Reconceptualizing Imaginary Friends: Interdisciplinary Approaches for Understanding Invisible Companions

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Imaginary friends or invisible companions are common features of cross-cultural childhoods. Research is primarily located in developmental psychology, where invisible companions are considered part of imaginary play. We argue for a reconceptualization of the core phenomenon, to one of regularly interacting with a person who is not normally perceptible to others, instead of uncritically adopting the dominant Euro-Western ontology of imagination. Analyzing the central experience through other branches of psychology, anthropology, religion, and spirituality shows that different fields are potentially discussing the same phenomenon, albeit obscured by disciplinary boundaries. We outline some implications of this new approach for the development of childhood studies.

Key words: imaginary friends; invisible companions; imaginary companions; children's spirituality; children's imagination

Imaginary friends, or imaginary companions (ICs) as they are more commonly referred to in contemporary academic literature, have walked alongside us for decades. These enigmatic characters have been immortalized in a range of popular media. In Matthew Dicks's (2012) novel *Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend,* the protagonist, Budo, tells readers how lucky he is to be in Max's life. Max created Budo, blessing him with the freedom to travel, the wisdom of an older child, and lots of time to learn because he didn't need to sleep. In the 1991 Hollywood film *Drop Dead Fred*, an adult woman suffered a stressful time, losing her purse and job while battling problems of an unfaithful husband and a domineering mother. She found herself reconnecting with her childhood imaginary friend, Fred, for support (Hallowell, 2007). Such fictional depictions are entertaining, and people's narrative accounts of their own experiences are intriguing. Studies suggest that most ICs bring fun and friendship, usually acting as playmates. While most disappear during childhood never to be seen again, others live on into the adolescent years, with a few remaining into adulthood (Taylor, 1999).

Research demonstrates that imaginary companions are a common part of everyday experience for many children.

Indeed, Fernyhough et al. (2019) describe interacting with them as a "natural part of childhood for many" (p. 1), and while most empirical research has been conducted in Euro-Western contexts, wider studies demonstrate them to be a cross-cultural phenomenon (Taylor, 1999, and see Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Lin et al., 2018; Moriguchi & Todo, 2019; Wigger, 2018). Prevalence varies both within and across cultures. For example, Wigger's (2018) study in Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, and the Dominican Republic found that in a sample of 443 children aged 4–8 years, an average of 21% of them had an IC. However, the rates varied considerably across each country, from 5% in Nepal to 34% in the Dominican Republic. In other parts of the world, particularly in North America and Europe, higher percentages tend to be found. Hoff's (2005) study in Sweden recorded ICs in 52% of 60 children; Singer and Singer (1990) noted 65% in a study with 111 children in the UK; and Taylor (1999) reported 63% of 152 children in the USA. Wigger (2018) and McLewin and Muller (2006) observe that studies use different methodologies, with some involving parents as well as their children, which may account for some of the differences. Varying definitions of ICs in studies, detailed below, also account for different rates, making it difficult to produce definitive figures and to compare studies (Adams, 2010; Klausen & Passman, 2007; Trionfi & Reese, 2009; Wigger, 2018, 2019). Furthermore, Mills (2003), Majors and Baines (2017) and Wigger (2018) also note that culture plays an important part in shaping the acceptance of the concept, which may in turn affect results. Nevertheless, ICs are a familiar feature of many cultures.

Developmental psychology has become the dominant field for the study of ICs, in which the relationships between having ICs and various aspects of child development have been explored. These have included theory of mind, creativity, social and language development, object relations, imagination, and reality testing (Klausen & Passman, 2006). For readers seeking more detail on work in the field, we refer them to Klausen and Passman's (2006) historical overview of the phases of research into ICs, and to Armah and Landers-Potts' (2021) comprehensive literature review on ICs and children's development.

As the word *imaginary* implies, the majority of studies—and particularly those in developmental psychology—do not challenge the underlying assumption that ICs are creations of the mind. Here, we refer to the concept of the imaginary as understood in developmental psychology, while acknowledging that other conceptualizations exist in different fields. We propose a different direction for the conversation: one which challenges this fundamental assumption that underpins the concept of ICs in most Euro-Western thinking. Mills (2003) unintentionally highlighted this assumption when she aimed to compare ICs in the USA with those of children in India, initially assuming that a comparison would be straightforward. However, adults in India told her that children did not play alone and therefore had no need to create an imaginary friend, but they advised that children did speak to invisible companions. These were considered to exist in a spiritual realm and/or be part of the child's past-life memory. We embrace Mills's (2003) approach for engaging with a different worldview, not least because it challenges the privileged Euro-Western perspective but also because, by crossing disciplinary boundaries into religion, it begins to contest academic silos that inadvertently strengthen the dominant discourse of imagination.

However, we propose that a more substantive challenge is required. In an earlier book exploring different worlds children inhabit, often unseen to others, the lead author of this paper (Adams, 2010) noted that there was often a blurring of categories of unseen beings, which are labelled differently, including imaginary companions, spirits of the deceased, and ghosts (p. 43). Here, we develop that concept in detail. We offer an original contribution to the literature by first arguing that reconceptualizing imaginary friends/companions as depicted in the dominant Euro-Western discourse of developmental psychology is required. This deconstruction demands the input of a range of fields and disciplines that include Indigenous voices. In particular, we draw on bereavement studies, parapsychology, psychiatry, anthropology, religion, and spirituality to show that, in many cases, researchers of ICs and researchers in these other fields are potentially investigating the same phenomenon. This overlap is largely

obscured by disciplinary boundaries and their respective ontologies and terminologies, which remain separate. Finally, we propose that childhood studies would benefit both theoretically and in applied contexts from embracing the study of this reconceptualization of the cross-cultural phenomenon of ICs.

The language of "imaginary companions"

To develop our definition and reconceptualization, we need to analyze scholars' language and its underpinning assumptions. As the term *imaginary* friends/companions implies, most authors in the field view ICs as creations of the mind, usually as part of children's play. The title of Taylor's (1999) seminal book *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them* encapsulates this view. In her introduction, she writes, "imaginary companions … are just a variation on the theme of all the pretend play that is going on in the preschool years," albeit important play for cognitive and emotional development (p. 7). Similarly, Armah and Landers-Potts (2021) link ICs to "imaginative play" and similarly refer to the children "who create them" (p. 31). Davis et al. (2018) also describe them as a form of imaginative play (p. 2790). Such language is not confined to Euro-Western scholars. In a Chinese study, Lin et al. (2006) describe the children as engaging in *imaginary companion play*. In Japan, Moriguchi and Todo (2019) write: "Having an imaginary companion (IC) is an example of children's imaginative and pretend play" (p. 269). In addition, there are sections on ICs in books about imagination, such as those by Singer and Singer (1990) and Harris (2000). Even where authors sometimes deviate from the explicit term imaginary, the underlying assumption that ICs are deliberate creations of the mind remains the same. For example, Klausen and Passman (2006) refer to "pretend companions within the broader context of pretend play," and note that "imaginary companions/playmates" are interchangeable terms (p. 349).

The term *invisible companions* is increasingly seen in the literature. This usage could be viewed as a potential step forward in opening up the conversation to wider understandings that go beyond the often unquestioned stance of pretend creations. However, some authors, such as Gleason et al. (2000), Gleason (2004) and Wigger (2018), use it interchangeably with imaginary companions. Others, such as Roby and Kidd (2008) and Tahiroglu, Mannering, and Taylor (2011), use the term invisible to differentiate these companions from personified object friends such as toys, which are visible to others, but still assign the unseen companions to the realm of the imaginary.

Hence, use of the term invisible companions does not necessarily remove the automatic association with imagination, but it has the potential to create a space for a looser connection, a space that leaves room for different disciplinary and ontological interpretations. In the IC literature, the word invisible implies that normally the companion is only seen by the child while remaining invisible to others.

The interchangeability of the words companions and friends is common. While most children describe their ICs as being joyful additions to their lives, there are accounts of some being unpleasant and problematic for the child (Adams, 2020; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Hallowell, 2007; Majors & Baines, 2017; Taylor, 1999). For example, Hallowell (2007) reports details of 5-year-old Lewis's IC throwing clothes, pulling hair, and opening and closing drawers. Taylor (1999) also describes children complaining about their ICs hitting them, throwing temper tantrums, and putting yogurt in a child's hair. Therefore, we use the word companion instead of friend. Further consideration of the different types of ICs is also needed as part of our reconceptualization.

Narrowing our focus: Different forms of ICs

Svendsen (1934) is generally recognized as establishing the first definition of ICs, which others have continued to use and/or adapt (Klausen & Passman, 2006; McLewin & Muller, 2006). Svendsen (1934) described an IC as being

an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but with no apparent objective basis. (p. 988)

Svendsen deliberately excluded cases of children ascribing a personality to an object. Harris (2000) deemed this exclusion unnecessary, favouring a more inclusive definition based around "pretend play in which the child temporarily acts out the part of someone else using pretend actions and utterances" (p. 30). Numerous other authors have also included these object friends, such as Taylor (1999), Roby and Kidd (2008), Carter and Bath (2016), Davis et al. (2018), Wigger (2018), and Fernyhough et al. (2019). Some studies also include other types of ICs, such as animals (Klausen & Passman, 2006), superheroes and angels (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021) or a role/character that the child plays (McLewin & Muller, 2006). A small number of scholars also include paracosms—imaginary worlds that contain multiple characters and pretend identities (Hoff, 2005; Klausen & Passman, 2006; Taylor, 1999).

We share Svendsen's decision to exclude object friends. Instead, we focus only on ICs that take a human form. We make this choice first because empirical studies show that the majority of ICs take a human form (Majors & Baines, 2017). Second, the inclusion of object friends is unambiguously a form of pretend play in contrast to playing with invisible companions, where questions (should) arise as to whether these should unquestioningly be classified as imaginary or not. Third, the experience of interacting with a being taking a human form appears in a range of disciplines, albeit not framed as imaginary/invisible companions as they are in developmental psychology.

By focusing only on those human companions that are normally invisible to others, we capture the core phenomenon, which can be detected in a range of literature in other disciplines. Whereas others have used the terms imaginary companions and invisible companions interchangeably, we do not. From here on, we differentiate these as follows:

- We use the abbreviation ICs to indicate imaginary companions, as per traditional conventions in developmental psychology which often use the terms invisible companions or imaginary friends/companions interchangeably: those in human form, personified objects, animals, superheroes or angels, a role/character that the child plays and/or a paracosm. The child interacts with the companion(s) on a repeated basis rather than in a one-off encounter. The term implicitly and/or explicitly assumes the companions are all pretend creations in play.

- We use the abbreviation IvCs to indicate invisible companions: those in human form that are normally only discernible to the percipient. The child interacts with the companion(s) on a repeated basis rather than in a one-off encounter. The term does *not* implicitly and/or explicitly assume that the companions are *all* pretend creations in play.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of the Characteristics of Abbreviations IC and IvC

Permitted characteristic	IC Imaginary/invisible friend/companion	IvC Invisible companion
Deemed to be imaginary	Yes	Yes or No
Human form	Yes	Yes
Personified object	Yes	No
Animal	Yes	No
Superheroes, angels, etc.	Yes	No
Role that a child plays	Yes	No
Paracosm	Yes	No
Repeated interactions	Yes	Yes
Discernible to others	No	No
Discernible to the child *	Yes	Yes

*Experiencing the invisible companion may involve one or more of the following, in any combination: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and/or sensing their presence.

Beyond developmental psychology: IvCs in different fields

Essentially, we have deconstructed the concept of imaginary/invisible companions by setting aside the dominant assumptions of imaginary play and focusing on the most common manifestation: those with a human form. In so doing, we illuminate the core experience children and adults report. Narrowing our focus to this core experience of interacting with IvCs facilitates engagement with other fields that also study human-form invisible companions, although they frame them differently. We now outline fields that study the same or similar experience, noting their respective conceptual framing and terminologies, before moving on to discuss interdisciplinary approaches in more detail. We begin with different branches of psychology.

Bereavement studies

Another means of framing the experience of encountering an IvC is located in bereavement studies. Here, the invisible person is deceased and known to the recipient. In this context the IvC is often termed *sense of presence* (Steffen & Coyle, 2010, p. 273). Hayes and Leudar (2016) observe that between 50% and 80% of people report the presence of a deceased person whom they had been close to. This presence can take different forms, including hearing their voice or other sounds related to them, feeling their touch, seeing, and/or sensing them.

Theoretical explanations for encountering the deceased include the stages of grieving developed by Kübler-Ross (1969) and Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005). One stage is that of denial, during which the bereaved person may see or sense the deceased. While this model has been considerably critiqued (Stroebe et al., 2017), there are nevertheless many reports of people's encounters with their deceased loved ones.

Another model is attachment theory, based on Bowlby's concept that young children develop a bond with their primary caregivers, which recognizes that adults also have bonds with other adults. Bowlby proposed that following a death, the bereaved person often seeks to reestablish the attachment and may see or hear the deceased (Field et al., 2006). The terminology of *continuing bonds*, which can aid the grieving process, is also used in this field (Steffen

& Coyle, 2010).

While most research focuses on adults, Clabburn et al. (2019) identified continuing bonds as a common theme in papers exploring young people's experience of bereavement. They described the bonds as spontaneous events that usually involved the bereaved person seeing, hearing, or sensing their deceased loved one. These were mostly positive experiences, although in some cases they caused distress.

Different language is used elsewhere. For example, Guggenheim and Guggenheim (1996) coined the term *after-death communications*, which are also referred to as *visitations* (Kwilecki, 2011, p. 221). As described in the literature on the grieving process, these communications can similarly take a number of forms, including sense of presence, visual images, voices, smells, unusual activity in electrical appliances, and appearances of natural phenomena (Kwilecki, 2011). In addition to occurring in either waking or dream states, communications can also take place during meditation, coma, or near-death experiences (Tassell-Matamua & McCormick, 2016). The percipient may also feel the touch of the deceased, and the experience is often within the first year after death (Kwilecki, 2009). Tassell-Matamua and McCormick (2016) and Exline (2021) note that these experiences can overlap with "continuing bonds."

The experience of repeatedly interacting with a deceased person following bereavement may therefore be applicable to a small number of cases reported as ICs, dependent on the child's circumstances and their description of the companion. The ontologies embedded in theories of grieving are varied. They include: beliefs that by encountering the deceased, the bereaved person has experienced a "misperception" reflecting their denial of the death; psychoanalytic theories suggesting that the experiences are a form of wish fulfillment; and experients' views that they are genuinely communicating with the deceased person (Cooper, 2017, p. 357). Whichever of these ontologies are assumed, the concept of being able to interact with a deceased person who is normally invisible to others challenges developmental psychology's explanations of deliberately creating a person for the purposes of play.

Parapsychology

The concept of after-death communications also crosses over with areas of study in parapsychology. Irwin and Watt (2007) note variations in defining parapsychology. Their reference point is "the scientific study of experiences which, if they are as they seem to be, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists" (p. 1). Irwin and Watt do not assume the existence of the paranormal, although they observe that other scholars in the field do and that some contemporaries also define parapsychology as the study of the paranormal.

The most relevant area of parapsychology to ICs is the study of apparitional experiences. Irwin and Watt (2007, p. 192) note that this term is based on a theory that an objective entity exists. They present a taxonomy of four types: experimental, in which living people create an apparition of themselves which appears to a specified participant; crisis, in which a person undergoing a crisis appears; postmortem, when a person who has been dead for at least 12 hours appears; and ghosts, where the same figure is seen in the same location on several occasions, often by a range of witnesses.

Taylor (1999) draws parallels between childhood ICs and adults who report ghostly appearances. While Taylor recognizes the subjectivity inherent in judging whether an experience is real or fantasy, shaped in part by culture, she argues that for an adult's report of a ghost to be considered the same as a child's report of an IC, the adult needs to believe that the ghost is a figment of their imagination. For Taylor, the belief that the invisible person/entity is imaginary is an essential criterion; where this belief exists, there are clear similarities between the ontologies of

developmental psychologists and some parapsychologists. However, where a person is certain, or suspects, that a ghostly apparition is/might be real, this contests developmental psychology's assumption that all are imaginary creations.

Psychiatry

Another discipline that addresses the phenomenon of perceiving a person whom others usually cannot is psychiatry. The experiences of hearing voices and seeing people who are not accessible to others are referred to as auditory and visual hallucinations. These can occur separately, as hearing voices or seeing visual phenomena, where they are termed *multisensory hallucinatory experiences* (Steenkamp et al., 2021 p. 5). If we apply this psychiatric language to a typical IC report, most would be unisensory experiences as they contain both seeing and hearing. The phrase *auditory verbal hallucinations* is also regularly used (Fernyhough et al., 2019, p. 1; Jardri et al., 2014, p. 221).

In psychiatric practice, diagnoses of mental illnesses are guided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* (APA, 2013), which defines and classifies disorders in considerable detail. It states that in schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders, auditory hallucinations are the most prevalent and are involuntary. However, despite historical concerns that ICs were a sign of mental illness, this view has been discredited (Fernyhough et al., 2019; Taylor, 1999). In fact, there is increasing recognition that hallucinations are prevalent in the nonpathological general population (Jardri et al., 2014; Larøi et al., 2006; Steenkamp, 2021), including in children and adolescents. Causes can vary, encompassing physical conditions such as migraine and life events like trauma, abuse, bullying, and bereavement. Such hallucinations are often transitory, passing when a physical condition has been treated or a problem resolved, and in the case of trauma through therapy, often with no need for medication (Larøi et al., 2006). Nevertheless, psychiatry is a relevant field to consider in this reconceptualization. As defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, disorders are founded on Western medical and social constructs that move beyond developmental psychology's notion of purposeful imagination to explain the experience of interacting with invisible people.

Anthropology, religion, and spirituality

Given that psychiatry and psychology are dominant fields in Euro-Western cultures, it is necessary to move outside psychology and explore other disciplines that have a stronger focus on different cultures. These can challenge the dominant disciplines and incorporate wider worldviews, including those of Indigenous communities. Anthropology is a particularly important discipline for these purposes.

Earlier, we considered parapsychology's study of ghosts. Some of these reports of what parapsychologists term *ghosts* may cross over with concepts of the soul or spirit. Hunter (2015) notes that within anthropology, the term *spirits* applies to a wide range of nonphysical entities. These include spirits of the dead, nature spirits, angels, and deities. He describes different theoretical approaches. Intellectualism and cognitive approaches, typical of early anthropology, tend to be reductionist in nature, aiming to explain away the belief in spirits. In contrast, relativist approaches focus on the importance of people's belief in spirits as opposed to whether or not the spirits exist.

Eller (2014) observes that the belief that humans have a spiritual element(s) that can survive the body after physical death is common to most cultures. This idea takes different forms. In Christianity it is the soul; in Hinduism it is atman. Eller (2014) demonstrates the diversity of beliefs across cultures. For example, the Tausug communities of the Philippines believe that the soul comprises four parts. Similarly, the Konyak Nagas of India believe that the soul is made of several parts which separate at death. Many cultures believe that spirits appear to people in the physical world. Varner (2010), writing on North American Indigenous communities, notes that the Kawaiisu believe that the spirit or ghost, the *inipi*, can become visible in the form of a human being and subsequently disappear or fly

away. In Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw culture, a ghost becomes visible when it arrives to fetch the soul of a person before their death.

Astuti (2011) spoke with young people in the village of Vezo in West Madagascar when exploring how the children constructed their understanding of death and the afterlife. The adults wanted to rid the children of dangerous thoughts, including preventing malevolent *angaste* spirits appearing in their dreams and leading them toward illness and death. Children were also taught that *the olo vakatsy* were spirits that had risen from the dead who were unwanted by their families, and were visible. Cassaniti and Luhrmann (2011) also highlight differences in the cultural framing of supernatural encounters in their study in the USA and Thailand, which found that the Thai participants tended to refer to entities such as ghosts in sensory terms compared to the US participants who tended to refer to experiences as external autonomous beings.

In addition to anthropological studies, surveys in the fields of religion and spirituality have gathered data on religious and/or spiritual experience. As Nelson and Hart (2003) recognize, these surveys are often framed around generic questions such as "Have you ever had a religious or mystical experience that is a moment of sudden religious insight or awakening?" (p. 3). Typically, these studies collect data on a wide range of phenomena, much of which is not relevant to this paper, but we extract those data which are. Nelson and Hart conducted a survey of 453 adults in the USA with a mean age of 20.5. They asked participants if they had "ever seen, physically felt, smelled or heard something or somebody that [they] realized in retrospect was not readily there in the same way as ordinary everyday objects, people and events" (p. 18). In total, 44% (n=199) reported they had, of which 29% (n=58) had experienced it twice or more. Another question was: "Have you ever felt a presence of someone who was not there in a physical way?" (p. 18). The majority, 58% (n=263), reported they had, of which 43% (n=113) had experienced it twice or more.

Some studies gathered retrospective accounts of childhood encounters (e.g., Hoffman, 1992; Scott, 2004). Again, questions have tended to be framed broadly and elicited a wide range of responses. Hoffman (1992) collected "over 250" accounts from adults aged 20 to 85 of a childhood experience which was "mystical or intensely spiritual … moments in which [they] seemed to experience a different kind of reality" (p. 18). He organized the experiences into nine categories, one of which—"uncanny perceptions"—included narratives of seeing people no one else could see. Some were people known to them who had died and others were unknown to them.

Hart (2004, 2006) argues that developmental theory has traditionally dismissed the idea that children have genuine spiritual experiences. In a separate publication (Hart & Zellars, 2006), he and a colleague write on ICs specifically from a spiritual perspective. They observe that some descriptions of ICs are "qualitatively distinct" from conventional accounts (p. 6). Specifically, some appear to provide wisdom to the child, taking on the role of guides. They detail four case studies, two of which took a human form. Meg, an American woman, described her childhood companion as a French-speaking girl who used to watch over her and comfort her in difficult times.

Hence, according to various cultures, many spirits can take a human form, such as Hunter's (2015) spirits of the dead, the *inipi* (Varner, 2010), sensing someone (Nelson & Hart, 2003), seeing a person (Hoffmann, 1992), and the invisible woman and girl described by Hart and Zellars (2006). These ontologies resemble those of bereavement theorists and parapsychologists and, with their other-worldly conceptions, also challenge developmental psychology's focus on imaginary creations in play.

However, not all spirits adopt a human shape, even those which once had an earthly life, such as the *tasel*, reported by Eller (2014). These spirits which adopt different forms also offer a pertinent interruption and challenge to the dominant discourse. While this paper focuses on ICs in human form, Wigger's (2019) multicountry study

of ICs revealed that some were shapeshifters, such as 4-year-old Amy's IC, called Cinderella, who was a girl who had previously appeared as a blue dog. Similarly, Aguiar et al.'s (2017) study reported a 9-year-old child whose IC, a boy, could shapeshift into any kind of animal to avoid being caught. While there are no systematic studies of human ICs who have the ability to change shape, and this type comprises a very small minority of ICs, their existence is important. While they may well be perceived as deliberate creations of the imagination, the belief in shapeshifters is embedded in many cultures, from ancient civilizations through to contemporary communities. Kachuba (2019) explains that in ancient Greek mythology, the god Zeus transformed into different people and animals, and describes how, in the 1990s, the Yukaghir in northern Siberia believed they could transform into animals. Bluett (2020) also notes that in the European Celtic tradition, shapeshifters were seen as beings that could move between different realms. Widespread beliefs in the spirit world are therefore an important challenge to the predominant discourse. Furthermore, although this paper has not focused on ICs that take other forms, such as angels and paracosms, we nevertheless recognize that these are important features of some children's lives, as explored earlier in a wider context by the lead author (Adams, 2010).

Discussion and implications

We have adopted the narrow definition of the Euro-Western concept of an imaginary friend/companion of those taking human form, and then set aside the automatic assumption of it being a creation of the imagination. We then focused on the core experience—that of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and/or sensing the presence of another person on a repeated basis who is not normally perceptible to others. In so doing, we have been able to identify the same phenomenon being studied across different disciplines, albeit enshrined in varying respective ontologies, epistemologies, and terminologies. It is important to emphasize that not every report in a different field is relevant to the definition of an IvC. For example, some accounts of ghosts, spirits, or after-death communications are only singular manifestations, which would not meet the criterion of a repeated interaction (see Table 1).

In this section, we first draw on examples of authors who make links between their respective field of study and others to develop our argument that an interdisciplinary approach needs to consider all relevant fields, not just one or two. Second, we challenge the dominance of Euro-Western approaches, particularly that of developmental psychology's discourse of ICs, and call for the consideration of a wide range of disciplinary perspectives according to the specific experience being reported. Finally, we consider the implications for childhood studies in embracing the study of ICs and IvCs.

Breaking down disciplinary barriers

The summaries of disciplinary approaches presented above, which investigate the reframed phenomenon of IvCs, reflect the tendency for many scholars to remain within the confines of their own discipline, wedded to their own ontologies, epistemologies, and associated terminologies. Of course, there are exceptions, where researchers have drawn on other fields and suggested parallels with them (e.g., Dein, 2012; Little et al., 2021; Steffen & Coyle, 2010; Wigger, 2019). For example, Dein (2012) notes that both psychiatry and parapsychology focus on anomalous phenomena which include having visions and hearing voices. We add that some of these experiences, particularly if the being appears in human form, may well be categorized as an IC from a developmental psychology perspective. Little et al. (2021) write from a parapsychological standpoint, observing the parallels between children's accounts of ghosts and reports of ICs. They conclude that while there are some differences between the two, there are more commonalities; for example, both types of accounts include communicating with another entity, hearing audible voices, and experiencing visions.

Similarly, Steffen and Coyle (2010), writing on bereavement, propose that sensing the presence of the deceased

might be considered as spiritual. They note that many positivist-empirical paradigms in psychology are reluctant to consider it in this way, in part because of the inherent conceptual, epistemological, and clinical difficulties arising. Exline (2021), a psychologist of religion and spirituality, reaches out to other disciplines in her work on after-death communications. She explores them through three different frameworks—psychopathology, normal psychological processes, and supernatural encounters—outlining the different interpretations and implications each framework brings. Critically, she shows how the same experience can be understood in these three different ways—an approach we take here, albeit that we draw on more than three disciplines.

While Steffen and Coyle (2010) and Exline (2021) focus specifically on the bereaved who experience the presence of a person known to them, these interdisciplinary views may well apply to a small number of encounters in the IC literature, that is, when a bereaved child describes their companion as a person known to them who has died. Researchers of ICs would not necessarily be aware if a child was bereaved, making this type of encounter difficult or impossible to identify in most studies. Such examples may be found in parapsychology and/or further illuminated if children used the words *ghosts* or *spirits*. However, if they were participating in a study of imaginary friends, they might not use the former terms. One potential exception was detected in Majors' (2013) study of eight children aged between 5 and 11 in the UK. An 11-year-old girl referred to as Ella described her IC as the spirit of her grandmother, who had died when Ella was 4 years old. Ella explained how she shared her problems with her IC, which helped her understand them better and to relax. Conversely, if children were participating in a study about ghosts or spirits, they—and the researchers—may not use the phrase imaginary friends. How researchers frame their questions is, of course, highly pertinent in shaping the answers receive.

Some scholars who specifically research ICs have also drawn on different fields. Wigger (2019), a social worker and ordained Presbyterian minister, drew on psychology, including theory of mind, but also considers different cultural and religious beliefs. He reflects on "a variation on the theme of imaginary friends" in Mexico (p. 123), the *alux*—spirits which children often see in fields and forests—and suggests that various religions and cultures have "in-between" figures such as angels, ghosts, and ancestors (p. 122).

In addition, psychologists Fernyhough et al. (2019) note a recent interest in comparing ICs with auditory verbal hallucinations. They explore the relationship between these phenomena and inner speech and argue that ICs show a "hallucination-like experience … which shows meaningful developmental relations with the experience of inner speech" (p. 1).

Bluett (2020) focused on ICs in her doctoral research, set in the context of children's relationships and early years education in Aotearoa New Zealand. She also contested the Euro-Western dominance that automatically assigns the experience to the imaginary and argued that we also need to consider different cultures' knowledge and understandings. In particular, she explored inheritance as an important feature and detailed how Celtic and Māori storying includes the existence of companions, unseen to others, throughout the lifespan to give advice and counsel. This narrative is not considered by the dominant Euro-Western discourse on ICs but is explored by Hart and Zellars (2006). Writing in the USA, they suggest that some ICs appear to give wisdom to their human friends. Bluett (2020) develops the term *culturally compatible travelling companions* (p. 349) to reflect the importance of inheritance in diverse cultural understandings based on her belief that:

> children are the recipients of ancestral inheritance which informs and upholds sophisticated and complex epistemological and ontological approaches to conceptualising the various relationships, and relationship companions. (p. 399)

While the authors cited in this section offer clear examples of working across disciplines to understand the

respective, similar phenomenon they focus on, we argue that this reach needs to extend further to include the wide range of fields we outlined earlier as relevant to the specific experience—fields which together embody a combination of diverse worldviews.

Challenging dominant discourses

The privileging of the dominant discourse around ICs is, as shown earlier, evident in the language used, even in some cases of the term *invisible* replacing *imaginary*. Literature also demonstrates this privileging when the identification of ICs is discussed. For example, Wigger (2018) suggests, when citing Mills's (2003) finding that children in India may have friends from a previous life whom they consider to be nonimaginary, that

> it could also be the case that children around the world have such companions, but that they are interpreted differently in light of particular socio-cultural beliefs. (pp. 47–48)

We propose that these past-life beliefs and other explanations such as paranormal, spiritual, and/or religious should be considered with equal status, rather than, in this case, imposing a Euro-Western view onto Indian cultural values. If this approach were taken, then different questions would arise:

- Have researchers in India missed accounts of past lives or seeing spirits in the West because of particular sociocultural beliefs which have labelled them imaginary companions?

- Are children in the West who are thought to have ICs actually remembering past lives or seeing spirits?

A similar difficulty lies with Klausen and Passman's (2006) claim that "many early descriptions of pretend companions may not be recognized as such because they were depicted in terms of spirits and other supernatural concepts" (p. 351). When referring to Mills's (2003) findings that children in India had relatively limited time for play, they asserted that "children in India have had few opportunities to develop pretend companions" (Klausen & Passman, 2006, p. 352). Again, the unquestioned assumption is that alternative non-Euro-Western descriptions are not correct.

Their statements could equally be reframed as follows:

- Many early descriptions of spirits and supernatural concepts may not have been recognized as such because they were depicted in terms of pretend companions.

- Children in Euro-Western cultures have had few opportunities to identify past-life and/or spirit encounters because their companions have been categorized as pretend/imaginary companions.

Moving away from developmental psychology but remaining with a Euro-Western view, Little et al.'s (2021) parapsychological paper suggests that some IC reports may:

> constitute "disguised or overlooked" ghostly episodes or encounter experiences ... [and] some IC experients might merely interpret their perceptions as imaginary play or fantasy constructions when in fact they involve something more anomalous. (p. 19)

While they acknowledge the wide range of encounter experiences, we could reframe their statement this way:

- Some experients of ghostly phenomena might merely interpret their perceptions as a ghost or haunting when in fact they involve an imaginary companion

We use these reframed statements to further illustrate that the same experience can be viewed differently: that in

some cases, the same phenomenon is being studied but alternative explanations are rarely considered. For clarity, we are not denying that many IvCs are imaginary as understood in developmental psychology. Many children purposefully create them as part of play, just as they might create an invisible rocket on which to fly to the moon, or mentally transform a tree branch into a magic wand, and children's voices are important to the conversation. Indeed, in her early work, Taylor (1999) proposed that a child needs to believe that the IC is imaginary for it to be classified as such. However, not all researchers pose this question to their participants. We also maintain that the dominant Euro-Western discourse—which tends to constrain all ICs to this narrow definition of pretend play (see Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Davis et al., 2018; Klausen & Passman, 2006; Moriguchi & Todo, 2019)—can limit alternative explanations.

Neither are we arguing that most IvCs are ghosts, spirits, or hallucinations. We do not privilege any of the views detailed in this paper. Some apparitional experiences reported in parapsychology would not be relevant as they may be singular occurrences and/or be apparent to several people and/or appear to the child but not involve interaction with them. Similarly, it is unlikely that theories of grief are relevant to significant numbers of reports of imaginary friends/companions because few children would have been bereaved at the time. Hence, not all perspectives are pertinent to all cases. Rather, we suggest that a range of perspectives may be relevant to most reports of ICs, not simply those of developmental psychology.

Through reconceptualizing ICs that take a human form, returning to the central core experience separated from the assumption of imaginary play, we can make a small indent into the robust boundaries of academic silos. This facilitates an interdisciplinary approach, which in turn also demands changes to the research questions we pose—questions that do not necessarily privilege any one ontological position. New questions may need to abandon current implicit assumptions and incorporate subtle changes to the language used. For example, a developmental psychologist might avoid using the words imaginary and invisible interchangeably, and a parapsychologist may ask a child to describe seeing an invisible person rather than a ghost. This different approach simultaneously concurs with and challenges the current dominant discourse; it respects the ontology and epistemologies of developmental psychology by accepting that many encounters with invisible companions are likely to be pretend play, but gives equal credence to a wide range of other disciplinary approaches which are not necessarily restricted to the cultural norms of the researcher(s) and their participants.

The implications for childhood studies

Although ICs are recognized as a cross-cultural phenomenon (see Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Lin et al., 2016; Moriguchi & Todo, 2019; Wigger, 2018), it is barely visible in childhood studies. Canosa and Graham's (2019) literature review assessed how childhood studies has evolved and found that it has tended to be more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. They identify that many are reluctant to move outside the typical boundaries of their disciplines, and argue that each subdiscipline tends to publish in, and cite from, particular journals at the expense of drawing on broader literature. We can also apply this point to the work on ICs, which tends to be located in developmental psychology and its associated journals, rarely drawing on other literature, including that from childhood studies. Majors' (2013) study of ICs, published in the journal *Childhood*, is one exception.

In a similar vein, Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery (2020) argue that childhood studies has largely remained reluctant to draw on psychology in general and developmental psychology in particular. They go on to lament that childhood studies has focused primarily on social-constructionist approaches, and suggest that neither psychology nor childhood studies has responded to reciprocal calls to see what each could offer the other. They write:

> Being open to explore the work of psychologists, even while continuing to discuss paradigmatic differences, would change childhood studies from a multidisciplinary to a more interdisciplinary project, unafraid to dialogue with difference. (p. 14)

The study of ICs and IvCs can contribute to this interdisciplinary endeavour as part of the quest to understand this shared feature of global childhoods. Certainly, the emphasis on social constructionism is relevant, because sociocultural factors have a strong bearing on how encountering an invisible person can be labelled and interpreted, from imagination through to a spirit encounter, among other aforementioned possibilities. Mills's (2003) initial attempt to compare ICs in the USA with those she anticipated finding in India is a good example of how cultures shape understanding of the same experience in very different ways. Applying a social constructionist lens to classifications of ICs and IvCs offers an interesting area for future exploration, albeit with the recognition that some religious and/or cultural ideas are not easily transferable or open to reframing.

Canosa and Graham (2019) also identify calls in childhood studies to disrupt ideas, including Gagen's (2010) rally to "push the boundaries … through greater experimentation and more dissent from the protocols" (p. 32). If childhood studies embraced ICs and other experiences not commonly addressed, this could lead to increased conversations around thinking differently about children's experiences. With this proposed reconceptualization from ICs to IvCs as just one example, this and similar moves would contribute to advancing childhood studies' outlook and its further development as a field.

The subdisciplines of childhood studies may find the concept of IvCs of interest, both theoretically and, where relevant, in applied contexts. For example, there are potential applications in education for theory and practice. The proposal to reframe ICs and embrace both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, as proposed here, offers an area for critical thinking and debate around ontologies and epistemologies for students in secondary, tertiary and higher education systems. Challenging the taken-for-granted Euro-Western assumptions that all ICs are imaginary forms of play is a practical way of illustrating the power of critical thinking through a topic many students will identify with, even if they did/do not have an IC or IvC themselves.

Younger children in schools and childcare settings may also benefit from discussions around ICs and IvCs, particularly because they are the most likely to currently have them. ICs feature in children's literature, such as *Imaginary Fred* by Colfer and Jeffers (2016) and *The Adventures of Beekle* by Santat (2014). While most are written from Euro-Western perspectives and there is a need for more representation of different cultures, they are useful resources, including to children who have not had such a companion. The texts can be used as a literary device in creative writing or the arts and also as a conversation starter to explore children's experiences and/or ideas about who and what these invisible companions might be, particularly in cultures different to their own. Bluett (2020) suggests, in relation to New Zealand's early years education curriculum *Te Whāriki*, that teachers can become critically aware of their own storying and reach outside their personal worldview to "consider what else may be known about children and childhood" (p. 737); that is, by recognizing that other cultures bring different interpretations of ICs to that of the privileged developmental psychology worldview.

This list of benefits is by no means intended to be exhaustive; rather, it indicates the possibilities that can exist for childhood studies and applied practice should some in the field choose to embrace this common feature of childhoods and challenge the dominant Euro-Western conception.

Conclusion

If we are to truly understand the phenomenon of imaginary/invisible companions of human form, we need to

be open to a wide range of explanations. Reconceptualizing the phenomenon of ICs by taking it back to its core experiential components—of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and/or sensing the presence of another person on a repeated basis who is not normally perceptible to others—aids in breaking down the academic silos—silos which obscure the fact that researchers in a range of disciplines are, in many cases, studying the same phenomenon but not recognizing that they are doing so.

As Mills (2003) showed in her work in India and the USA, researchers' language needs to be culturally compatible with the context in which the study is situated. Therefore, the developmental psychologists' ontological position that ICs are creations of the imagination is as valid as any other. But other ontologies are equally important. Some of these encounters might be continuing bonds, after-death communications, spirits, past-life memories, ghosts, nonpathological hallucinations, or, in rare circumstances, pathological hallucinations. In many cases, albeit not all, these are potentially the same phenomenon but have been labelled differently.

In being open to a wide range of cross-cultural understandings, including those held by underrepresented voices, we can potentially transcend multiple disciplinary boundaries. This can lead to new understandings of this enduring element of invisible companions, who will undoubtedly remain alongside children around the world for centuries to come, no matter how researchers might describe them.

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