Imaginary Companions And Their Meaning To Counterfactual Thinking
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Theory
Thinking about what might have been, about hypothetical alternatives to our own pasts, is central to human thinking and emotion. Such ability is called counterfactual thinking and is developed before reaching the age of 4. During pretence, children create imagined scenarios about possible worlds, with some children more involved in pretence than others. This study is dedicated to children who are particularly involved in such imagined, possible worlds: Children with "imaginary companions". Imaginary companions (IC) are real for the children, but not visible to the outside world as such. In particular we want to know if preschool children with current or former ICs differ in their ability to understand and produce counterfactual alternatives to reality from children without ICs.

Do children with current and former Imaginary Companions (ICs) differ in their counterfactual thinking ability from children without ICs?

Method & Design
This Quasi-Experiment tests children (N=60) at the age of 3-6 years with current and former IC (N=30) and without IC (N=30) for their counterfactual thinking.

1. Counterfactual Understanding
   „If only I would have brought my umbrella, I would have stayed dry.“
   „Who said it?“

2. Counterfactual Production
   „Imagine that you are playing outside in the muddy yard….
   „What could you have done so the kitchen floor would not have gotten dirty?“

3. Open directed Counterfactual Production
   „Just imagine…
   …what if the the world would look like this…(Szenario 1, 2, 3)? “

Pending issues
If the assumption is confirmed, the importance of IC on a part of the cognitive development of children could potentially become scientifically measurable. In this case the fantasy phenomenon and the imaginative power of children in the field of developmental research would receive much more attention.

A current online parent survey is being done to determine how many children in Germany have an IC.

References

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