went to India. She reports that initially:

When I asked psychologists in India, and informants from the general populace, if they were aware of any children with imaginary playmates, the answer was universally, 'no.' The explanation was that children were never alone and therefore had no need to invite an imaginary companion (p. 67).

Yet, she eventually discovered children who did talk to companions that nobody could see and finally figured out that the issue was the term, "imaginary;" these companions of children were not considered imaginary or made-up. They were simply invisible—fitting given that they were believed to be beings from the spirit realm and/or from a previous life—real, not "imaginary."

In a related vein, Taylor and Carlson (2000) conducted a study of parental attitudes towards invisible companions in light of parental religious beliefs. They found that in general, mainstream Christian parents tended to support fantasy play of all kinds in young children (including Santa and the Easter Bunny as well as invisible friends), while fundamentalist Christian parents tended to discourage it, including invisible friends, associating fantasy with the occult and worrying that invisible beings could be demonic. Even so, Taylor and Carlson (2000,

p. 265) do mention that some children identified “Jesus” as their invisible friend, and presumably this would be acceptable to fundamentalist parents. While none of the children, mostly churched, that we interviewed named Jesus as their companion, one child, a 6 year old boy, did name the Holy Spirit. This invisible (not imaginary) friend had come at Christmas time and the child said they do things together like read the Bible and pray.



The Holy Spirit

These findings raise the question: What kind of religious implications attend the phenomenon of invisible companions? Intuitively there would seem to be a connection. After all, God, the Gods, angels, demons, saints, and spirits from past lives are, for the most part, invisible figures that nonetheless are experienced as possessing agency and personality of their own. So, could it be that the ability to sense and engage such agency in play and pretense—despite invisibility—is part of the cognitive scaffolding for a religious imagination? For religious knowing?

I believe the answer, for now, is that we simply do not know. Frankly we are only beginning to explore the relationship between cognition—how our minds work—and how they

work in relation to religion. But a promising direction for research comes from the cognitive psychologist Justin Barrett of Oxford University. Barrett is part of a research field emerging over the past two decades that is being called the cognitive science of religion.⁷ For example, Barrett has added a religious twist to Theory of Mind tests by asking a “God question,” that is, *What would God say is in the box?* He and his colleagues have done this in Christian settings, in Israel with Jewish children, and among indigenous Maya of the Yucatan (who are aware of the Catholic God). As Barrett and Richert (2003) explain, whether following Freud or Piaget, the idea in psychological approaches to religion over the past century is that children draw their understanding of God or Gods from their understanding of humans. As Ronald Goldman (1964/1968) put it (following Piaget, and influencing a generation of religious educators), children generally move from “gross materialistic and crude anthropomorphic thinking to the view that God is unseeable because of his spiritual nature.” According to Goldman, “God is seen in purely physical and human terms,” and his examples are drawn from children 6 to 11 years old (pp. 88-90). Goldman himself was specifically asking about images of God in pictures of a child praying: “What is the picture or idea of God the child in the picture has when he is praying?” (p. 88). Even so, the anthropomorphic principle should be the same for understanding more complex aspects of cognition—such as theory of mind. Understand how children develop a

⁷ Barrett (2004) outlines some of the major features of the cognitive science approach to religion. In addition Theodore Brelsford (2005) helpfully summarizes the field and potential implications for the field of religious education. In general the cognitive science of religion cuts across several disciplines—cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, and even theology. The big question is *Why is religion so ubiquitous?* Why, despite a wide variety forms and expressions, across so many cultures and societies, does religion persist? And is there something about the ways our minds work, the way we think, our ways of knowing, that has anything to do with the persistence of religion?

theory of mind in humans, for example, you will understand how they develop a theory of God's mind. The idea would be that the cognitive skills for thinking about God are drawn from their thinking about other people. So, Barrett asks children about God's perspective.

What happens when children are asked this God question? In several versions of theory of mind experiments, Barrett and colleagues have found that 3-4 year-olds will say that God will know that there are rocks in the box.⁸ That is not surprising; they also will say that Mom or Dad or a friend will know that there are rocks in the box. The surprise comes with the older children, the 5-7 year olds that understand that Mom or Dad or friend will be fooled by the appearance of the box. They too will say that God knows there are rocks inside the box. In essence, "My Mom will be fooled and think there are crayons in the box, but God will know there are actually rocks inside."

This is surprising, first of all, because they are still too young. From the perspective of Piaget, they would be too young to be able to imagine a point of view that can know all there is to know. That would be a sign of abstract thought not the concrete, anthropomorphic thought of middle childhood. If children were simply projecting human minds onto God's mind, as Barrett, Rebekah Richert, and Amanda Driesenga (2001) put it, "it would be expected that when children start attributing to humans false beliefs, they will likewise attribute false beliefs to God and other agents" (p. 55). In other words these findings raise serious doubt upon "the assumption that children *first* form thorough human concepts and *then* use these to conceptualize God (and other beings)." They suggest instead that "early-developing conceptual structures in children used to

⁸ Barrett (2004) offers the best summary of the multiple versions of this experiment.

reason about God are *not* specifically for representing humans” (Barrett & Richert, 2003, p. 300). Even if children have been told that God knows everything, the fact that five year olds can easily understand this and use the knowledge to differentiate what God knows from what humans can know in a theory of mind test, at least raises doubts about whether or not children are as crudely anthropomorphic as once thought. The Mayan children, as well, differentiated the knowledge attributed to the Sun, Masters of the Forest, God, humans, and animals, demonstrating flexibility in understanding agency, and raising questions about anthropomorphic origins of religion (Knight, Sousa, Barrett, Atran, 2004; Knight, 2008).

It may be more accurate to say that young children are primed to sense agency, intentionality, and knowledge all over the place before they differentiate human knowledge from non-human knowledge (whether animals, Gods, or invisible friends). Sensing agency so easily, whether in those we can see or those we cannot, may be a clue then to the making of the religious mind, one factor, perhaps, to religion’s ubiquity and persistence through time.⁹ Differentiating types of agency and knowledge so easily could be a sign that there is more to understanding God than simply projecting a big human in the sky.

Regardless, much more work on this front needs to be done, but Barrett’s addition of the God question to theory of mind tests opens a promising way into better understanding how children come to think about God.

⁹ Barrett (2004) refers to the cognitive tool for sensing agency as HADD (hypersensitive agency detection device).

The Big Question

We are still left with the big question: Are invisible friends and Gods cut from the same cloth? Singer and Singer (1980), in their reflections on invisible friends, thought this could be the case. They follow Julian Jaynes (1977, 2006/1989) who indeed thought the biblical God, schizophrenic voices, Homeric visions, hallucinations, hypnotism, and “imaginary playmates” all to be vestiges of a “bi-cameral mind” in which the right brain addresses the left (with the feeling of coming from outside the self). On the other hand, Marjorie Taylor (1999) answers the question “no.” She (like the story of Nicole and the stickers illustrates) has found that children clearly understand their invisible friends as pretend, whereas they understand God to be very real. While admitting—based on children naming Jesus as a friend—there could be “some degree of overlap in children’s conceptions of religion and pretense,” Taylor and Carlson (2000) suggest that children, when interviewed, are probably just trying to get “in the ballpark of what might be acceptable” for the interviewer when they name Jesus, since he is invisible (p. 265).

I believe the question needs more investigation. Because theory of mind tasks stand at an intriguing crossroad between Taylor’s work with imaginary companions and Barrett’s work on religious knowing, the second part of our study—reported in full elsewhere (Wigger, 2010; Wigger, Paxson, & Kilchenman, under review)—used theory of mind tasks to try to better understand how children think about their invisible friends compared to how they think about God. We added an invisible friend question, e.g.: *What will Crystal think is in the box?* We have generally replicated the work of Barrett, but with children who currently have imaginary friends,

also asking the God question so we can compare what children say God knows to what their invisible friends know.¹⁰

In general, among the younger children (2-4 years old) we found no significant differences between the knowledge children attribute to other people (a good friend) and invisible friends or God. This was expected based upon the previous findings that younger children tend to attribute omniscience to everyone (the child knows, they think everyone knows). But the implication is that the cognitive overlap between religion and imagination cannot be ruled out—more work is needed here, especially among 4 year olds.

But the real question was whether older children (5 and older) would treat invisible friends like God, having special knowledge. Here, in general, we found that Taylor was right, God is clearly different (statistically speaking) from invisible friends in what they can know. Invisible friends were treated much more like humans, much more likely to be fooled by the crayon box. Yet, not always. To our surprise, there was also a statistically significant difference between the knowledge attributed to invisible friends and to humans. That is, even among older children who clearly exhibit a robust theory of mind (understanding that a person will be fooled by the appearance of the crayon box), on average their invisible friends were more likely to know rocks are in the box than a person would (sometimes, one invisible friend would know, the other would not).

¹⁰ We performed three types of tasks: false belief, occluded picture, and a secret code (scribbles), all well known in cognitive psychology. We asked about the knowledge of four agents: real friend, invisible friend, dog, and God.

Generally speaking then, invisible friends are in a kind of liminal, in-between, cognitive space, more likely to have special knowledge than people do, but less likely to know as God knows. This makes them, at the least, religiously interesting, perhaps as we suggest (Wigger, Paxson, & Kilchenman, under review) in similar cognitive territory as saints, or angels, or the spirits of those who have died—somewhere between an all-knowing God and limited humanity. Our hope is to continue this line of research into the “in-between,” ideally cross-culturally, to investigate whether and in what ways children engage invisible beings in various cultural and religious settings.

Because knowledge and wisdom are such important attributes of God, if not the spiritual life, better understanding how children develop their understandings of who knows what could help us better understand children themselves and the making of their theory of (religious) mind. And from our study we can wonder whether invisibility and imagination play key roles.

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