

# **Imaginary Companionship and Adult Memory Narratives: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

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*Signed: Caroline Denise Rond*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study has been to understand the experience of imaginary companionship through the memory narratives of adults. Following a mid-century lull in research on imaginary companions, contemporary studies have focused primarily on childhood populations. Using correlational methods to draw inference between imaginary companionship status and other developmental facets of childhood these large sample studies have sought links for instance to theory of mind, narrative ability, perspective-taking and creativity. However, as less is known about the personal meanings attached to and the lived experiencing of these early relationships, the study has taken a phenomenological approach.

For the nine university students who remembered having had an imaginary companion and who volunteered to share their stories, the aim was to understand the meanings attached to these companionships through idiosyncratic, personal accounts. The delineated phenomenon, 'the remembered as told', permitted an understanding of both the experience and its interpretation within a context of intentionality and temporality. The individual narrative interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). From the narrative data emerged the following key themes: The relationship experience, social comparison, self-evaluation, the impact of the imaginary companion relationship on identity formation, the influence of mother as a key figure, the influence of others in memory and, the experience of temporality and loss.

What is apparent from a collective examination of the narratives is how the imaginary companionship is experienced ecologically in terms of other co-occurring experiences and connections to relationships within the family. Interpretation shows further that the connections include past and present representations of self and that, as a potentially self-defining memory, this special companionship has, for some individuals, facilitated coherence in their evolving life stories.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The idea for this study grew essentially from an interest in the workings of the imagination, initially from observing children at work and play. Employed in psychological and educational settings, clinics and schools, in Southern Africa and the USA, I consider myself fortunate to have been an observer of children. And so I have for a number of years been intrigued by this thing we term 'imagination'. All kinds of children in all kinds of settings moving beyond the actual into a place of projected alternatives.

The decision to research imaginary companions came about as a result of a graduate childhood studies module, 'Imaginary Worlds', and an essay I wrote on young children's imaginary friends. This would be my first exposure to academic literature on the topic. And as I myself had not had an imaginary companion nor knew of any other family member with one, my first sense of the phenomenon was reliant on my own imaginative faculty and of course the second-hand source material of research articles and text books.

The first step towards this current project was the completion of a literature-based dissertation on imaginary companions in 2013, (Way, 2013). Theoretical findings pointed to a most normative and in fact developmentally significant role of the imaginary companion. The paper highlighted the findings of several contemporary studies most notably, the link to theory of mind (Taylor, Cartwright & Carlson, 1993; Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Taylor, Carlson & Shawber 2007), to 'cognitive flexibility' and mental displacement, (Hoff and Carlson, 2002), creativity (Somers & Yawkey 1984; Hoff, 2000; Hoff, 2005; Bouldin, 2006), to levels of self-knowledge (Davis, Meins & Fernyhough 2011), richer narrative ability (Trionfi & Reece 2009), and, to 'referential communication' skills (Roby & Kidd 2008). The emergent picture was one of children benefitting personally and socially from these relationships and as already highlighted, a fairly common part of early childhood.

One of the motivating factors for this current study was a timely reading of Klausen and Passman's 'Pretend Companions: The Emergence of a Field'

(2006). Herein the authors have pooled archival material, historical antecedents that have both informed and shaped our current knowledge on this topic. The article, on a personal level, did well to highlight an ontological readiness following what the authors describe as a 'mid-century lull'. With the emergence of an enthused empiricism came new questions and methods and it appeared, according to the authors, that imaginary companionship had begun taking its place within the broader ambit of developmental psychology alongside other forms of pretend play.

As mentioned earlier, the theoretical dissertation was a step towards this current research. However, it was not a step in the same direction. As a theoretical endeavour it permitted cognitive, academic access to the phenomenon. The experiential essence, the 'felt' dimension of the relationship, was still some distance away. The opportunity for further research meant I was given a second chance, to get closer to the phenomenon, to add to Klausen's 'emergent field' of research.

Initial consideration was given to the perspective of adults as a novel extension of the phenomenon. The imaginary companion has developmental relevance to early childhood, its temporal parameters evidently set in place between the ages four to six or seven, (Taylor 1997; Taylor 1999; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup 2000; Taylor & Carlson 2004; Hoff 2004). Studies examining imaginary companionship from other points along the developmental continuum are limited and there are few with adult participants other than those wherein parental testimony for the child is sought. The feasibility of understanding the experience retrospectively, from an adult perspective, made phenomenological sense. In the end, students from the university campus were voluntarily recruited, sharing with me their stories of imaginary companionships.

A decision was made at this stage not to de-limit the concept of an imaginary companion. By allowing participants to decide for themselves the nature of their own experiences I felt firstly, it more likely that the emergent narratives would be personally embedded. Secondly, I considered the landscape of memory to be

ambiguous and so too the concept of imaginary companions. By leaving these two things in their natural state I hoped for a greater catchment area; an increased likelihood that participants would be able to access their past with a sense of ownership and confidence, speaking freely about even the ambiguous experiences. Thirdly, an understanding of imaginary companions would already no doubt be de-limited, framed by existent perceptions and beliefs. By leaving the definition open there was a chance for conceptual reflection and perhaps reconsideration. Fourthly, with the purposeful collapsing of this conceptual boundary there was hope that whole ecologies may emerge from the stories, naturally apparent links to other remembered things, to self, childhood, family relations, life events etc. This decision was therefore an auspicious one and marked the beginning of this research as an interpretive journey.

Nine Oxford Brookes University students from an array of academic pursuits have shared their memories of imaginary companions with me. I, in turn, am to share them with you the reader.

The introductory chapter begins with a taxonomic interpretation of imagination and imaginative play. The imagination is put forward for the reader as a particular flexibility, a capacity which appears to 'invigorate' other mental functions and seems to enable the imaginative person to conceive of a wider than normal range of actions or ways of being. A general discussion on imaginary play suggests that it serves both normative and adaptive purposes for the child. Suggestive of a personal interest in the value of play I have included in the discussion concerns over the threat of its extinction due in part to the shrinking of imaginative space, time, place, and encouragement to pretend. Marjorie Taylor, an imaginary companion researcher whom readers will be familiar with by the end of this study, has questioned the vulnerability of children's imagination due to the ever increasing consumption of fantasy in the media.

Following on from this, the next section begins a more in depth look at the imaginary companion. Imaginary friendships are not characteristic of any



particular homogenous group and the literature has suggested that this particular form of symbolic relationship is a valuable tool in the facilitation of social competencies (Bouldin & Pratt 2002; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup 2000; Taylor 1999; Taylor and Carlson 1997). This chapter summarises for the reader the current status of imaginary companion research and gives some attention to the correlates and developmental attributes which have been postulated as related to early imaginary companionship. What becomes clear from an understanding of this section is that imaginary companions are no longer conceived of exclusively as markers for children's poor reality-testing, ego defensiveness or as the result of acute early trauma. Included in the discussion of research outcomes are findings on theory of mind, creativity, fantasy predisposition, narrative ability, self-knowledge and cognitive flexibility. Following this, I have included a description of Taylor's much used 'Imaginary Companion Interview', (1997), a screening instrument employed to determine imaginary companionship status in childhood. The final section covers what I have termed 'definitional discrepancy', a conceptual debate concerning the inclusionary/exclusionary criteria for an imaginary companion relationship. Although I remind readers of the non-definitional and interpretive stance adopted in this current study, it is worth noting Svendsen's (1934) definition, a most frequently cited one: "An *invisible character* named and referred to in conversations 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 no apparent *objective basis*" (Hart & Zellars 2006 p.6).

The methodology chapter begins by positioning the research within an interpretive epistemology. Concerned with the meanings of imaginary companionship for individuals rather than the quantification or frequency of this phenomenon, the act of interpretation relies on social processes such as language, consciousness and intersubjectivity. The reader is reminded that generalisations from this small sample of participants to any larger population is not something that is aimed for.

In line with the interpretive stance, the methodology section encourages the reader to enter into a negotiated discussion around child and adult and this is done from the perspective of human geography. Concepts drawn from the landscape of childhood and adulthood, referencing the work of human geographers Chris Philo and Owain Jones, (Philo & Jones 2003; Jones 2011), are explained as non-reified and temporal experiences viewed against the background of the child-adult binary so often witnessed in developmental literature. Much of the work referred to in this section is rooted in Bachelard's (1969a), 'Poetics of Reverie', a phenomenological interpretation of childhood as a place that is revisited, imaginatively returned to by adults.

Continuing along this line, there is a reflection on the service of autobiographical memory. Through the collapsing of space and time memory retains its potency in the personal construction of self. This leads us to consider too the potential for de-stabilisation through attempting to reconstruct our memories and therefore ourselves. A childhood experience such as the relationship with an imaginary companion must therefore take account of many factors in its recollection. What follows the more philosophical discussion is the provision for the reader of five research examples. These are examples of studies by other researchers that have attempted a similar sojourn to childhood via adult memory encounters.

Before the phenomenon under investigation is reached, the reader is given an overview of phenomenology and researcher preparation. Thereafter the study moves towards delineation of what it is that will be investigated, identifying and describing three closely related imaginary companionship phenomena : The adult who remembers; The imaginary companion as remembered and; The remembered as told. Despite the fact that it may be a fairly common methodological goal in phenomenological research to describe phenomena it is difficult if not impossible to separate out the experiential component, how it exists in mind. This has much to do with the idea of '*essences*', (Husserl 1977), and is what makes a phenomenon what it is, its way of being. The phenomenon

of the remembered as told, for instance, has to do with telling someone else a story about something particular one remembers, something that happened and that one was a part of. This has a special kind of temporal value, as much about what happened as about where it happened, when, who was there, what else was going on at the time etc. It is the reflective understanding not of experience only but of the memory of that experience.

There is a section devoted to describing the 'narrative interview'. The current study's data comprises memory narratives of imaginary companion relationships. This form of unstructured interview aims to expose themes and patterns between individuals as well as assist in a more lucrative understanding of each participant's idiosyncratic experience. For smaller sample sizes such as in the case of this study (N=9), narrative interviews are able to capture in a rather unique way the active manner in which experiences are interpreted including the contextual factors which help to shape that interpretation. As the method selected for data collection there are certain qualities that have positioned narrative as favourable over others. Qualities described for the reader include co-production and collaboration, context and temporality.

The interview transcripts have been interpreted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, (IPA), (Smith 1996, 2007; Smith & Osborne 2003; Reid, Flowers & Larkin 2005). Rather than being an analysis in its truest sense, the narrative data is described for the reader. Excerpts are provided throughout this section as experiential examples of the phenomenon as-lived. There are conjectured links to the literature and to my interpretation although this is traditionally reserved in phenomenological studies to the discussion section.

The discussion section is a consolidation of participant testimony, existing literature and theory, and interpretation. Discussion of the data moves from childhood memory, to imaginative play and how this particular form of play may assist in personality extension, the negotiation of multiple selves and self-other boundaries. This is once again linked to notions of the inherited adult self/selves

and informs part of an overall understanding of the adult participant experiences. From pretend play to imaginary companionships the discussion moves towards the provision of an experiential interpretation of the phenomenon, the remembered story and the telling.

## **Imaginative Play: Framing the Context**

Imagination is the capacity to think of things as possibly being so; it is an intentional act of mind; it is the source of invention, novelty, and generativity; it is not implicated in all perception and in the construction of all meaning; it is not distinct from rationality but is rather a capacity that greatly enriches rational thinking

Imaginativeness is a particular flexibility which appears to invigorate all mental functions. The flexibility that is central to imaginativeness seems to enable the imaginative person to conceive of a wider than normal range of actions or ways of being that do not follow conventional representations. What we observe in highly imaginative people is variability in ways of thinking, a peculiar richness of detail, unusualness.

## **The Child's Work: Understanding Imaginary Play**

Imaginary play generally begins from 11 months to 18 months (in typically developing children), and it is the child's work, preparing him/her for adulthood. Imaginative play is a thinking skill; children have to understand the meaning of what is happening. According to Harris (2000), there are three types of play involving *imaginary characters* relative to the medium of the role play:

- i. When the child invents a creature or person and interacts with it, but does not rely on any prop from the environment (in this case, the child interacts with an invisible imaginary companion).
- ii. When a child invents a creature or person and then projects it onto a toy.

- iii. When children act out or impersonate an imaginary character, (Harris describes the child as using the self as the vehicle for the role play). In this case, the child pretends to be something or someone.

The first 'make believe' games will re-create familiar activities such as going shopping or feeding a doll, acting out ritualised family activities. Through testing out roles in play they are slowly beginning to think about what it would be like to be someone else, an understanding and awareness that later develops into empathy. The imitation of social practices, the exercising of choice, the opportunity to switch roles and act according to the reasons of another, these are said to contribute to the development of judgement.

Ossorio (1977 p.234; 2006) has described the range of choice a child has during play as corresponding to a loosening of constraints – a maximisation of freedom during which time children can switch from one role to another, swap one set of rules for another, abandon one game for another. When they engage in imaginative play, children have the opportunity to expand the possibilities of how a social practice occurs and to expand their behavioural repertoire within that practice. They can invent new versions of social practices by imitating, deconstructing, and reconstructing those practices, and they get used to living in society where change is necessary and adaptive. The loosening of constraints that accompanies a child's play gives opportunities to learn these patterns and to operate within a greater range of ritual and relationship.

Play theorists have concluded that free imaginative play is a significant contributor to children's ability to self-regulate,(Kantor 2008).Some have described the emergence of "private talk" (Berk, 2008) in play, as distinct from that which may occur during other non-play social practices. However, with the parent or teacher for example, not being a participant, the child in their imaginative world has license to regulate the action taking place. Accordingly, it

is this rather unique 'observer-critic' role in early imaginative play that contributes to the development of the competence to self-regulate.

In short, children's imaginary play affords them the competencies to participate in human life. "Imaginative play demonstrates directly the earliest instances of creating scenarios, assigning statuses, and living out the drama." (Ossorio 2006, p.294)

## **Social Status of Imaginary Play**

The preceding discussion, having described what is meant by imaginary play, would be incomplete without at least some reference to the current status of imaginary play.

The preeminent issue concerns anxieties over the threat of extinction.

Researchers, social scientists, and practitioners alike have developed a range of ideas about the value of children's imaginative play and expressed concern about the impact of over-regulating it. Contemporary writers such as Chudacoff (2008, cited in Kantor, 2008, p.259), have argued that 21st century children play differently from their ancestral predecessors, due in part to the shrinking of imaginative space, time, place, and encouragement to pretend. It is claimed that today children play approximately eight hours less each week than their counterparts did two decades ago (Elkind 2008). With the pressure of 'making the grade', free play, and in fact free time, is being replaced by test preparation, school readiness, all manner of developmentally enhancing activities. Our society may well have created a false dichotomy between play and learning.

In Santer and Griffiths' comprehensive literature review on 'Free Play in Early Childhood', (2007) published by the National Children's Bureau, it is shown that there are some dichotomies within early years practice. They claim a tension between the language of play and the extent to which (some) adults understand its true potential. Children may receive the message that some activities are

more important than others, and that what adults do, and how they do it, is of more value than what children choose to do. The conclusion drawn from the report is that in some situations there is a lack of confidence in free play as a primary means of learning.

Chudacoff,(2008), views techno-friendly society as reducing opportunities to stimulate the imagination of children. Cognitive development, self regulation, self esteem, and socialization are increasingly seen as outcomes of imaginative play. On the flipside, play is seen simply as fun, as the opposite of work. Bruner (1986 p. 109) has stated, “All mankind shares the ability to be imaginatively creative but the education and environments in which children find themselves can increasingly cut them off from their creative selves. These quickly make them adjust to a factual, material world.”

Imaginary companion researcher Marjorie Taylor, in her paper entitled, *Children's Fantasies and Television* (2003), has posed the following questions regarding the potential vulnerability of children's imagination: What effect is increased fantasy consumption, (in our media frenzied society), having on the natural development of children's imagination? And, are the personal, private fantasies of children the result of what they have consumed from television characters, ie. the product of someone else's imagination? Taylor's own research is testimony are things which children with imaginary companions (IC's). However, to the diversity of characters held in young minds, to the spectrum of creations that come to life most often bearing no resemblance to anything witnessed on TV or film.

## **The Imaginary Companion**

This form of symbolic play is a valuable tool in the facilitation of social competencies (Bouldin & Pratt 2002; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup 2000; Taylor 1999; Taylor and Carlson 1997). Aligned with contemporary findings, imaginary companions are no longer conceived of as markers for children's poor reality-

testing or as signs of acute ego-defensiveness, nor relegated to the socially or cognitively impoverished. Pearson et al. (2001) in a study of 1,800 children in the UK aged between 5 and 12 years found that 46% reported current (or previous) imaginary companions. 43% of children were aged 5 to 9 years. 19% of children aged 10 years reported current imaginary companions, as did 9% of 12 year olds. Estimates by Singer & Singer, (1981), Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow and Charley, (2004) have suggested 65% of young children to have, or have had, an imaginary companion.

Imaginary friendships are not characteristic of any particular homogenous group – gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and may include children with special needs and those who have been traumatised (Spender et al, 2011). For example, children with Aspergers Syndrome are also recognised as creators of imaginary friends (Calver 2009; Attwood 2006).

The imaginary companion, as a self-constructed other, permits the child to privately work through the conundrum of what it means to be ‘self’ and ‘other’. From a developmental perspective, individual differences in social understanding for example has shown support for the role of “internal-state talk” as a “consistent” factor in the development of this faculty (Nichols, Svetlova & Brownell, 2009, p.472). Fragments of reality which do not make sense, episodes from daily life, the expression on a face, these can re-experience and re-work. The mental simulations undertaken by the child, although internal, are able to be readily reflected to the IC, and filtered back again to the child. Carlson & Moses, (2001; and Eisenberg 2010 cited in Eggum et al. 2011) refer to the potential influence of children’s “effortful control” as a moderator variable which influences Emotional Understanding, Prosocial Orientation, and Theory of Mind.

New findings in theory of mind research have shown that some abilities, such as perspective-taking, may not be solely reliant on cognitively sophisticated skill acquisition or advanced Theory of Mind concepts in preschool aged children.



Imagination allows for a natural type of philosophical enquiry. Children who utilise this faculty are able to consider alternatives and make sense of their lived experiences through frequent hypothesis-testing. Imaginary friendships, as interpersonal simulators, provide the opportunity for preschool children to organise their self-other scripts through recital and reconstruction.

Early psychological discourse centred on the imaginary companion's role in ego fragmentation, in disabling effective coping mechanisms and in the pathologies emanating from an 'escape' into fantasy.

More recent research has sought to illuminate the functionality and 'purpose' of the imaginary companion:

- i. Fantasy Predisposition,
- ii. Personality correlates such as Intersubjectivity, Creativity and Social Sensitivity, iii.
- Theory of Mind,
- iv. Self-knowledge and Knowing Other Minds (Davis, Meins & Fernyhough, 2011),
- v. Narrative ability, (Trionfi & Reece, 2009).

I will review Theory of Mind (ToM) literature in order to get a better understanding of children's developmental currency, reflected on the psychoeducational discourse of fantasy play, examined self-other narratives within early relational frames and described how imaginary friendships may inform aspects of the adult self.

## **Fantasy Predisposition and Imaginary Companions**

The debate surrounding young children's ability to discern false-belief is not far removed theoretically from that which surrounds their reality testing competency. It has been suggested that relations between children and their imagined constructions be taken as a "vivid merging point" between fantasy and reality (Klausen 2007 p.356).

In a study conducted with 3- and 4- year olds, Wellman, (Estes et al., 1989; Wellman and Estes, 1986), the children were asked to imagine a pair of scissors, shown a real pair, then asked to differentiate the properties of both. The children verbalized that the actual pair of scissors were able to be seen by others and realised that the imaginary pair could not. They also understood that it was only the imagined pair which could be "transformed by thought alone" (cited in Braten (Ed) 1998 p.339). Paul Harris, in his 1991 study on fictional absorption, tested whether this ability of children to differentiate was contingent on the nature of the imagined object by including not just an imagined pair of scissors but something 'extraordinary', such as a monster or witch. His results confirmed that of Wellman's. The children were able to construe the ontological status of the extraordinary objects and therefore showed no evidence of confusion between real and imagined, irrespective of the nature of the imagined (Harris et al. 1991).

The reality testing ability of young children was further explored by Goy (1990), a study in which she looked specifically at children's judgements about imaginary friends. The sample of 4-year olds were given imaginary companionship status via parent testimony and were asked to differentiate between the IC and a school friend. One child out of sixteen, after being asked which friend they could 'really hear' and 'which friend they could only pretend to hear', answered incorrectly. Taylor (1999) reported that 4-year-olds had shown concern that a researcher was taking their imaginary companions too seriously,

“It’s only pretend, you know. ” Taylor presents a cogent argument reconciling children’s sophisticated understanding of fantasy and imagination with their apparent confusion. Pivotal to this is the degree of *control* children have over the fantasy, for instance, whether children’s fantasies are culturally created (like Santa Claus or the Easter Rabbit) or, whether child controlled and mediated.

The fantasy predisposition of children with IC’s was examined by Bouldin (2006), revealing a significantly higher frequency in daydreaming activity, together with a higher sensorial acuity of dream content (p.22) than their peers. These same children engaged more frequently in games with a mythical theme – centred, for example, around “non-existent beings” such as fairies and monsters (p.24). The results support previous research findings that children with IC’s are able to readily and easily process the content of their fantasies (Bouldin & Pratt 2001; Taylor et al. 1993; Taylor 1999). Supportive evidence is found in Acredolo’s 1995 study wherein the play behaviour of a sample from infancy through to preschool years was analysed and found that children who would later create IC’s had shown significantly more indications of interest in fantasy even in their infancy than their non-IC peers, (cited in Taylor 1999).

An early study by Singer & Singer,(1981), found that children with IC’s engage in less television viewing than their peers. A similar study confirming these results was conducted by Taylor & Carlson,(1993). They suggested that the fantasy realm generated by television is displaced by children’s own imaginative play, and that children who are in the company of their ‘other’ may have less time or motivation to engage in TV viewing.

## **Personality Correlates: Intersubjectivity, Creativity, Social Sensitivity**

## **Intersubjectivity**

If we take intersubjectivity to imply shared understanding and co-creation of meaning then it is hardly surprising that this should be expected of children with rich imaginations. And, that it would extend to the knowledge exchange between person and fantasy character.

Papastathopoulos (2007), in researching the intersubjectivity of pre-schooler's imagination, arrived at a similar conclusion to Bouldin. His sample of children with IC's showed significantly more engagement not only in pretend and sociodramatic play but in the negotiations surrounding the pretense as well. In this instance, intersubjectivity could well be facilitated by meta-communication, discourse, and joint attentional focus or what Becker-Weidman has identified as "shared emotion (attunement), shared attention and shared intention".

The dialogic units that make up intersubjective episodes can be verbal or nonverbal as long as there is an expression of thought or idea. With regard to imaginary play, we see what Goncu, (1993), has termed "expansion" – the "introduction, extension, acceptance, revision and conciliation" of thoughts and ideas.

## **Creativity**

The ease at which children creatively step into the shoes of their virtual other is a unique and meaningful process. As if in an extended theatrical role play, these real to life relationships seem to demand huge amounts of imaginal resourcefulness. Hoff (2005) conducted a bi-focal study in which she tested the hypotheses that i) imaginary companions could be conceived of as products of a creative disposition and, ii) that children with IC's have what she terms "negative self-images" (p.170). As stated earlier, Hoff's sample comprised middle school children who normatively will have reached a certain level of cognitive flexibility

and perceptive skill, more so than is deemed the case with younger preschool children. Using her own instrument, she empirically assessed 'involvement in creative activities and hobbies' (p.170) through the AQ (Activity Questionnaire), and included such items as 'inventing their own games', 'built their own toys'. The instrument was shown to be statistically related to the Creative Functioning Test (Smith & Carlsson 1990, 2001) and the Unusual Uses Test (Hoff 2000, Hoff & Carlson 2002). The Creative Functioning Test (CFT) has been validated as a measure of "cognitive flexibility", which Hoff has defined as "the ability to shift flexibly between imaginative and rational thought" (p.171). The test, a simple black-and-white picture stimulus, presented to the child in different time increments, relies much on subjective interpretation and some might say, akin to other similar instruments, the child's own projections. As the picture is shown with rapidly decreasing exposure time, the child is left to imagine what they see after they know they have viewed the same image during longer exposure series. According to Hoff, (p.171) a child high in creativity will "abandon rational thought" and allow the "subjective representational world" to shape their visual perception. Hoff fails to account for children's self-efficacy in sharing their perceptions with the researcher, nor does she factor in levels of verbal ability. Hoff states that the children are told to "describe what they see on the screen, even if they are not certain" (p.171). This does seemingly afford children an unsolicited opportunity for imaginative projection but necessitates both self-confidence and verbal skill. Although there is research which suggests children with IC's have a rich and sophisticated linguistic repertoire, this is evidenced in discourse with familiar people such as parents and peers. One of Hoff's questions in this study was whether children with IC's had potentially lower self-images than their counterparts, yet the CFT no doubt demands at least some measure of self-efficacy and social confidence on the part of the participant. To evaluate children's perceptions of themselves, Hoff used a Swedish self-image inventory, 'How I Think I Am' (p.171). Subscale items include among others, a mental wellbeing and relationship component (with parents and peers). In terms of construct inclusion, there seems to be considerable overlap with the Self-

Knowledge Inventory used by Davis et al (2011) in their study on children with IC's levels of self-knowledge.

Interestingly, Hoff went beyond the now standard interview format for assessing the presence of an IC, (Taylor and Carlson 1997), supplementing her evidence richly with a series of IC 'character depth' questions, and has rationalized her use of this interview by reaffirming the link between IC's and creativity in terms of these children's ability to "cognitively elaborate" (p.172).

The results of Hoff's study were supportive of her hypothesis that having an IC was related to creative potential in middle school children. This finding is in line with Theory of Mind (ToM) research and in particular, with ToM's assertion that 'cognitive flexibility' is a component of executive functioning. Also worth noting is the fact that the CFT used by Hoff would have necessitated children's fixed attention to picture stimulus. As Hinnant & O' Brian (2007) have suggested, children's executive functioning is dependent on both cognitive adaptability/ rule switching and attentional control. The findings on creative disposition also concur with Bouldin's (2006) findings supporting the idea that children with Imaginary companions (IC's) are able to imaginatively produce vivid mental constructions. However, as noted by Taylor (1999), the methods of assessing children's creativity and the manifestation thereof, is a difficult task and variances across sample populations should be interpreted with caution. Taylor has stated that when differences in creativity between children with and without imaginary companions have been observed, they do favour the former.

Hoff's findings with regard to children's self-image (p.176) are particularly interesting in light of Davis et al.'s (2011) study. The children described themselves as being "different from others", having "lower psychological wellbeing", and rated low on measures of self-image, which would be in line with Davis et al's finding that these children have higher levels of self-knowledge and are more aware of their authority on self-states. However, her findings are inconsistent with Singer & Singer's (1990) study of 111 observed pre-schoolers. They found the children with IC's to be less fearful and anxious, and less shy.

Myers et al. (Myers, 1979; Singer & Singer, 1992) conducted longitudinal case studies which revealed that those who had had imaginary companions in their childhoods exhibited *creative capacity* as adults. The exercise and expansion of creative thought likely takes place because of the interaction with an IC. According to Somers and Yawkey, (1984) imaginary companions promote *originality of ideas*. Mackeith (1982) has pointed to another genre of imaginary play in which imaginary companions are included, namely imaginary worlds, so called *paracosms*. These invented worlds include elaborate scenes, novel places, new languages, strange creatures (Cohen & Mackeith, 1991; Mackeith, 1982; Singer & Singer, 1992).

The relationship between early IC's and adult creativity was investigated by Allen, (2012), who sampled 41 female (adult) students, of which 21 were identified as having had an IC as a child and 20 did not. The design was consistent with the mixed methodology format. All of the sample participants were administered the quantitative portion which included the *Khatena-Torrance Creative Perception Inventory* (KTCPI) (1976). The KTCPI consists of two measures, What Kind of Person Are You? (WKOPAY?) and Something About Myself (SAM). The results from this study showed those who had IC's as children are *more creative in specific ways*, based on the findings of the KTCPI. Of significance was the factor identified as '*Disciplined Imagination*' and the '*Creative Perception*' index identified (PsycINFO Database)

Edith Ackermann,(2006), re-positions the debate on creativity and imagination through the following hypothesis: If it be the case that developmental researchers suggest that inventing imaginary companions is a helpful step in gaining empathy and social skill, as a response to developmental transition, then more is needed on understanding what solutions children of different ages invent for themselves to cope with some of these developmental tasks. In other

words, it is worth considering that the imaginary friend is simply a creative solution to normal developmental conflict in childhood. The capacity to generate an imagined interaction with someone or something else would, in this hypothesis, be viewed as a positive coping mechanism.

### **Social Sensitivity**

Greater other-orientation is an adaptive faculty for young children, one that was assumed to emerge only in later childhood. Preschool aged children that are able to transcend their own mental state are able to better understand the motivation behind character actions in a story, empathize with others, and distinguish appearance from reality (Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg, & Cohen 2000; Weil, Hayes & Capurro 2011 p.371).

Goldstein and Winner (2012 p19-37), tested the hypothesis that experience in acting/role-playing would lead to increased empathy and theory of mind in middle aged children and adolescents. In their study, pupils received a year of acting classes, with constructs of empathy and ToM assessed before and after training. Results showed that those learners who had been enrolled in acting classes had significantly higher dispositional empathy scores, were able to “match the emotion of a fictional character” (p.27). The adolescent participants also showed increases on a *naturalistic measure* of theory of mind, the Empathic Accuracy Paradigm. The findings show what Goldstein has termed ‘plasticity’ in empathy and ToM, occurring beyond the critical developmental period of 3-4 years. Other correlational studies have pointed to increased theory of mind ability in those who spend much time thinking about mental states, for instance psychologists (Dziobek et al., 2006), fiction readers (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, de la Paz, & Peterson, 2006), and dysphoric adolescents (Harkness, Sabbagh, Jacobson, Chowdrey, & Chen 2005).



A previous literature-based study on the relationship between imaginary companion status of young children and corresponding levels of cognitive perspective-taking, (Way 2012), has suggested that cognitive flexibility, when seen in terms of relational responding, implies an ability to move more easily into the shoes of another. This form of dyadic interaction is de-contextualised, providing both a context and opportunity for perspective-taking. Children with imaginary friends appear to have a more developed understanding of what information a listener has or does not have access to, suggesting that they are better able to take others' perspectives into account (Davis, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2011).

The imaginary companion, as a self-constructed other, permits the child to privately work through the conundrum of what it means to be 'self' and 'other'. From a developmental perspective, individual differences in social understanding for example has shown support for the role of "internal-state talk" as a "consistent" factor in the development of this faculty (Nichols, Svetlova & Brownell, 2009, p.472). The positive association between children with an IC and their tendency to focus on mental characteristics in describing a real best friend is consistent with the notion that having an IC entails that the child becomes practiced in focusing on cognitions and emotions (Taylor & Carlson, 1997).

The mental simulations undertaken by the child, although internal, are able to be readily reflected to the IC and filtered back again to the child. Carlson & Moses, (2001; & Eisenberg, 2010, cited in Eggum et al., 2011), refer to the potential influence of children's "effortful control" as a moderator variable which influences Emotional Understanding, Prosocial Orientation, and Theory of Mind. Trionfi and Reece, (2009), have stated that, when conceptually construed, imaginative companion play relies on idiosyncratic mental constructions to create context. Roby and Kidd (2008) investigated the referential communication skills of preschool children with IC's versus those without and

observed a significant difference in the “meta-cognitive processing skills” of the two groups.

## **Theory of Mind and Imaginary Process**

Imagination has become a key issue in current theory of mind debate, (Davis, Meins & Fernyhough, 2011; Astington & Edward, 2010; Bouldin & Pratt, 2001), giving credence to the potential role played by the imaginary companion in meta-representational thinking.

Research has shown that critical developments occur both in imaginary play, (the emergence of the IC), and Theory of Mind around the age of four years (Davis, Meins & Fernyhough 2011; Diachenko 2011; Astington & Edward 2010; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). The overlap between imaginary process and ToM has warranted further consideration.

Mental Representations are, according to Theory of Mind, a necessary and oft sufficient component of the young child’s ability to construe the thoughts and feelings of others. What is argued by theorists is that children, typically those aged 3 to 4 years-old, do not understand the interpretive nature of the mind, believing it to be a “passive recorder”, trapping sensorial images and soaking up the day’s takings (Taylor et al. 1991, p.1334). The hypothesis of a copy theory of mind is that children, in particular those who have not yet developed false belief understanding, have limited representational diversity and are unable to distinguish seeing from knowing. Children would, accordingly, be unable to understand why two people who have the same visual perspective would interpret an event in different ways.

Simple visual perspective-taking, referred to in ToM as Level 1, is the child’s understanding that other people can see different things from themselves, measured by “what can I see and what can you see?” tasks (Heagle & Rehfeldt,

2006, p.2). Level 2 is considered to be 'complex' visual perspective-taking, (p.2) involving a judgement of not only the *what* but the *how*. According to ToM, successful mastery of this task implies the child knowing that what they see is indeed different to what another may see, but they are also able to verbally express how it is different. Incrementally, level 3 perspective-taking requires a greater degree of other-orientation and increased mental simulation. This is the point at which children come to realise that seeing equates with knowing. They understand that what they know, they have experienced, and that what others know has come to them through experience. This is the beginning of an awareness of situated reality, that knowledge including other peoples, is positioned in time and place. Level 4 perspective-taking is, according to ToM, rooted in children's ability to predict that another will make a decision or hold a belief based on what they deem real and true (Heagle & Rehfeldt, 2006). Level 5 is a predictive faculty wherein children are able to discern truth from fiction, and decide how another will act based on that other's knowledge of falsehood. An abstract mental operation thought to be successfully mastered between ages 5 or 6, this is the level at which ToM supporters argue that transcendence of self-perspective is possible.

ToM to a large extent underscores the natural egocentricities of very young children, suggesting that a large amount of effort and energy is required to resist interference from their own perspective (Apperly & Samson, 2010; Apperly, 2009). There is the question of whether a buffering process is needed to short circuit the apparent egocentric bias in children's thought. Some ToM supporters suggest the re-routing from self-perspective to other-perspective requires executive level functioning, although no tidy definition of executive functioning has been offered or accepted. Processes defined as important to higher order functioning in terms of ToM involve "inhibitory control", "attentional control", "cognitive flexibility", "error detection" among others (Hinnant & O'Brien, 2007, p.303).

Theory of Mind proponents have asserted that it is the advancement of mental skill which permits children to cognitively decentrate – that is, to “free themselves from the grip of their own perspective...” (Hoffman, 2000, cited in Maxwell & DesRoches, 2010,p.36). However, with new research showing ToM abilities such as social reasoning in children younger than was previously held, the argument supporting a ‘conceptual change hypothesis’ (Perner,1991, cited in Samson & Apperly, 2010) is less credulous. In a similar vein, there is evidence now showing that these fractures in cognitive processes which are required to resist interference from the self-perspective occur in adults with ToM difficulty.

Considering Simulation Theory (Harris, 1992,1996), a plausible route to the understanding of Theory of Mind is the role of, i) language and, ii) children’s conversational experiences in their imagined projections. The crucial exchange of information that takes place with increased frequency in the lives of young children is, according to simulationists, important because it reveals immediate and concrete differences in knowledge and belief. ToM studies have revealed a link between language ability and false-belief understanding, suggesting that early linguistic competence facilitates false-belief understanding, and by default, perspective-taking. (Bigelow & Dugas 2008). According to a simulation theory account of ToM, the pluralistic understandings gained from self-and-other talk in the formative years may advance the ability to shift from an egocentric processing modality.

A signifier for ToM advancement is the preschool child’s ability to reflect on their own and others’ thoughts. Flavell, in early ToM trials conducted at Stanford University (cited in Bower 1993p.93) suggested that 4-year-olds seldom engage in thought reflection or cognitive reflexivity and that only around age seven does this ability manifest fully. However, there is other evidence to suggest that children with imaginary companions have a high degree of referential thought and reflexive consciousness, (Taylor 1997; Taylor 1997; Roby & Kidd 2008).

These children mediate the lived experiences of their virtual other, engaging in storytelling exchanges with peers and adults, interpreting for themselves and others the episodes of this relationship.

### **Self-knowledge and Knowing Other Minds**

Examining the relationship between imaginary companion status, self-knowledge and Understanding of Mind, Davis, Meins and Fernyhough, (2011) undertook a correlational study (N=80) knowledge and mental state understanding in children aged 4 to 7- years of age. Concerned with extrapolating the type and amount of interior knowledge children feel privy to and comparing this with IC status, the researchers hypothesised that those with established imaginary companions would show a greater sense of authority concerning aspects of their interior knowledge states and a refined awareness of the privacy of their thoughts. The reasons put forward as to why the relationship with a virtual other was presumed to index children's self-knowledge were based largely on Taylor's work (Taylor,1999; Taylor & Carlson 1997). According to Taylor, even the very young child is aware that others cannot see their IC, and that knowledge regarding this friendship is mediated via the child. Through non-verbal behaviours and narrative engagement with parents and significant others, the child functions as gatekeeper, actively selecting what (of their IC relationship) to reveal and when. For this reason, the researchers postulated that 4-7 year olds would know that their knowledge was private.

Restricting evidence to internal-state understanding, the rationale behind Davis et. Al.'s hypothesis could well have been supported by, and indeed seems to parallel, Theory of Mind's levels 1- 3 understanding of perspective-taking (Barnes-Holmes et al., in press). According to ToM, "simple visual perspective taking" (p.16) would imply the child knowing that people see different things, ie. that their IC is not seen by others and belongs to themselves. The next level, "complex visual perspective- taking" (p.16) during which time the child realises people can see the same things differently. Relative to Davis et al.'s hypothesis, the child knows that they have an idea and a mental representation of their IC

and that others may have a different idea because of what the child shares or does not share with them. The child at level 3 is aware that “seeing leads to knowing” (p.17), and by this token, the hypothetical support for Davis et al.’s study would be evidenced by children knowing that because others could not see their IC’s, they did not have knowledge of their existence, other than what they came to know indirectly through the child. The pervasiveness and strength of the child-IC relationship – the fact that the child spends a large part of the day with a friend that nobody else can see – means that there is continued reflection on knowledge states. The child is sharing stories, keeping secrets, explaining antics, all with a very concrete understanding of who knows what.

Davis et al. cite & Carlson’s (1997) study that self-knowledge measures are a valid and predictive assessment for ToM and particularly for false-belief understanding. While Taylor & Carlson used higher order executive process, (appearance/reality and false-belief), in examining ToM with relation to IC status, the mental representations in Davis et al.’s study are seemingly more superficial. Lower-level constructs such as ‘feeling ill’, ‘having fun’, ‘feeling hungry’ ‘dreaming’ (p.685) are used in relation to children’s and adults self-knowledge. With non-significant correlational measures obtained on ToM and interior knowledge, Davis et al.’s study did not replicate Taylor and Carlson’s (1997) positive findings but did seem, according to item variance across sample groups, to indicate a belief by children with IC’s that they are the keepers of their interior selves and that adults, for example, are privy to some external, manifest states (p.685). A limitation of this study was the failure by researchers to specify a definition of an imaginary companion, although stated in the preliminary analyses that some sampled IC’s included personified objects. This may have had a confounding effect on measures of self-knowledge as studies (Harris 2000; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup, 2000) have found significant differences in the way children relate to these two forms of imaginary construction. The relationship with personified objects, for example, is one of hierarchy,(Gleason

et al.,2000) such that the child may feel more empowered and have a greater sense of authority over their internal states. Invisible companions on the other hand are held equitably, as friends.

Davis et al. chose not to control for socioeconomic status or ethnicity, and stated in their findings that gender had no statistical significance (p.685). A large study conducted by Carlson and Taylor (2005) showed no statistical sex differences in verbal ability, fantasy predisposition, or competence ratings with regard to children's IC status, but did show differences in the form and function that the IC took.

An exploratory study conducted by Vierkant, (2012), using Theory of Mind as an exemplar, has tried to make sense of the current flux of literature on early false belief assessments and children's ability to truly know the minds of others.

Testing the assumption that having sophisticated constructions of explicit knowledge is a necessary pre-condition for ascribing awareness, Vierkant has cited recent literature (Buttleman, Carpenter, Tomasello, 2009) highlighting the dislocation between children's demonstration of false-belief understanding under test conditions versus their behavioural implementation of acts, such as helping behaviours, as signifiers of this understanding. What Vierkant's paper does astutely is question the now established protocol for assessing false-belief in young children by suggesting that report, (and therefore explicit knowledge), is perhaps not such an "exclusive criterion" (p.142).

Vierkant argues that in false-belief testing there is a presupposition that the child knows their own mind. In order to verbally share the belief states of others entails children having an explicit representation of the nature of this belief, otherwise they wouldn't be able to report it. There is the crucial element of knowing – the child being able to cognitively reflect on what it is they believe another believes. According to Vierkant, a plausible explanation is that both children and adults understand their internal self-states "in a way that does not

require [us] to have the theoretical concept of belief“ (p.143). This hinges on the ToM debate between simulation theory and theory/theory (Vierkant, 2012; Apperly & Samson, 2010; Apperly, 2009). Simulation theorists suggest that children do not require a theoretical set of concepts in order to understand another. They hold that self-knowledge is a developmental precursor to otherorientation, and that the manner in which the child knows themselves is really a case of less effortful introspection. Theory theorists on the other hand, hold a rule-based view, asserting the need for perceptual access to an established set of concepts. Vierkant suggests that there may be another process involved when it comes to making internal thought explicit. Not requiring the “drawn out weighing of evidence”, (p.145) “deliberation” (p.145) through language is one such means. Reflecting on “consciousness and agency” (p.148), Vierkant suggests that it is language which fosters the child’s ability to negotiate their own mental content and simultaneously allows these internal beliefs to be communicated to others.

### **Narrative Ability, and Imaginary Companionship Status**

What follows is an examination of the use of narrative in play. My analysis of Trionfi and Reese’s (2009) study includes references to Theory of Mind (ToM).

Assessing the extent to which imaginary companions facilitate narrative competence in 5-year-olds, the researchers used previous studies to confirm linguistic correlates with IC status. Their hypothesis was premised on the belief that this correlation may reflect a more established connection to fantasy play and language development. Developmental researchers have long asserted the importance of language in children’s play, and in particular, the need to use “explicit language to negotiate meaning” in their role play and fantasy organisation (p.1302). Trionfi and Reese attempt to make a conceptual comparison between imaginary companion play specifically and narrative, (p.1303), suggesting they both depend on “mental and linguistic constructions to create context”. Although they do not elucidate the nature of this “mental construction”, there seems to be no implied higher order executive process. The



inference then is that the mental element refers to the act of imagination and creative faculty. The researchers assert that it is the de-contextualisation required for both IC engagement and complex narrative that marks the correlation.

The sample (N= 48, mother-child dyads), with children 1.5 to 5.5 years of age, of middle-class socioeconomic status, primarily of New Zealand ethnicity. The researchers used Taylor's standardised 'Imaginary Companion Interview' (1993, Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Vocabulary skills were assessed using the 'Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test- IIIB' and the 'Expressive Vocabulary Test' (Trionfi & Reese, 2009, p.1304). The story comprehension assessment involved children hearing a story with which they were unfamiliar, and asked a series of questions covering their knowledge of 'plot', inferential connections, and real world knowledge which could assist in contextual understanding of the story. The researchers also included a 'Story Retelling' task, assessing the ability to recall contents and share verbally with a puppet (p.1305).

The findings of the study showed that the older aged children in the sample had benefitted from their IC in terms of the "richness" of their narrative, and the awareness of context and listener. This, suggested the researchers, is because of the frequent practice they get in having de-contextualised conversations with their IC's but also in their sharing of IC-related stories to others (p.1310). Trionfi and Reese's suggestion that these children are aware of the privacy of their relationships and thus feel the need to share knowledge with others may be supported, for example, by the findings of Davis et al.'s (2011) study on children with IC's having greater awareness of this self-knowledge. Accordingly, children may have an increased sense of 'their voice' when it comes to their IC and are motivated to narrate the episodes of this relationship.

In a final caveat I want to bring to attention to the fact that Trionfi and Reese made a choice to exclude children's verbal IQ and verbal repertoire from their study on narrative richness. However, they do suggest (p.1311), that children with IC's may have such high levels of language and narrative skill that they create their IC's "as an outlet for their verbal expression". In the discussion of their findings, Trionfi and Reese posit a "third variable" to account for the correlation between imaginary companions and increased narrative ability, suggesting "personality variables" such as perspective-taking (p.1311).

Davis, Meins, and Fernyhough, (2014 pp.622-633) researched young children with imaginary friends looking at their tendency to verbally describe their other real friends with reference to mental characteristics rather than physical appearance or behavioural traits. Although this aligns clearly with what has already been explored in the Theory of Mind section, it is also interesting to look at this spontaneous tendency as a form of narrative acuity.

Roby and Kidd (2008) investigated the referential communication skills of preschool children with IC's versus those without and observed a significant difference in the "meta-cognitive processing skills" of the two groups. The researchers found that IC children were better able than their peers without ICs to name a specific referent and to avoid describing redundant features.

### **Historical Context**

The following section raises some important issues in imaginary companionship research. The examination of past studies affords some clarity of the larger picture and an understanding of where the current study may be positioned. Issues to be highlighted include i) defining the imaginary companion, ii) methodological devices iii) Child reports and parental testimony iv)making sense of data.

### **Definitional Discrepancy**

As a construct in an emergent field of study, the imaginary companion has proved difficult to operationally define. It is not rooted within any particular theoretical discourse, and this makes the objectification of an already elusive construct all the more difficult. Whatever definition researchers choose to guide their efforts, consensus is held on the natural development and privacy of this experience for the young child.

In terms of operationalized conceptions, Svendsen's (1934) definition is, by way of historical literature review, the most frequently cited : "An *invisible character* named and referred to in conversations 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 no apparent *objective basis*" (Hart & Zellars 2006, p.6).

Personified objects in the domain of imagination research refer to children's attachments to specific toys such as stuffed animals or dolls. Svendsen's definition excluded props on the basis of their imaginal independence, asserting that their objective, here-and-now presence did not draw on the child's embellishment. The definition also excluded all other forms of symbolic play involving companionship on a temporary or transient basis, for instance, the case of a teddy bear's picnic, or tea party.

Singer and Singer (1990) chose to include stuffed animals in their extensive research for *The House of Make-Believe*, based on the criteria that the toys were richly imbued with human and friend-like qualities by the young child. They stipulated the young child project an autonomous identity on the part of the toy for the relationship to be considered significant.

As a long-time researcher in the area of children's imagination and author of much foundational work on Imaginary companions, Taylor has set what she defines as stringent identifying and inclusionary criteria for IC sampling. The triangulation of parental corroboration, child testimony and semi-structured interviewing inform what she holds as an accurately representative sample of children with IC's. Her sampling criteria have included the description and

naming of an imaginary companion over time-delayed sessions, the verbal agreement by parent or caregiver of these descriptions and that the described other was not based on any known real friend and, in instances where she had chosen to include personified objects in her study, the corroboration by parents that the play object was engaged with frequently and was treated as real by the child (Taylor & Carlson, 2005).

In their investigation of *Individual and Family Correlates of Imaginary Companions in Preschool Children*, Manosevitz, Prentice & Wilson (1973, p.74) defined the IC to children's parents as a "very vivid imaginary character with which their child interacts during their play and daily activities". This definition could be interpreted then as including imaginative play with stuffed animals but there is no alluding to permanency or repetition of engagement with the imagined other. We find a similar definitional take on IC's in Bouldin's (2006) study of *Fantasy Predisposition and Fantasy Style*, in which it is similarly explained as a "very vivid imaginary character", non-existent in reality, but something that the child "treats as though it does" (p.19). In this instance, by virtue of her stipulation that this imaginary other does not exist, there is an assumption she has chosen to exclude personified objects and there is no reference made to permanency or quality of the child-other relationship.

Implications of operational inconsistency are evidenced in Gleason and Hohmann's (2006) study wherein it is suggested that there exists a variance, potentially significant, in the type and strength of relationships between preschool children and imaginary friends on the one hand, and children and personified objects on the other. Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) make a case for the separate categorisation of Invisible and Personified imaginary companions, citing differences in the typology of the child-other relationship. They suggest that 'friendship', approximating the qualities of real peer relations, is found more frequently with the invisible companion dyad, whereas the relationship with personified objects is more likely to be of a hierarchical nature.

Latterly, Klausen and Passman (2007b p.359) have arrived at a threefold typology of children's fantasy attachments. They discern between the *imaginary companion* as a friend with no physical basis, the *personified object* as a physical object afforded a pretend personality, and *pretend companions* as a term which refers to both. Given this, most research reviewed would be said to reference the pretend companion as a chosen definition.

In a similar vein, Harris (2000) has classified pretend play according to what he deemed was the mode of pretense : *Personified Objects* directed outward towards some external thing, *Pretend Identities* concerning the child's own self, and *Imaginary Companions* toward an entirely fantasized construction.

Reflection on imagination research invariably includes reference to the works of Paul Harris and in this case it is the merging together of imaginary phenomena that is of particular interest. Defined ontologically, Harris asserts that "they serve similar developmental purposes" for the child. The imaginary companion is situated as one- of- three forms (types) of role play. *Impersonation*, (child takes on a character of person or animal), and *personification* (where the child personifies an object) are noted as the other two forms.

Despite Gleason's assertion that we are dealing with two separate phenomena operating according to different social processes, (2004) and the citing of reasons to examine invisible companions and personified objects separately (2000), I have opted for an interpretive approach within this study. My inclusionary criteria for participants purposely did not set forth any parameters in the definition of an imaginary companion and every effort was made to suspend my expectation of what I was wanting to hear from storytellers in the narrative sessions. Gleason has suggested that the two concepts may be only "subtly distinct" (2000), which I feel is further validation for a lucid de-construction of individual notions of what it means to have an imaginary companion.

Allowing for multiple constructions of this concept is, I feel, in line with Klausen and Passman's suggestion that researchers should pay careful attention to both definitional forms (2007).

## Conceptualising Friendship

Disagreement concerning the qualities of the imaginary companion IC and the nature of the child-other dyad has lessened, in part due to renewed empirical vigour, increased use of qualitative enquiry, the plausible relationship with ToM, and the rise of children's agency and voice.

Taylor (1997, 1999) was forthright in her assertion that young children, progressing normally through development, do not believe these companions to be real (see later discussion on *The Imaginary Companion and Pretense*). The objectification of the IC is made apparent through children's conscious awareness of the constructed nature of, and internal investment in, the friendship. The IC's of preschool aged children are afforded independent agency by their creators, having personalities of their own.

In terms of friendship attribution, as with other dispositional traits, this population of children are not homogenous however. The level of investment in their friendships as well as the degrees of elaboration of character, and character depth, have shown to vary considerably.

Papastathopoulos (2007), in his writings on the *Intersubjectivity of the Imagination* and imaginary companions, reported that preschool girls with imaginary companions, observed in dyadic play, attributed an interlocutor role to their imagined friends, giving them relational qualities but acknowledging their non-physical existence.

These friendships initially begin to emerge during times of quiet contemplativeness or when children are engaged in free play, absorbed in the act of imagination. Almost as a raising of consciousness, akin to adult meditative practice, Hart & Zellars (2006, corroborated by Taylor, 1997) suggest the very act of creating the imaginary other is an essential ingredient in the deepening of perception and "quieting (of) the mind" (p.12)

The nature of the relationship between child and peer versus child and fictitious other was the focus of Gleason and Hohmann's (2006) study. Although based

on a small, predominantly female sample, the study showed the latter as providing much of the same social value for preschool children as do real friends. This was evidenced in correlations with the following relationship variables: "conflict", "power", "instrumental help" and "nurturance" (p.141). Gleason & Hohmann went so far as to assert that, when examined within the context of significant peer relations, there was no statistical difference between real and imagined friends. Taylor (1999) argued against the hypothesised uniformity of friendship concepts, stating that the IC most certainly had a set of "special qualities"(p.130) not found in real-life peers, and that the two forms of friendships were inherently different. She premised this on the fact that children do not necessarily give up their IC's when real ones come along. When, according to Taylor, these companions do outlive their usefulness, they are relinquished.

Studies have been non- supportive of the hypothesis that children with IC's have limited authentic peer engagement and are not as socially competent as their peers (see Bouldin & Pratt,1999; Harter & Chao,1992). Presumed social incompetence and the potential hindrance caused by the presence of an IC led to initial speculation that imaginary relations were all that fed the social needs of this group of children. These children in fact show a high degree of sociability and normative levels of peer acceptance in their real-life play (Singer & Singer, 1990; Gleason, 2004; Carlson & Taylor, 2005).

### **The Imaginary Companion Interview**

Assessment of children's imaginary companionship status has been reliant on, and benefitted from,Taylor's (1997) Imaginary Companion Interview. Although not a psychometric or standardised instrument, the interview has been used to *verify the presence* of imaginary friendships. Although Taylor acknowledged children as "the best sources of information",(1999, p.23), she makes clear the fact that elaboration, over-imaginings, inconsistencies and misinterpretation of adult's questioning contribute to a significant amount of variability in responses.

Construct validity of course rests largely on the accuracy and containment of the construct under investigation. Although an expected outcome of conversing with children, it has left researchers pondering as to the significance of what remains uncovered about the fantasy lives of children. Taylor (1999) has interestingly noted that parents of older children may not be as aware of their children's imaginary friendships, with one study revealing only 20% of parents of 6- and 7-year-olds knew about the playmates.

The protocol devised by Marjorie Taylor has typically taken the following form:

- i) The researcher will spend a few minutes engaging with the child
- ii) The researcher invites the child to answer a few questions (beginning the process of the semi-structured interview): “ May I ask you some questions about friends? ...Some friends are real, like the ones that live on your street, the ones you play with at the park. And some friends are pretend friends. Pretend friends are ones that are make believe that you pretend are real. Do you understand?” (Taylor & Carlson, 1997).
- iii) The child is then asked whether they have or have had a pretend friend. If they answer yes, they are asked further prototypical questions, gathering information on the imaginary companion’s “name”, whether it is a “toy” or not, its “gender”, “age”, “physical appearance”, what qualities the child “likes” or “does not like” about the IC, and where the friend “lives, sleeps, eats” (Taylor 1999).
- iv) Children’s reports are then corroborated by a parent’s completion of a questionnaire or telephone interview.
- v) Only children whose imaginary friends are corroborated by a parent are deemed as having an imaginary friend.

Taylor and Carlson, (1997), wanting to know whether children would remain consistent in their descriptions of the imaginary friends, devised a repeated interview strategy with a sample of 4-year olds. Both parents and children were



interviewed twice, each interview a week apart. Information obtained in the first interview, for example, what the friend may have looked like, was used to clarify the responses in the follow-up session.

Accordingly, children were “categorised” (Taylor, 1999, p.29) as having an imaginary friend if they met the following criteria:

- Child provided a description of the IC in first session.
- Named the same IC in second session.
- The parent said that it was not a real friend, and if a toy, that the child played with the toy “a lot” and “treated it as if it were real”(p.29).
- The child said yes to having an IC at either session, named the friend, and this was described “independently by the parent”. *Or*
- The child described different imaginary friends at two sessions and the parent attested to the fact the child had “lots of imaginary companions” (p.29).

The exclusionary criteria were as follows:

- Child said “no” to having a make believe friend at both sessions, even if the parent said yes.
- The parent stated that the child did not play for a long period of time with a particular toy/stuffed animal that the child had said was their imaginary friend.
- The child said that they did have a special make believe friend but could not provide any details of this friend.

This interview format is meritorious in its utility. This is especially true for correlational- type studies wherein research questions are concerned with relationships between delineated variables. For instance, should I have wanted to quantify my MA literature study on the possible relationship between cognitive perspective-taking and children’s imaginary friendships, I would have employed Taylor’s IC interview. The types of research questions I may have been able to address include:

- Is there a relationship between Imaginary companions and perspective taking in young children?
- What is the nature of this relationship?
- Does the presence of an imaginary companion facilitate an increase in manifest levels of perspective-taking towards peers?
- If there does exist a positive correlation between these two variables, what other factors may be at play? ... And so forth.

As long time researchers on the topic of imaginary friendships, Davis, Meins and Fernyhough, (2014, p.631), have remarked that research has focused on asking children various questions about their IC's appearance and behaviour but "no study has yet assessed the characteristics that children spontaneously focus on when given an open-ended invitation to describe the IC... studies exploring heterogeneity within IC-group".

## **The Framing of Child and Adult**

In order to make the case for continuity, in what is often a discontinuous life story, the following sections will explore ontological and epistemological issues surrounding the notion of 'child' and 'adult'. I did not wish for the study to reflect what has been considered an 'artificial', and certainly enlarged, gap between child and adult and so an attempt is made to locate a 'new intermediate space' (Waller, 2010). The space is experiential belonging neither exclusively to childhood nor to adulthood. The dominant discourse of 'otherness', documentation of the differences between the experiential worlds of children and adults, (as well as between children with and without imaginary friends), has made it difficult for researchers attempting to 'understand things from a child's perspective'. A brief unpacking of the debate surrounding notions of childhood and adulthood as well as the case made for continuity may together provide some understanding of methodological choice. Consideration is given firstly to the framing of 'child' and 'adult'.

It has already been pointed out that 'children' and 'adults' are framed in such a way as to impose a bi-polar and hierarchical model, one which is reproduced and enforced further in social scientific discourse. The dominant discourse of 'otherness', documentation of the differences between the experiential worlds of children and adults, (as well as between children with and without imaginary friends), has made it difficult for researchers attempting to 'understand things from a child's perspective'. James et al. (1998) suggest there has been a tendency in the social sciences to focus on difference. By concentrating, for example, on play as an exclusive part of childhood but not of adult culture, (p.181), the idea of childhood tends to be reinforced as a very different time. There is the heightened concern too with being 'child-centred', suggesting the exclusive benefit of researching children in the playground, to the exclusion of the family and other social variables (James et al. 1998). The prevalence of developmental discourse which presents children as 'other to' adults does not take into account the non-homogeneity of children as a category. Intra-category variables such as gender, class, age, ethnicity etc. yield as much variation in research response as they do for adults.

In this study, the child and the adult speak to one another. As the adult self connects with child self, remembering an earlier time imaginary friendship, the experience comes to be understood in a way other than that of intellectual detachment.

Consideration of the debate around child and adult conceptualisations must at some point take account of memory. The epistemological question concerns how one assesses the 'truth', viability or value of early childhood memory. The fragmentary and porous nature of early memory, notarised by the likes of Sigmund Freud, is a distinctive feature of modernist representations of childhood. Haughton, who penned an introductory piece in Freud's *'The Uncanny'*, (2003), has spoken of the co-construction of childhood memory, how what is remembered is not a solitary process but instead mediated via family lore, photos, social expectations, and biographical norms.

Kuhn, in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995, p.158) has argued that it is near impossible to separate the past from that which it is situated in - the culture, the connectedness, of childhood. Kuhn is interested in what people do with memory content. How, as time passes, we use 'the stuff' of memory to make more memories, how these memories turn into stories, how the stories change our selves. Through her own autobiographical work Kuhn sees memory as a producer, of account and meaning.

### **Human Geography: Bachelard, Philo and Jones**

Memory marks our membership to developmental categories. An argument for the loosening of constraints around 'adult' and 'child' in research praxis may find support in an examination of memory, in particular, the recognition of memory as a "stream of consciousness" as opposed to a "self-enclosed consciousness" (Halbwach cited in Meusburger, ed. 2011).

The following section explores the work of human geographers Philo (2003, 2008) and Jones (1999, 2001, 2003, 2008), offering a critical response to the question of how the 'worlds' of children may be accessed and represented. The section begins with a brief outline of Bachelard's position, In 'Poetics of Reverie' (1969a), Bachelard sets out the basis for a 'phenomenology of childhood' whereby adults are able to imaginatively revisit the joy and wonder of their youth. The quest for adult researchers to recapture early years is, according to Bachelard, made possible through projecting imaginatively back to an experience all adults have once had. This then is about some form of natural connectivity between the 'two worlds'. More recent engagement with this issue can be seen in Chris Philo's writings (2003), as he addresses whether researchers can re-enter childhood through the faculties of what he terms 'reverie' (a term borrowed from Bachelard) and imagination. With particular reference to childhood geographies, he points to the importance of memory, imagination and emotion in researching childhood, establishing a meaningful

connection between the realms of child and adult. For Philo, (p.7-23) this scholarly activity seems something that is so important and necessary arguing that it is “unique”, an “opportunity” that researchers “can and should take advantage of”; seeking “ fragments of connection” by virtue of the very fact that all of us have been children. Philo uses Jones and Cunningham (1999) as an example of those who argue that memory *can* be a source of recreating ‘children’s geographies’.

Attention is called to Jones’s (2001, 2003) response to Philo, highly salient to this study on imaginary companionship. In response to Philo’s argument, has stated concerns about the ‘reachability’ of the otherness of childhood as well as the ethics of such a goal (p.29). Examining Philo’s idea of ‘reverie’ for example- a valued part of childhood – states that are central to childhood and indicative of otherness, he argues for the importance of researching these moments, for adults getting a handle on these unique imaginative geographies because doing so would support their continued availability to children. However, these moments represent childhood at its most remote from adult perspectives. Jones makes the point that, as adult researchers, we should remain very alert to the question that as these places are almost ‘adult free zones’ by definition, how do we enter them without doing damage (p.33). Drawing from Jones’s response to Philo, the assertion most relevant to this study on imaginary friendships is that it is “fruitless to get caught in any fixed or binary notion of ‘possible or impossible’ in terms of adults meaningfully remembering childhood” (p.30)

In examining the bringing forth of childhood into adult life, (forward as opposed to journeying back), Jones cites Probyn,(1996, p.103) who describes the chronological re-ordering of memory, a continuous back and forth. For her, childhood is ‘deployed’ in adult life, providing some form of illumination in the present, although still strongly aligned with Philo’s position of connection between two worlds. The influences of childhood on adulthood, the call for a heightened awareness of these influences, the irrecoverability of the past, elation and despair at what is remembered and what is lost to memory are part

of a larger theme of disconnections and reconnections. Jones, who has claimed to be wary of the dualities of such discourse, makes the suggestion that for adults to go back to this other time in their memories there needs to be suspension of logic and the adoption of a feeling state (p.34). According to both Philo and Jones, feeling and imagination together permit at the very least a “fragmentary connection” to the past although Jones does claim the ‘unreachableness’ of childhood experiences (2001/2008).

What of the things that make childhood separate? The experiences that ‘define’ this time as distinct and special, are we as researchers not to know them? Jones is quoted as saying, “the mysteries of childhood” (2008, p.2) yet readers are reminded of Bachelard’s position stating that all adults/ adult researchers have already been children, already known childhood. So how much of it then is really that mysterious? For Jones, it seems more of an ethical issue, one of respect and reverence, saving children from the intruding probes of adult researchers. And although the aim of this study was not to seek children’s first hand perspectives, in ontological terms it is still worth considering the debate about what constitutes the “colonisation” that the likes of Jones refer to (Jones, 2008; Thomas & Hacking, 2003). By using terms such as ‘colonise’, ‘venture towards these other lands’, ‘childhood becomes another country’, ‘a disputed territory’, ‘children as a theoretical resource’, established geographical terminology with which Jones is familiar, does this not serve to reify the categories of adult and child, de-value the social capital of children, a mimicry of some poor third-world country? If what is understood by colonisation is the taking of something, an experience, a phenomenon, from childhood and ‘giving’ it to adults to make sense of, then this very study on imaginary friendships comes close.

For the reader, two issues bear reflection: The first is that the experience, the phenomenon under investigation, belongs to the same self. The child and adult *both* own the experience, it is theirs - young child, old child, adolescent, young adult, older adult, old age-experienced and re-experienced in the natural

unfolding of one life. Secondly, the implication is that the colonising act of research robs childhood of its natural resource. The landscape that both Philo and Jones claim is rich in magic and otherness, is also claimed as one left ravaged and barren. Yet the aim of exploration into something as multi-textured as an imaginary companionship is to fully understand its richness.

It was my intention to view categories of adult and child on a continuum, in geographical terms, one landscape. With less rigid framing around what is perceived as 'a childhood experience' or 'an adult experience', the understanding of one category requires multiple perspectives or layers of analysis. If memory is viewed likewise as a landscape, a living landscape, then the study is a movement through chronological time called into consciousness and redefined, re-experienced in relation to the present. Although Jones's position on the 'fixity' of child- adult selves has already been interrogated, the point at which our arguments do converge is his assertion that life is "inherently spatial" (2005 p.206). In this he describes what may be akin to *schema*, suggesting that each moment's laying down of experiences is coloured by the past, moments of "becoming-the-now" that make sense because of other moments. He therefore does contend that memories always have a spatial framework. Most significantly, his assertion of 'fragments of connection' between adulthood and the memory of childhood, an idea shared with Philo (2003), is difficult to grasp when in another instance he has stated that it is through memory and imagination that we maintain connections across space and time.

### **Remembering: Research Examples**

The aim of this section is to provide a relevant and applicable research context against which the current study may be evaluated. This will be achieved through the provision of six examples. These are studies that despite variation in methodology have similarly utilised an adult perspective from which to understand and give meaning to the past or to an experience normatively situated in childhood.

I wish firstly to turn attention to Alison Waller, an English literary researcher whose cross-disciplinary work borrows key concepts from psychology and human geography, informing ideas of self, memory and contextuality all of which hold relevance to this current study. In 'Revisiting Childhood Landscapes: Revenants of *Druid's Grove* and *Narnia*', (2010,303-319), Waller draws from two children's tales wherein fictional characters revisit places of the past. Waller's analysis of the text follows closely the evocative process of memory in relation to place and for me raises the question of proximity. How differences in 'distance' between past and present may be personally perceived and whether the possibility exists that special memories such as those of place may have a larger 'homing range', engaged with more frequently. Waller's interpretation of the character's experiences is suggestive of dissonance- that returning to the past may bring with it a form of discomfort she terms a 'paradox'. However, in 'Swallows and Amazons' (Waller & Maine,2011), which I turn to next, the re-visitation of adults to their past experiences of fiction is interpreted as "nostalgic enjoyment" (354-371).

The theme of memory, narrative and identity is further evidenced in Waller's 'reality-located' exploration of how adult re-readers engage with the fictional tale 'Swallows and Amazons' and how adults as 're-readers' experience the text in relation to their previous childhood selves? (Waller & Maine 2011). In the individual interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed, the adult participants were asked in the first place to recall their knowledge and experience of the text from past and then were given the text to re-read and reflect upon. A unique part of the participant experience in this study was the opportunity afforded for child and adult readers to 'meet each other across time', as discussions were video recorded and shown to each group. Waller and Maine searched for "recurrent ideas" in the narratives which were organised into common themes. The researchers do note that their study's aims were best served through adopting an 'eclectic approach' in terms of addressing the meaning-making processes of both children and adults



The theme of 'journeying back', prevalent in much of Waller's research, appears as much an interpretation of belongingness – what 'belongs' to the adult – as it is an interpretation of engagement. In the 'Swallows and Amazons' study, Waller and her colleague employ terms such as "the interactive space", "across time", "meaning as temporal", "something that is happening between", for me all interpretively descriptive of the child-adult-child traverse (354-371). They have stated that "...less attention has been paid to how reading over time might provide *insights into the continuities between childhood and adult* reading experiences...". In terms of validating support for the current (imaginary companionship) study, it would be well to echo this sentiment that other located experiences, such as imaginary process or early relationship encounters, may offer insight into the continuities of what it means to be child and adult as well as the experiences themselves.

David Sobel, (1990 vol.7, p.8) in his study, *Adults Memories of Special Places*, found that adult recollections captured how important these places were in forming self-identity. Sobel has shown how memories of place-particular experiences have shaped the way these individuals are as adults: "The person makes a literal place in the world during childhood, preparatory to making a figurative place in the world during adolescence and adulthood" (p.10). He has stated that during his interviews, adults told their stories with a "breathless, twinkle-in-the-eye animation", feeling once again the excitement and thrill of childhood. Korpela, Kytt and Hartig, (2002) who have conducted a child-focused study of special places, claim that adults and children provided converging evidence that 'emotion- and self-regulation' occurs in special places of childhood, revealing similarities between what children relate in the present and what adults remember about experiences of special places.

Similarly, Raymund (1995) conducted an interactionist study of children's experiences and adult memories of childhood playscapes... "discovering the deeper meanings and effects of childhood on a person's overall life experiences

is difficult... “ (p.135). She utilised a survey method with questions seeking to detail what the adults remembered about how they played, where they played, what they played with, and how they felt as children; how their childhood experiences influenced their adult lives and the lives of their children; and how the adults viewed their childhood (p.136). Raymond has stated that the impacts of childhood,(in this case, special places), remained through adulthood and were remembered emotionally with fondness.

Skar and Krogh, (2009), investigate children’s nature-based experiences in Norway through adults’ memories of their own childhood and through observations of children’s practices over the past decade. Utilising a phenomenological framework, the focus of this case study was on both children’s actual nature-based experiences as well the way in which nature experiences are shaped and influenced by the social context of everyday lives. Researchers engaged in novel ‘walking interviews’, conversing in natural outside spaces where the tone was relaxed and participants were placed at ease. Examples of key questions included: “How do adult informants describe changes in children’s usage of natural areas?”; “How does the changing sociocultural context contribute to explaining these changes?”; “ What challenges are posed in the changing patterns of children’s outdoor life?” There was a descriptive emphasis to the interviews with informants’ giving descriptions of the actual experiences throughout the life course, minimising the risk of childhood presentations being overshadowed by ‘nostalgic memories’. The significant role of emotions in memory richness and recall was highlighted in this study and is supportive of the current status of literature on memory.

Camahalan’s study (2014) has shown the importance of tracing development in a non-linear manner. Arguing against ‘transitoriness’, she has used a grounded theoretical approach to investigate the childhood memories of seventy-five graduate students enrolled in a child development module. The aim was to provide an opportunity for the young adults to engage directly with their own childhoods as a new way of understanding child development. With regard to

the consequences of the early memories, the researcher claimed that all respondents reported themes of self-growth and emotional growth; believing that their early memories had taught lessons about self and belongingness as well as resiliencies from the ups and downs of life. With not too much critical analysis, an interpretation of this study would suggest that Camahalan is a believer in the human-ness of experience. The fact that ordinary life provides us - ordinary living things - with experiences that last in mind and memory. Lasting impressions are made on the self and carried through to adulthood.

As a last example of research that places child and adult on one experiential landscape, I turn to Scott's (2004) 'Retrospective Account of Spiritual Narratives. It is an interesting study to examine following Camahalan's (above) and also interesting because he does something quite similar to what I have undertaken in this imaginary companionship study. He has sought a collection of stories from volunteer adult participants who make the self-judgement as to what constitutes '*a spiritual experience*'. The tellers identify events in their own lives as spiritual without any attempt on Scott's part to define or classify whether these experiences conform to any accredited definition. Scott has stated, "I make no attempt to verify the veracity of the accounts" (p.68). Similarly, in the collection of narratives for this current study, I did not undertake any form of pre-assessment concerning definitions of imaginary companionship. In the few times when a participant sought reassurance I gently directed them back to their own understanding. The focus in this kind of approach is not in gauging 'the truth' of retrospective narratives but in the power the narrative itself has. Potentially, this power is for (self) transformation... "The experiences remain potent... I see them as access pathways to self-understanding..." (Scott,p68)

There is a further similarity between Scott's study and this current study on imaginary companionships. He gives consideration to the role of social, emotional and familial factors in the shaping of the narrative. By not reducing the experience to one accepted definition the personal narrative reveals itself in a

living context and, as Scott suggests and with which I concur, it is only in this way that the stories and the assumptions implicit in them can be truly heard.

Both Camahalan and Scott agree that early experiences are responsible in large part for shaping the adult mind. For Scott however, it is 'the intensity' of the experience that counts, an awareness in the child self that something 'out of the ordinary' was happening. Scott suggests that in many cases the experience includes the recall of specific emotions. He suggests further that these emotionally-laden experiences "have often remained hidden and unspoken". The reason he gives for this, if considered psychologically, tends to be somewhat pathologising. Scott states that should a child have a realisation or awareness which is alarming to the adults in their life the experience may be denied or suppressed. For Camahalan however, as she refers to the 'human factor' common in early experiences, less emphasis is placed on the criticality or severity of these. For her it seems as if the persistence in memory of the experience is due to the fact that it has spoken to the self, that some core construct has been touched by the event(s) and is remembered as special by the adult self.

These examples serve to highlight the fact that memory is the connective tissue of life, binding together past and present in a way that is significant and transformative. As Casey states, memories possess "a depth not easily penetrable by the direct light of consciousness" (Casey 2000, p.265). "Retelling (the) past in discourse ...we come to know it from within again. We come to know it better, more completely and more poignantly, than if we had left it unremembered, un-unfolded (p.121)

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study seeks to understand the phenomenon of the imaginary companion and it does so through the memories of adult students at Oxford Brookes University. I believe an authentic understanding of the personal experiences

required both a practical and philosophical sensitivity to the participants, their rights to ownership of memory and to the manner in which this memory was conveyed through oral conversation. Together with a sensitised disposition, loyalty is arguably the cornerstone of the methodological choices made and described: to the nine participants, their stories (and kinsfolk included), to the study, the ethics committee, the School of Education and myself, (my interpretive voice). One might suggest the methodology chapter is a declaration of the conscious act of binding the study, intellectually and emotionally, to the phenomenon.

The previous chapter sought to clear ground in terms of: the examination of the constructions of child and adult; providing a sound rationale for the loosening of constraints around what are considered exclusively childhood phenomenon (play, imagination) and lastly; explaining how crucial ideas and concepts borrowed from human geography may assist the study, in locating what is inherently spatial, temporal and experiential. A discourse of 'otherness', fixating on the differences between the experiential worlds of children and adults, (like that between children-with and children-without IC's), has made it difficult to venture anywhere near what is considered a childhood-located phenomenon. In response to this, the preceding chapter argues for another way around the problematic untouchability of childhood, through the perspective of human geography. Proposing that memory and imaginative faculty work as binding agents, that adult and child are never really out of each other's sight, our personal history looks a lot different when understood in these terms. What does become apparent in human geography is a theme of connection, disconnection, and reconnection.

Further to this, the preceding chapter has included examples of other studies which have sought to examine and understand 'childhood-located' experiences. The idea was to present ontologically similar research for scaffolding: generically an educational scaffold may assist learning by providing 'support' or for 'convenience', but for purposes of this study, the examples are there to be

accessed and experienced by readers prior to the methodology chapter, in preparation and readiness for the methodology and interpretation. Readers may also wish to use the research examples in a comparative manner, to gauge on whatever criteria they wish. This is an interpretive study and the reader is of course called upon to interpret the work.

The following is a list of research examples provided in the previous chapter: Alison Waller's study, (two different projects are referenced), examining fictional reading experiences and historical process; Sobel's study of adult's memory of past special places; Raymund's analysis of childhood play and play-scapes as they are remembered/ re-storied; Skar and Krogh's study of children's nature-based experiences in Norway through adults' memory narratives and through observations of children's practices over the past decade; Camahalan's grounded theoretical study examining development in a non-transitory manner by linking the memories of graduate students (enrolled in a child development module) with their own childhoods as a novel way of understanding child development, and lastly is Scott's' retrospective account of spiritual narratives, wherein stories of remembered spiritual experiences are collected, collated and understood in reference to the self and self-transformation.

The Methodology chapter begins with an acknowledgement of the tensions that run through the study between cognitive science and phenomenology, and synchronous voice of psychotherapist and researcher. Some readers may identify the dynamic as a felt tension more evident when the study is regarded as a whole, for other readers it may just be noticed as a subtle dissonance or not noticed at all. The ecology of the study is important however, and the point of this beginning is not to de-vein the writing piece by piece but rather just to describe the opposing tendencies.

Beneath the heading of 'Phenomenology', the study's aim of understanding participant experiences is looked at against the *phenomenological attitude* and researcher assumptions. I will explain the importance of describing/elucidating the actual phenomenon in the phenomenological approach and show the reader how I have arrived at three possible phenomena: *the adult who remembers*; *the imaginary companion as remembered* and, *the remembered as told*, each with a different focus, each lending itself to a particular experiential end.

Next, a description of narrative interviewing is provided as the chosen data collection method, and a brief rationale for this choice. The aim is to share the potential utility of a narrative style interview for this particular study, examining narrative's harmonious relationship with phenomenology. Narrative has demonstrable sensitivity to individual experience and self-authorship and as I hope to show, provides a shared space for intersubjective exchange.

The second-half of the chapter is devoted to participant's experiences of imaginary companionships. This is the data section where information is gathered and an interpretation, (analysis) of the information is offered. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the method used for interpreting the participant stories. The steps involved in IPA will be explained in a practical fashion using examples and excerpts drawn from participant interviews.

## **Tensions**

Quantitative research has an established and successful past, a long history of producing important findings. Some argue it has become "the language of research rather than the language of a particular paradigm". Using this language in qualitative research may stem from a "desire for intellectual and scientific acceptance by the academic community" (Tobin & Begley, p.389, 2004).

Although this section is not meant as a judicious defence of an interpretative position, there is need for an explanation of the project's methodological turn and concurrent tension.

As I shifted from an original interest in imaginary friendships and their correlation with perspective-taking to a non-defined interest in the IC experience, it has felt at times like a step backward, moving away from the light. However, as this idea of exploring lived experiences took root, committing to an interpretive framework seemed necessary.

In its formative stages the study has been influenced by cognitive-developmental literature on childhood, play, imagination and imaginary friendships. Soliciting accurate and academically verifiable findings meant that much of what is referenced in the literature review is quantitative and scientific. So it is that I have cited studies aimed at locating and measuring constructs related to the imaginary companion, explaining correlations to psychological variables, studies that situate the IC within a normative developmental framework, studies that are robust, coherent, replicable and objective.

My position as a novice researcher translates into a genuine concern for 'quality work' and for being able to demonstrate subject 'competence', hence an initial and comforting tendency to stick with well-known studies, familiar literature, not wandering too far from the path. This is the same well-worn path I have followed as a psychotherapist, a psychometrically trained professional whose work is framed by medico-psycho formulations, diagnostics and generalizable theory. I did not want to be guilty of collapsing therapeutic and research interests and in some respects playing it safe has meant losing sight of the value of ambiguity and discordance. In the relational-centred approach, developed by Evans and Finlay,(2009), for example, data emerges from the researcher and co-researcher relationship, a shared dialogical space quite similar to a therapeutic encounter, where according to the authors, anything can appear. Of course, I was wary of moving toward this kind of intersubjective fusion because of the potential for blurring roles.

As a doctoral researcher, the aim is to produce something new *and* something of value, with the former condition warranting an intermediate stage of literature re-reviewing. With the study continuing to project a particular type of



understanding, empirically rather de-personalised and narratively inauthentic, the entire process felt unstable.

A less personalised yet equally probable explanation for the continuance of tension can be located in McDowell's discernment of *constitutive* and *enabling* understanding (1994). Constitutive understanding is linked to the work of philosophy and phenomenology whilst enabling understanding is arguably the target of empirical science. The type of constitutive understanding sought for instance in the present study, regards the unpicking, (identifying and articulating) of conditions surrounding a phenomenon, an understanding of the essences of personal experience. However, the work covered in the literature review and preceding theoretical sections of this study, together with my professional background in psychology, is rooted in empirical science, loaded in the discourses of cognitive and developmental psychology. It is the type of understanding which, according to McDowell's typology, works to reveal causal elements, the organizational structure of elements and the causal interactions between those elements. In the forthcoming sections I make the case for selecting phenomenology as a different route to understanding the imaginary companion experience, one that is concerned with personal meaning whilst also not locked into intra-individualistic explanation. Developmentally-oriented literature on imaginary companionships, that which this study has relied on and benefitted from, by its very nature bypasses experiential phenomena in favour of other objective, theoretical and sub-personal functions, such as cognitive elements.

Following McDowell's distinction between constitutive and enabling understanding, McCulloch poignantly suggests that "meanings ain't in the head, they are in the mind, but the mind just ain't in the head" (2003, pp. 11–12). Using this to support an explanation of the tension in the study, I would need to further add that the approach I have chosen, that of Phenomenology, seems to reject the kind of internalism that is espoused in cognitive science. That is, the fundamental idea that the mind be identified with, or held the same as, the brain. Furthermore, that the brain is self-contained and set apart from all else. McCulloch has stated too that a phenomenological approach to understanding would not be accepting of the kind of externalism that reduces intentionality to cause-

and-effect. Similarly, psychoanalytic theory when translated empirically lays claim to unconscious processes, the mind subjected to external force as opposed to phenomenology's conscious state of intentionality (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000,p149). The authors question the ontological status given to research participants even in cases where psychoanalytic ideas are used within a 'sociological framework' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Clarke, 2002).

There is a tension existent in situations with dynamic interplay, the dynamic between internalism-externalism for instance. McCulloch's suggestion however, is that the either-or dynamic is immediately rejected on the premise that subjective does not equate with 'inside the mind', nor objective 'outside the mind'. There are other philosophy writers such as Sanders (cited in Wrathall & Kelly,1996), whom suggest that there is only one way to reconciliation and tension reduction, which is to shift from a representationalist (internal) view of the mind to an ecological (external) view. It would seem to run counter to McCulloch's call of just letting go, forgetting for good the trappings of either-or. What Sanders appears to be in favour of is actually a diluted version of traditional, 'analytic' approaches, suggesting a binary opposite for cognitive science in the form of eco-logical-ism. Which brings us back full circle.

So where does that leave this current study, with incongruence and tension?

The study has benefitted empirically from developmental psychologists such as Marjorie Taylor, neuro-behavioural researchers such Stephanie Carlson, and many more cognitive-scientific researchers, especially in terms of the imaginary companionship literature. Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), assert that "thicker" elaborations- thick descriptions of individual experiences- are warranted on the basis of the need for more detail, more complex explanation, more emotion and humanity. Flyvbjerg, (2001) describes this as "stick(ing) to the details" of individual cases. And phenomenology is not the only approach that has attempted to inform understanding through providing thick descriptions. Social –constructionist studies, for example tend to look beyond intra- individual mechanisms and patterns, to the processes of human engagement. The construction of narratives for instance, which provide researchers a 'thicker-type' of understanding of the sense-making of individuals. Narrative identity

research has similarly undertaken the study of memory process and links to the conceptual structures of the self. In the case of narrative identity research, despite similar empirical questions being asked, the literature generated from 'identity' research begins to resemble something traditionally psychological and familiar, as "components" are "defined and ordered", and experiences are collectively "framed" and "synthesized" (Singer & Conway, 2011). Phenomenology, within which this study is rooted, and cognitive science from which most of the framing literature has been drawn, are regarded as incommensurable but even if it be so, the philosophies and phenomenology have within themselves housed incommensurable forces. Whilst phenomenologists agree on the need to "study human beings in human terms", (Finlay, 2006a), these terms naturally translate into human tensions and human contradictions, surely. The current phenomenological study aims to describe what it is for someone to have a particular experience within a world of other experiences, but in moving toward the experiential unknown has rightly or wrongly walked through the known. The absolute non-importation of known theoretical frameworks in the hope of arriving at new descriptions holds for some phenomenological studies whilst for others, such as this current study, it appears that the work itself serves to highlight the tensions between lived and theoretical accounts, something Dreyfus describes as "living life forward" and attempting to coherently "understand it backwards" (1991) .

## **Phenomenology**

### Participants

Potential participants were recruited by requesting permission from the university to circulate information about the research to all registered students via poster advertisements and leaflets distributed around campuses. ( for poster example see Appendix 6)

Participants who were interested in volunteering could contact me via email or telephone. All of the participants chose to email me. I replied in turn and

forwarded each an information sheet (see Appendix 2) explaining the rationale for the research and the procedure.

My original proposal for the sampling of participants stated that individuals would be *Oxford Brookes University students with good conversational English ability, who are willing and able to share their imaginary friendship experiences*. They would be sourced through *posters on campus noticeboards, (Harcourt Hill, Headington, Gypsy Lane Campuses), Facebook groups and Associations linked through Student Union portal , and Internal Brookes email, (“message of the day”)*.

I used the same campus-type poster advertisement to post on an Oxford Brookes open Facebook group and received no response. I received two potential participant email enquiries from an internal Brookes mail alert that had gone out but neither of these two individuals were able to commit to meeting with me.

The original proposal for the sampling of participants stated that the sample would *ideally comprise a multicultural, mixed age and gender group of students, not restricted by their enrolment in any one faculty*.

The table below shows the composition of the participant sample group

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Student in :</b>
1. Undergraduate	Female	20	White British	Education
2. Post Graduate	female	21	White British	Social sciences
3. Undergraduate	female	23	White British	Social Sciences
4. Post Graduate	Female	26	White British	Education
5. Post Graduate	Female	30+	White British	Psychology

6. Undergraduate	Female	19	White British	Social Sciences
7. Undergraduate	Female	20	Asian British	Education
8. Undergraduate	Female	23	White British	Psychology and Art
9. Post graduate	Male	21	Turkish British	Education

To preserve anonymity each participant's transcript was given a code, P1 being the first participant to be interviewed and P9 the last. It is not uncommon for participants to want to be named in this type of study, to retain their sense of authorship and legitimate their rightful presence. When presented with the request to be identified I explained to participants that they would receive an electronic copy of the completed study and the choice would then be theirs to share it and to identify themselves. However, in the interests of other individuals such as family members who had not been consulted and who could inadvertently be recognised the participants would not be named in the study.

### Method

The main criteria for the methodology was that it be sensitive to lived experience, responsive to the individual and temporal nuances of the data. The raw data are intimate, unstructured narratives and because of this the investigation needed something to frame/contain the storying process while holding accountability to a full interpretative description. In place of following pattern, theme or replication in the data, the aim was to reveal the idiosyncratic meanings attached to a lived event. As epistemological significance lay in the

lived experiences of individuals and their interpretation, phenomenology was selected as a methodological approach.

Although a rather crude formulation for a complex subject matter, perhaps the best starting point is to discuss Merleau-Ponty's (1962) four qualities shared in phenomenological thought: description, intentionality, reduction and essences.

1. Beginning with description, the researcher is directed toward exploring a recognisable human experience (phenomenon) as it is lived through, rather than how it is to be conceptualised, theorized, or reflected upon (van Manen 1997). The aim is to determine *what the experience means* for the people who have had the experience, providing descriptions in place of explanation or analysis. At the risk of stating the obvious, experiential accounts are not identical to lived experience itself. Once a human experience is over what is left are the transformations of that experience –the recollections, reflections, and descriptions.

2. Consciousness is an important concept in phenomenology. When we are conscious of something we are in relation to it, aware of it, and it holds meaning. Referred to as 'intentionality', it is a key focus in this approach. The researcher aims to make explicit this intentional relationship by describing what research participants are experiencing (via consciousness) and how they are experiencing it.

3.Reduction will be explained further under 'researcher preparation', and will for now be described as the process whereby things are made less complex - the phenomena are reduced to their essential elements, seen for what they are. The impact of the researcher is too reduced, their strength in the interpretive act lessened.

3. In section 3, *The Phenomenon Under Investigation*, the concept of essence is elaborated further. It refers to the very core of an individual's

experience and it is the researcher's task to illuminate the hidden meanings and essences of this experience.

According to van Manen, (1997 p.345), phenomenological understanding is best described as "existential,... embodied, situational, and non-theoretic".

Phenomenology has much to do with our humanity, our relationship to each other and to the world in which we find ourselves and this would include: the research participant's existing network of relationships, relationship between participant and researcher, the researcher's relationship with others in the research team. Although they happen (are happening) at the edge of the phenomenological field my lesson from this study has been that these relationships are meaningful and therefore impactful. Drawing from, adding to, casting light on, the relationships that this study's participants had with their mothers for example impacted the narrative about imaginary friendships. Mothers were mentioned often in conversation, bearing witness and consulted for their testimony. As this had not been suggested or recommended, it seemed to be a natural phenomenon.

Reflexivity is seen at different stages of the design, with the final analysis involving a process of reflective writing and rewriting. Ambiguity and complexity of experience is carried through to the final word. It is not the researcher's duty to 'make things easier' to understand. Because the raw data may contain participants' narratives and quotations there is an opportunity for readers to make their own sense of things.

Recounting memory of an imaginary friendship and the experience of this is an interpretive act and the aim was to retain the storyteller's sense of authorship. The manner of description, language choice, perceived significances are all things that belong to the storyteller. What belongs to the researcher is [my] own ordinary everyday language in the expression of findings and this is situated alongside participants' own expressions and discourse.

## Researcher Preparation

Attention is drawn to the role of the researcher. This is viewed in terms of a relationship with the phenomenon under investigation, how another's experience of the phenomenon comes to be understood, how meanings are made explicit and how the researcher transfers what they have understood to others. What follows is a description of the 'phenomenological attitude', and an explanation of the concepts of 'bracketing' and 'bridling'. I feel it is important to explain this in personal terms as it is not something that could be understood as a methodological device or technique.

Because phenomenology has to do with the subjective act of knowing we have to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that we, as researchers, have in relation to the world when we are in our normal, unreflective mode of being, *the natural attitude* (Husserl, 1982 ). The natural attitude takes things just as they are in the world, at face value. However, Dahlberg's (2006) assertion that we are connected by phenomena to everything else in the world, to other subjects and objects, reminds us that researchers too are part of this world, the one that is being defined, investigated or explained. Researchers such as I, working with lifeworld phenomena, are to sensitize ourselves, to become prepared in a manner that allows us to see shades of meaning while remaining vigilant to what we may be doing to the phenomenon in the explication of meaning.

It is easy for the phenomenological researcher to become tangled up. Enmeshment not only in the process of extraction (of data) but in the whole research experience. Best practice would involve some form of initial 'risk assessment' wherein a frank acknowledgement of one's own perspective, assumptions and emergent hypotheses are laid down. Traditionally, a more acute form of reduction, termed 'bracketing' by Husserl (1998) and more recently, 'bridling' by Dahlberg (2006).



Husserl's term describes the mental act, (used synonymously with a 'conscious act'), of putting to rest knowledge gained through secondary or mediated sources - "All past knowledge derived from readings or secondary sources, as well as one's former personal experiences with the phenomenon, are meant to be excluded". Ignoring what one already 'knows', a necessary but not sufficient condition for transcendence in Husserlian philosophy. This attitude of "wonder... quiet inquisitive respect" (Bettis, 1969, p.12 ) is traditionally adopted prior to any engagement with the data or study participants. On reflection, the process 'feels like' an imaginary transposition, moving across from my place to your place, an active and cognitive process. A critical concept for Husserl, he explains it thus, "I am here and I imagine going there and being at the place where you are right now... you are here (the 'there' where I imagine being) and you imagine you are going there, to the place where I am (my here)" (Moran & Embree, Eds. 2004)

Dahlberg (2006) has introduced a more contemporary notion of 'bridling', (the author has stated she owned horses and borrowed this term very specifically). I see it as having much to do with restraint. Wilfully energetic beasts, the horse and mind are kept in check. Beliefs, theories, assumptions sit powerfully beneath the surface of pre-understanding. I have taken 'bridling' to be a reflective process, scrutinizing my involvement with the imaginary companion as phenomenon. Through this process I look for the meanings that exist in relationships - those between myself and phenomena, participant and phenomena and also intersubjectively. Dahlberg describes this as giving the researcher "elbow room" (p.11-19)... "[I] bridle [my] understanding so that [I] do not understand too quick, too careless, or slovenly,...that [I] do not make definite what is indefinite" (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003).

With the rejection of bracketing, of suspending personal opinion, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on getting beneath subjective experience. Researchers in this tradition 'attune themselves' towards the phenomena, a readiness to see all that there is to see. If however, according to some in hermeneutics,

interpretations are all we have, the challenge would still be to describe 'what is given in immediate experience' without intrusion from theory or pre-understanding (van Manen, 1990, p.184). Debunking the practice of bracketing as impossible and unrealistic would leave us reliant on intuition – “the researcher aims to create rich and deep account of a phenomenon through intuition” (Cohen, 2001). Even when this is so, implicit assumptions are still to be made explicit. A parallel with other schools of phenomenological thought. According to van Manen, (1997), the explication of meaning is made possible through language use and in particular a register which is informal and idiographic.

There is a reflective section in the study which initially consisted of journal-type entries of the research process. However, as is called for at the commencement of phenomenological writing, there are certain assumptions and hypotheses which I would like to make explicit:

- i. Ignorance: As a child, I did not have an imaginary friend nor recall any friend or sibling having had one. I remember first hearing about an imaginary friend in my late childhood.
- ii. Unfamiliar: I did think it was a strange experience, maybe even something that wasn't true. I struggled to fully understand the psychology behind it.
- iii. Significant: What I began to believe in was it's significance. However variable the definition, this relationship in all its forms seemed important. It held a noticeable place in the life of the individual.
- iv. Familial: Right from my first encounter with stories of imaginary friends, they seemed to be involved in the life of the family. In one way or another bits of family history seemed to be woven into the story.
- v. Emotion: I have come to believe strongly that there is an emotional or feeling component to the experience of having an imaginary companion. I have noticed non-verbal clues such as facial expression, hand gestures,

use of personal space and verbally, the emotional valence becomes apparent through tone, pace and pitch of voice.

- vi. Common: I had little idea as to how common they are. The literature gave me some idea but along the way this seemed to become a less important fact for me.
- vii. Imagining: I have imagined. It is fantasy. Not in the sense of travelling back in time to my childhood, but at this present time. I am forty years of age and have an imaginary friend, what's it like? Is it really an important relationship? What's the experience like for me? The most difficult part of that exercise was trying not to be influenced by what I had already started hearing from participants. My mind wanted to borrow parts of other people's stories and I began to get frustrated. I could not un-hear what I had already heard and as much as I tried 'thinking outside the box', 'letting my mind go', there were second-hand elements in every imagining.

This last point is reassurance as to why I did not define or describe at the outset the imaginary friend for participants. I will discuss in the next section the concept of *phenomena*, but reiterate for now that the essential characteristics of a phenomenon exist only as they are experienced. I wanted this phenomenon to show itself. I made a decision to share nothing about the imaginary companion, not in the advert for volunteer participants, nor the participant information sheet nor in my dialogue with volunteers. When questioned, as I was, my scripted reply became "an imaginary companion is however you define it, it is whatever you consider it to be or however you have experienced it".

### **The phenomenon under investigation**

A phenomenological approach requires several layers of reflection. The first of these is researcher attitude, as discussed. The next reflective act is pausing to clarify and demarcate the exact phenomenon to be investigated, why this phenomenon and what it means to me the researcher.

This is a risky business, the business of 'describing' phenomena. It means attempting for a moment to separate the thing from the thing as-experienced. Despite the fact that it may be a fairly common methodological goal in phenomenological research to describe phenomena it is difficult if not impossible to separate out the experiential component, how it exists in mind. The idea of *essences* is central in Husserlian philosophy (1977) and, although a term borrowed gratefully, there is not the scope to delve much further than to say that *essence* or *essential meaning* is what makes the phenomenon what it is, its way of being. When the phenomenon presents itself as something, it presents its essence. The term 'essence' has been used interchangeably with 'structure' in the sense of a phenomenon, that is, it houses the meaning of *what* something is.

Dahlberg, (2006) suggests it has much to do with intentionality stating that when one understands a particular phenomenon and *what* it is, one is dealing with essence. As intentional subjects we form meaningful relationships with the world of objects and the world of people, existing in these relationships are the essences. They are, according to Dahlberg, not the outcome of interpretation and therefore not reliant on me as researcher to decode or decipher.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) has written of essences saying they belong to the "flesh of the world"; all phenomena are connected and it can be hard to see where one phenomenon ends and the next begins.

In order to make things clearer, I have arrived at three possible phenomena: the adult who remembers; the imaginary companion as remembered and, the remembered as told. Each has a different focus. Each lending itself to a particular experiential end. Pivotal to our experience of self, human body and relationships to others and the physical world, all three phenomena are valid dimensions of understanding an imaginary companionship.

Although for the purposes of this study only one of the phenomena is selected, the three identified phenomena in their own way offer an interpretation of

selfhood, embodiment, sociality, spatiality, temporality, and discourse (Ashworth, 2003). That which has been selected to be the focus of this study is *the remembered as told*. The rationale for this choice was that it offered a wider lens through which to view the data. By choosing this I felt I would be able to show the structural whole, that is socially shared as well as revealing how imaginary companionships are experienced in individual ways. It thus seemed possible to provide an expanded understanding of the experience.

### **The phenomenon of: The adult who remembers**

This study comprises a small sample group of young adults have remembered their imaginary friend (s) and, through their own volition, have volunteered to share their information with me, the researcher. The aim was for participants to speak freely about their experience, to interpret and reflect as they so choose. Investigation of this phenomena would yield questions concerning the psychological essence of individuals, *who is this person? What is their intrinsic experience? How are they known by others or by the researcher?...* The belief that memory would work in an unpredictable manner, I hypothesised that other related co-occurring experiences may emerge, events that would link the imaginary companion to family happenings, to moving house, starting school, nan and granddad - extensions as it were. Furthermore, after re-visiting the literature, it seemed highly likely that the recollection would extend to other individuals in the family system and that their perspectives on the imaginary friend would become known. For this reason, the adult (who remembers) was not to be the phenomenon investigated.

That is not to say there is no regard for the adult as subject. Limiting the study to this phenomenon might have meant a psychological interrogation. There has been discussion of the limitations of studies looking at 'those with' versus 'those without' imaginary companions. I did not wish for this to be an adult version of these earlier studies, explaining differences or similarities, identifying qualities

residing in the adult. This phenomenon is all about the adult, not the remembering or the content of the memory or the act of telling another.

### **The phenomenon of: The imaginary companion as remembered**

Here the focus is on the imaginary companion, the meaning of the object-as experienced. An understanding of this phenomenon would permit some form of personal interpretation but not take into account the meanings of context or significance of the self as a reflective being. There was a danger for me in positioning the imaginary companion as a remembered object. Choosing to understand this phenomenon would have meant losing sight too of the changing nature of things as they exist in mind. Consequences of events in childhood do not stay the same in mind or memory but are transformed by later experiences. I was concerned that this phenomenon would not permit an understanding of intersubjectivity

Memory studies suggest both image and feeling components to the things we store. For this reason it was important to provide scope in the study for participants to access sensorial memory, to share images as they arose and to be able to relate this kind of textured recall in a narrative form.

Should this have been selected as the phenomenon under investigation there would have been, as mentioned above, a measure of personal interpretation. By wanting to understand 'just' the imaginary companion I could have worked with participants' own definitions, looking at how and why the IC comes to be defined in various ways and how this relates to definitions in the literature. If the question raised by this phenomenon was, *what is an imaginary companion*, my role as researcher may have been more influential, a judge of definitions, measuring personal sentiments against one another and against the available literature. The reader may have by default played this part too.

## **The Phenomenon of: The remembered as told**

This is the phenomenon under investigation. It has to do with telling someone else a story about something particular one remembers, something that happened and that one was a part of. This has a special kind of temporal value, as much about what happened as about where it happened, when, who was there, what else was going on at the time etc. It is the reflective understanding not of experience only but of the memory of that experience.

I take a risk here by suggesting that both 'the adult' who remembers the IC as well as 'the IC' as remembered, are less experiential investigations. In order to understand *what the experience means* for the people who have had the experience, a first person report of experience was needed. This is to be shared by the 'I', a reflective position that is weighted in personal significance. It concerns subjectivity and identity because the construction of a story (from autobiographical memory) involves imagination and humanness. Reflection however is also a decentring process. The lifeworld, the lived context of this experience gives an intersubjective component, with the ego in a less egocentric place human experience is open to intersubjectivity.

It felt necessary too for researcher and reader to witness and appreciate ambiguity. The whole story from telling to listening to the writing down or recording becomes relational and situational. Sharing of the remembered across interpersonal space has researcher and the participant storyteller assuming that *their words* will be understood as spoken and intended.

I argue that the value of this phenomenon is the 'felt' component, the "felt meaning" of the experience. van Manen (2007), in his commentary of Langeveld's (1983) *The Secret Place in the Life of the Child*, has connected one early experience to other understandings of development and pedagogy. The felt meaning extends to the reader who should feel that they have vicariously experienced the phenomenon under study and should be able to envision

coming to similar conclusions about what it means (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

The lived experience, the sharing of the remembered, is further able to be interpreted through the use of a post-interview feedback form which was developed purely to aid in following up the participant narratives and summarising the experience for the participants. The form will be detailed in a later section but it is fitting for me to share at this moment that I did not have in mind any specific way in which the form would be used interpretively until I began my own reflection on this phenomenon. The commitment to detailing exactly what it was that I was looking for and the decision to look at the multiple layers of an autobiographical memory experience brought to mind the potential utility of this feedback form. As I have stated, the reader will be guided through the form in a later section.

Some ground has been cleared on the subject of phenomena, the nature of the phenomenon under investigation and how interpretive process can assist in an understanding of the experiential component of phenomena. The next step is to explain the methodological tool selected for this study.

## **The Research Tool: Narrative Interviewing**

“The history of narrative begins with the history of (hu)mankind; there does not exist, and has never existed, a people without narratives” (Barthes 1966 p.14). Simply put, narrative is an act or process whereby one informs another of an event or happening (Smith 1981). Theoretical definitions such as those belonging to narrative theory include Polkinghorne’s (1988), idea of narrative as a story relating a series of events, either true or false; his belief that narrative accounts have a unique explanatory power, (Richards 1989, p.258). This definition highlights formulaic expression, the importance of organisational and stylistic elements of the communicative act and Polkinghorne’s belief that



scientists should learn to read people as they would a text, (p.259). Along these same lines, the genre of story for instance, the focus would be on the act of creation as well as the finished product - how parts and plot work in synchronicity. However, as noted by Sikes and Gale, (2006), a definition such as Polkinghorne's could equally apply to the genres of communication that include quantitative experimental description and report, considering such findings to be narratives within these parameters.

This current study relies on the ideas expressed by narrative theorists Connelly and Clandinin, (2000 p.20), with an emphasis on the collaborative and dialogical nature of narrative. As a form of scientific inquiry, narrative is considered a dynamic and social means of reaching experiential understanding. Their ideas differ from the likes of Polkinghorne in that the communicative elements are in motion, parts shift, and the collaborative meeting of communicator and receiver is transient. The end product too exists only in interpretation. Although having looked to Polkinghorne for his ideas on temporality, there was more to be found in the way of applying narrative to the explanation of human action and experience in the work of Clandinin and

Connelly. Polkinghorne's propositions for example are difficult to follow in terms of how meaning may be expressed in and through narrative (Richards 1989, p.259). It is this experiential element that I found most attractive in the work of Connelly and Clandinin: "Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (2006 p.375).

Essentially mindful of the research purposes for which narrative is appropriate, this section is part explanation and part justification. The kind of narrative inquiry used is firmly located within the 'turns' of post-modernism – "linguistic", "textual", "reflexive", "poststructuralist" and "literary" (Maclure 2003). In terms of methodological decision-making, it would be well for readers to understand that both phenomenologists and narrative researchers are concerned with the essence of lived experience and interpretation. Self-authorship of life events

make narrative an appealing research tool in the phenomenological approach. Influenced by phenomenology, some would argue that the story in its telling is the construction of the reality, that the phenomenon is formed out of the stream of consciousness (Young 1987). As I had searched for a means by which I could gather experiences, connect to them, and interpret them in a loyal manner, it seemed not only that narrative permitted this very thing but that it would carry the ethical, ontological and epistemological torch for its part of the journey. Despite the claim that narrative is a contested, complex, transitional and developing field (Chase 2005), narrative interviewing seemed a best-fit option for this study on imaginary companionships, for accessing the personal memories of participants.

After consideration, the decision was made to use the story for the purposes of scholarship. A storyteller-listener type narrative I deemed would work best in uncovering 'unanticipated' themes with 'storyteller' participant relying on their own personal narrative. Although the word 'story' in relation to a research paper may have negative consequences for how the work is regarded I have used it with all intent and purpose and without defence. It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in any kind of debate around the science *vs* non-science, objective *vs* subjective, binary. What follows is a succinct rationale for my choice of narrative.

**1.** The narrative interview is purposeful. The act of listening was to a natural extent beholden to authorial intention and academic intent and could be made explicit to participants. Although the researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimal in narrative interviews, there is a sense of importance inherent in the act of listening. The purposeful 'spontaneity' of generating questions or remaining silent, of being so obviously present as to warrant a feeling of trust, of mindfully reflecting what I had heard and understood, these were important factors for me. Yet despite its humanness, the narrative interview is far from random or spontaneous. There exist the basic generative

rules of storytelling as well as the study's purpose, aims and research questions (Fife, 2005). As a researcher seeking to understand the phenomenon of imaginary companionships and the stories/ counter- stories that encase these, there was a sobering awareness of the non-randomness of the dialogical relationship.

**2.** Narrative is concerned with self. The giving of voice to participants implies with equal measure to their sense of being heard. It has been my aim, as it is for phenomenologist enquiry, to honour each individual story, beholden to agency and intent. It has been said that the personal worth of narrative lies in the act of *owning* a story and *choosing* to share it (Snowden, 2002). It is worth noting Taylor's finding, through her own imaginary companion research, that the 'source' of experience and experiential detail is oftentimes obtained second hand. The parent, usually the mother, may be consulted even by adults in the verification of their imaginary companion experiences as if in a matter of testimony. The imaginary friend may therefore in some manner be considered a familial artefact, belonging to more than just one member of a family. Although this theme is elaborated on further in the data interpretation and discussion, it is worth mentioning one interpretation of the life story – the way in which an individual arranges their self-script to include other characters, plots and scenes - as psychosocially constructed. This would suggest the story to be co- authored by the culture and social interactions of the individual (McAdams 1996). A further reason for my choice of the narrative interview. "...Life stories may be judged by such aesthetic standards as coherence and richness and by such pragmatic standards as credibility...somewhere between pure fantasy and slavish chronicle, life stories are psychosocial constructions that aim to spell out personal truths..." (p. 307)

**3.** Narrative accounts are contextual. Connelly & Clandinin, (1990), have argued that as vectors of social location, narrative episodes are embedded in context, a

position that permits them to be viewed somewhere between total relativism and complete reality. Consequently, to understand a narrative is not merely to understand its chronological sequence of events but also to be aware of its non-chronological dimension. That is, the construction of a whole from successive events, or the configuration of a plot. In human life the vast majority of social phenomena flow without precise beginning and end. Yet, in the scientific tradition of making sense of life events it so often taken that investigation demarcate a beginning and an end. But even more than the structural configuration of story is the context-dependent nature of language itself. Wittgenstein's (1953) use of language games for instance, has highlighted the need to see language as an integral part of social behaviour. He has argued against claims suggestive of language as able to offer us lasting descriptions in immutable ways. The use of a narrative form has allowed me to look at language, choice of words, emotive connotation, the connection to other words, repetition and emphasis, to see language as connected to larger structures of meaning for instance to family. Most importantly, contextuality disavows claims of transcendence making the narrative loyal to its time and place.

**4.** Narrative permits deconstruction in terms of reaching alternative or multiple understandings of experiences. When, such as in this case, there is more than one participant giving an oral account of their experience, it is possible that discordancy be exposed in text/transcription. I am of the belief that cognitive ambiguity, because it is uncomfortable, oftentimes wishes to be expressed. When someone is permitted to talk freely about their experiences and cognitions surrounding the experience, reflexive questioning may expose inconsistency. Transcribed interviews also permit the researcher to, originally as Derrida did with deconstructionism (1976,1978,1982), search for instability, for 'essentialised' elements of text, irritate the 'good' and 'bad' qualities of commentary and to remain cognisant of the instability of text.

5. Narrative interviews can be recorded and transcribed. Taking notes during the conversation was something I wanted to avoid. It was most important that the participant felt listened to. Eye contact and reflective listening are impossible if one is taking notes and it is also in my opinion a block to establishing rapport. According to Smith and Osborn, (p.64) it is however important not to “reify the tape recording”, not to rely solely on it to the exclusion of other non-verbal cues and nuances. The audio recording would be useful in capturing semantic elements as well as for transcription.

Although narrative inquiry has gained a degree of acceptability in academia as a valid research approach (Sikes 2006; Richardson 2000; Plummer 2001); Angus, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly 1986, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) there are issues to consider in any narrative interpretation. Firstly, there are the natural defence-mechanisms at work in accounts of self or life events. Protection of the self, self-concept and ego integrity may for some individuals preclude sharing certain self or familial integrity or, things that are considered anti-social may, for example, not be shared with an interviewer. What is deemed socially undesirable is oftentimes left out of the recounted experience. It is possible that the hesitancy of participants to ‘reveal themselves’ be lessened through rapport with the researcher and a belief in the ethical integrity of the particular research process.

In short, storytelling as a way of recounting and creating order out of experience begins as a natural process in childhood and continues through all stages of life. Researchers such as myself who make the choice to use the sorts of narratives that explicitly tell stories do so because we believe this approach is most effective for communicating to others the ‘data’ we want to get across and through making this choice convey our own epistemological, ontological and ethical position. “We sought personal stories, believing that they offered the only, as well as the most ethically and methodologically acceptable, means of

obtaining the sort of personal sense of the lived experiences we were interested in” (Sikes & Piper 2010: pp.39–42).

### **The Post-Narrative Feedback Form**

Before moving to a discussion of the data and the chosen method of interpretation, it is fitting to give some idea of what took place following the narrative interviews. Each of the nine participants was asked, once they had finished speaking, to listen to an audio recording of the narrative, by means of a small tape recorder shown to them prior to commencement. Participants were given the choice, for reasons of privacy and discretion, to listen with headphones. If they felt that narrative needed extraction (deletion), or they wanted to add or clarify a part of the conversation, this too was amended accordingly. Once satisfied, the participants were asked to complete the post-interview feedback form. The participants were given the choice to complete the form and all nine participants consented.

The form was suggested to the University research ethics committee following the thesis proposal and their recommendations. This was in response to the legitimate concern for participant wellbeing and best-interest. In particular, because I had stated my professional role as a mental health specialist when seeking ethics approval, it was felt that safeguarding measures needed to be put in place to minimise the likelihood of the narratives moving into a therapeutic domain, or disclosing upsetting/uncomfortable content. Besides a safeguarding plan, other contingencies in the event of personal distress for participants included a referral list of university counselling telephone numbers, university based student support services and other external help agents such as the Samaritans counselling service. Although this seemed an unlikely scenario, there is a necessary ethical responsibility placed on researchers and the university as a whole when undertaking research with animate participants.

The form was designed to give participants a moment for self-reflection, a debriefing of sorts, immediately following our conversation. My rationale for using a semi-structured tool in an interpretive study was to allow some distance between participants and myself, moving out of the shared personal space in which we found ourselves when engaged in personal conversation.

The rating scale comprised nine statements which I felt captured salient aspects of the overall experience. Participants were asked to indicate the choice that best expressed their feeling toward the following statements:

- I expected something different from this experience;
- I found it strange sharing my childhood memories with the researcher;
- I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend(s);
- Some details about my imaginary friend were difficult to remember; - As an adult I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend(s) played in my childhood years;
- Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words;
- I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate;
- I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else; - I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have, even if these are at a later stage.

All nine participants completed the form once they had listened to the audio recording of their interview.

The Post Narrative Form (shown below) forms the basis for Table 4 in the sections 'The Memory Experience'.

Post Narrative Feedback Form. Directions: Please indicate the choice that best expresses your feelings about the statements below by circling one of the five choices. Your choices are:

Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Undecided (U), Agree (A), or Strongly Agree (SA).

1. I expected something different from this experience	SD	D	U	A	SA
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2. I found it strange sharing my childhood memories with the researcher	SD	D	U	A	SA
3. I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend	SD	D	U	A	SA
4. Some details about my imaginary friend were difficult to remember	SD	D	U	A	SA
5. As an adult, I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend played in my childhood years	SD	D	U	A	SA
6. Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words	SD	D	U	A	SA
7. I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate	SD	D	U	A	SA
8. I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else	SD	D	U	A	SA
9. I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have, even if these are at a later stage.	SD	D	U	A	SA

**Method of Data Interpretation: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), (Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove 1995; Smith & Osborn 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), has been selected for this study because I felt it would best serve the aim of understanding, through interpretation, the experiences of multiple participants



as well as to preserve the integrity of each individual story. There follows further on in the paper a short reflection on my personal research journey encompassing some of the methodological decision-making processes and the reader will find therein that Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was not my initial choice and in fact had not considered it until after the narrative interviews when I began working with the data.

Prior to my consideration of IPA, the 'Listening Guide', developed by Gilligan (Gilligan, 2003; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003), was going to be used as a data analytic tool. The Listening Guide is considered a feminist, voice-centred methodology most often used with narrative data. As a feminist methodology it was originally intended to amplify marginalised voice and voices have become central to analyses produced (Balan 2005). For a single story, or another type of ideologically- weighted research question, I may have ended up selecting the Listening Guide as a means for making sense of the data.

However, after spending considerable time re-engaged with the interview recordings and transcripts, (with months passed since the actual interviews), it seemed to fall short. My feeling was that the reach of the Listening Guide may not grasp other elements lying outside the self. I decided, again after spending time with the narratives, that it would be difficult using this method to get a sense of the connection to context/ contextual factors and it may not adequately account for temporal elements in the narrative. Although the Listening Guide appears very much concerned with self and the mental processes surrounding self and identity such as perception and emotion, I wanted to retain the ecological integrity of the phenomenon which for the purposes of the study was an important part of the experiential interpretation.

Moving forward, I endeavour now as I have done in the preceding narrative section, to use this space to explain IPA and offer some justification of it as a choice for the interpretive section of the study.

Understanding:

IPA is a phenomenological approach with the principal concern being the meanings particular experiences or events hold for individuals. Within the ambit of social psychology for example, the approach has proven its utility, prizing personal perception over attempts to yield generalisations regarding lived experience, (e.g. Duncan, Hart, Scoular & Brigg, 2001, Thompson, Kent & Smith 2002; Clare 2003; Biggerstaff, 2003; French, Maissi, Marteau, 2005). For this reason it is seen as connected to theories of interpretation and symbolic-interactionism. I am particularly fond of the method's embracement of understanding as inclusive of identification and empathy as well as the type of understanding that 'makes sense of'.

The workings of IPA, the stages of which are elaborated on further to this, involves something similar to an individual case analysis with each transcribed interview read individually at first, and each recording listened to multiple times. Initial annotations and comments are made and include reflection on content, language use, deliverance and, with multiple readings, more interrogative comments (Smith et al., 2009). Each interview transcript is further re-engaged with noting emergent themes, clusters of related themes, resulting finally in a tabulation of superordinate themes which represent the range of experiential narratives of participants. I value the affordance this method gives to participant's voices by encouraging the use of verbatim extracts in the interpretation of data.

Table 1: Stages of IPA analysis (adapted from Smith et al., 2009, p.79).

Transcription of recorded/ taped interviews.
Line by line analysis of concerns and understandings of each participant.

Identifying emerging themes within these data highlighting commonality and difference for each case and then across multiple cases.

The researcher develops a 'dialogue' between themselves, their themed data and psychological knowledge to ascertain the meaning behind these concerns within this particular context.

A structure is developed which brings the relationships between these themes together or 'gestalt'.

The organisation of this material is transparent because the analysed data can be traced back through the process of transcription and emerging themes.

The interpretation is supported through supervision or collaboration so that it is coherent and valid.

Reflection of the researcher of their own perceptions throughout this process (Smith, 2007).

### Hermeneutics:

IPA employs what is known as a "double hermeneutic". That is, researchers attempting to make sense of a participant's sense-making. (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This was an important consideration in adopting this method to work with the narrative data, especially insofar as my own role was concerned. IPA offers the opportunity to make things explicit and through its epistemological stance I felt comfortable that my interpretation of the narratives would test any existing (personal) capacity for reflexivity. And, as a point of first reflection, I have taken this interpretive epistemology as resonate of a good 'fit' with my personal

experience and own narrative encounters both with participants and the literature.

IPA draws on the theoretical perspectives of hermeneutic theorists Heidegger, Schleiermacher and Gadamer (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006; Smith, 2007; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). Formatively, Schleiermacher's ideas transformed the practice of interpreting text for example by inviting researchers to engage in both linguistic and psychological interpretation, to search for meaning which was potentially beyond a person's own awareness,(Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Conscious oblivion forms a salient part of Heidegger's perspective too, with the acknowledgement that the IPA researcher's personal beliefs, assumptions and sense-making may emerge well into the interpretive process, or may not become fully conscious at all. That said, IPA studies such as this current project are considered indicative and provisional rather than definitive.

#### Sample size:

Because IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with understanding particularly defined phenomena in particular contexts a small sample size, such as was the case in this study, is considered acceptable,(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009 p.49). The aim is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of a particular group with the rigour of the study residing in the light it sheds. Beholden to the normative deadlines and time constraints of doctoral study, I had to consider the finality of the project and to decide when enough would have to be enough. Although tempting to wait it out for more participants and their stories there arrives a point, noted in IPA research, at which saturation takes place. A sample size of nine is therefore within the suggested parameters for an IPA study despite the literature showing favour for single, n = 1 studies,(Eatough & Smith 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009).

#### Narrative:

The choice for IPA was further prompted by its proven relationship with the narrative interview. Smith et al. (2009) have suggested that the best way to

collect data for an IPA study is through the semi-structured interview although this is not necessarily the only way. Data in the form of diary entries, letters or journals where thoughts have been recorded are also useful in IPA research. The loose type of narrative conversation I had engaged in with participants meant an increased opportunity for the emergence of novel and unanticipated information. The use of narrative in this form is I feel anchored to important phenomenological tenets concerning lived experience. This holds especially true for the interpretation of (autobiographical) memory narrative as contextually, socially and historically located.

## **Data Interpretation Stage 1**

The stages identified, although not stipulated by the approach itself, I have drawn from other phenomenological studies where IPA has been employed with good merit (Smith, Flowers & Osborn 1997; Smith 2004; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Langdridge 2007; Quin, Clare, Ryan & Jackson 2009; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005; Willig 2001). What must be included according to the founders of this approach, are the following characteristics: (a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (c) commitment to understanding the participant's point of view, and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al. 2009).

Following multiple readings of the nine interview transcripts a list of emergent (subordinate) themes was composed. Although crude and loosely defined, the ideas were recurrent across the nine transcriptions and were signifiers of the individual's particular experience. The process I followed was such that themes were listed roughly on one side of the transcripts and evidence pulled from the text for thematic content. I do not feel I was conservative at this first stage of analysis following a mantra of '*If in doubt take it out*'. The rationale for this was

that in losing data -it was left behind in the original text- my interpretations would be just that, mine, sans evidence. The whole purpose of selecting IPA for this study was to enlarge the scope for understanding of such a phenomena, to include the experiences that did not conform, the exceptions and outliers, and to offer to the reader enough experiential content that they may form their own interpretation.

The themes arose from the data, are present in the data, but are also a result of my interpretation. In the act of my reading and re-reading, and the moments between, there is a process of self-consultation. For me as interpreter, these are negotiated themes.

In the following table (table 2) the subordinate themes have been listed and alongside the approximate number of statements/excerpts that were interpreted as supportive of a particular theme. The purpose of the table is to give a concrete and visual representation of how important each theme was for a particular participant based on the number of textual clues lifted from each interview transcript. This then provides a starting point for further interpretation of the content of participant narratives as well as their relevance to each theme. It should be noted that although a participant may have only one or two statements in support of a theme the content and more importantly the 'felt sense' of the statement may hold more relevance than another participant who has for example seven statements which are experientially speaking less vital. This is about each participant's experience of a phenomenon and my interpretation of this experience. Narrative is ambiguous – there are statements which may have represented more than one theme and perhaps others which represent none of the themes identified. The value of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is that it is the narrative itself out of which these themes have arisen and not a case of the themes having existed *a priori*.

Table 2: Emergent themes and estimate number of validating statements

<p>Remembered relationship with IC and sense of significance.(Ownership, Attachment, Control, Mastery). Referential &amp; Intersubjective.</p>	<p>P1 = 6 P2 = 5 P3 = 3 P4 = 9 P5 = 10 P6 = 5 <b>P7 = 4</b> P8 = 7 <b>P9 = 11</b></p>
<p>Social Comparison/ Evaluative. Perceived positively or negatively/ social desirability; perceived social deprivation. Conformity.</p>	<p>P1 = 7 P2 = 2 P3 = 1 P4 = 4 P5 = 5 P6 = 5 P7 = 8 P8 = 1 P9 = 1</p>
<p>Introspection/ Reflexivity Meta-cognitive process, making sense of it all. Includes own evaluation of memory.</p>	<p>P1 = 6 P2 = 5 <b>P3 = 3</b> P4 = 7 P5 = 4 <b>P6 = 4</b> P7 = 6 P8 = 2 P9 = 4</p>

<p>Continuity of identity/ Self Continuity. Identity solidified vs. destabilised.</p>	<p>P1 = 1  P2 = 2  P3 = 1  P4 = 4  P5 = 7  P6 = 0  P7 = 1  P8 = 0  P9 = 7</p>
<p>Family/Social network/ key figures in memory. (Includes testimony by family member).</p>	<p><b>P1</b> = Mother 9 brother 4  <b>P2</b> = Mother 5  <b>P3</b> = Sister 3  <b>P4</b> = Sister 4  <b>P5</b> = Mother 4</p>
	<p><b>P6</b> = Mother 3  <b>P7</b> = Father 6  Mother 3  <b>P8</b> = Mother 2  <b>P9</b> = 0</p>



Temporal –chronological/ linear time and related idea of loss. (Things must end). Included is loss of memory content.	<b>P1</b> = 1 time
	<b>P2</b> = 5 loss of IC
	<b>P3</b> = 0
	<b>P4</b> = 4 loss of IC
	<b>P5</b> = 3 loss of IC
	<b>P6</b> = 0
	<b>P7</b> = 0
	<b>P8</b> = 1 time
	<b>P9</b> = 5 time

## Stage 2

The second stage involved grouping emergent themes into clusters. The seven super-ordinate themes arrived at were: The relationship experience, Social comparison, self-evaluation, impact of the imaginary companion relationship on identity formation, the influence of mother as a key figure, the influence of others in memory, the experience of temporality and loss. The themes are listed and described in the following table (Table 3).

Table 3 : Super-ordinate and related sub-ordinate themes.

The Relationship Experience	Asymmetrical distribution of power  Developmental mastery/Self-Efficacy  Referential / intersubjective
Social Comparison	Perceived positively: social desirability, social cognition.  Perceived negatively- (Perceived deprivation of social relations,  Conformity,

Self-Evaluation	Meta-Cognition	: Making sense of the IC relationship Evaluation of memory
The Impact of the IC relationship on Identity Formation		Continuity: Self understanding Discordance: Destabilise remembered identity
The Influence of Mother as a Key Figure		Collaboration & Support Control of mother Testimony Interlocution
The influence of others in memory		Disdain, unsupportive Isolation Community/extension
The experience of temporality and loss		Time. Loss and the IC relationship Time, Loss and memory

### Stage 3

In the next stage excerpts have been taken directly from the interview transcripts and are used as support for a particular theme or thematic strand. Excerpts are presented in italics and placed within the text so that the narrative flow is uninterrupted. The aim is for patterns and convergences within the larger story to become apparent while maintaining a sense of individual particularity.

## The Relationship Experience

Ownership: In the cases where the relationship experience is one of ownership there exists an obvious asymmetrical distribution of power in the relationship between the individual and the imaginary companion. This is exemplified in the following excerpt: *I suppose it was more like a friendship with yourself because you create the imaginary friends. So you kind of have more control over that friendship than over the interaction whereas with friends like real friends they have their own personalities (P4)*

In terms of the imaginary companion having a subordinate role, being under the child's control, P8 commented: *I could be angry with her and send her home away from me when I would get fed up.* Although there is the mention of anger as an emotional component the overriding sense in this narrative seems to be the ability to dispense of the IC as and when the child chooses. For a child this must surely be an empowering phenomenon.

P9, who had multiple imaginary characters represented in pictorial form on paper, remarked that his characters were replaceable not in a transient sense but in a way which diminished the capacity of the characters to exist independently: *they were replaced ... I'd play around with the characters a little bit and then use them in all sorts of ways ... (make) them speak to each other (P9).* This same individual emphasizes their belonging to him by stating: *there was the real world and there was my world and they were in my world (and he repeated at a later time), in my world (and), they were for me. (P9)*

For P4, her sense of ownership over two imaginary frogs translated in her getting to do more of what she wanted, having to rely less on real friends: *yeah you want to do something and you think, oh my imaginary friends would do that with me because they are mine... not having to share them and probably also get to do more unusual things.*

The notion of a child's perceived control over the imaginary companion does not always seem to be the case. Taylor, (Taylor & Mottweiler 2008, pp.47-54) has

found in her research that IC's "come and go on their own schedule rather than according to the child's wishes, and they do not always want to play what the child wants to play". Approximately one third of children in a study by Taylor, Carlson, and Shawber (2007) described their imaginary companions as disobedient or unpredictable. However, in this small sample of adults interviewed there was a common theme of ownership and control of the IC.

Constant thought: In these memory narratives there seems less of an emotional attachment and more a form of cognitive attachment as P9 remarked: *I'd think about them all the time; they had their own lives; I would usually have a certain character in front of me in my mind.* So the memory here is one of holding something important in mind with the investment of cognitive energy. The active construction of the fantasy, according to Bouldin et al.(2002), involves monitoring and continually updating the model of the other (imaginary friend's) mind states, and on the basis of these invent conversation.

The fact that they are constantly at the forefront of mind for some is an indication too of resultant behaviours. Behaviours such as *marking paperwork*, explaining things, organising activities, being a leader, *I used to line them up...take them into the garden...*,(P1) and assuming adult-like responsibility, *like putting seatbelts on all my imaginary friends to go out*, (P1) being examples of what Somers and Yawkey (1984) refer to as the process of de-contextualisation. It is defined as "the use of real situations out of their contexts during play" (p.86).

Interlocution: In cases of ownership an exclusivity of relationship exists. Only the child has direct access to the IC and will, in mediating for others in the family for example, act as an interlocutor. Trionfi and Reese (2009) reported in their study children with IC's produced richer narrative accounts than their non-IC peers both when telling a story and when narrating a personally experienced past event. And according to Gleason (2004), narrative skills may be increased as children share details about their imaginary companion with interested adults.

With regard to the stand Gleason takes on interested adults facilitating communication through an interest in the child's experiences, this has worked in an opposite way for P5: *there weren't many adults in my life I guess that would just sit and listen to a four or five year old kind of talking at them ...I just remember talking, it was about talking... I think it was more about her listening to me than it was about her talking to me, but yes. I knew it was just an outlet; it was just talking and it was probably child stuff ... I think she was safer than to talking to adults, not having the adults there to talk to... It was a bridge between the solid reality adults need to be there to talk to me and I can talk to people when they are not there.* In this instance P5 remembers not having her parents around to talk to and her very dear imaginary friend is an old lady who sits on a rocking chair just listening to the little girl talk.

P6 recognised this sense of exclusive ownership and in a self-effacing manner shared her sentiment: *I don't know [does] that sounds selfish?* (Then goes further to state), *he wasn't a secret I don't remember trying to keep him a secret at all.*

Compensation for peers: In terms of an emotional attachment, there can be a compensatory element served when the adult remembers either not having many friends or that the friends were not pleasing to be around: *More attached and nicer to me I think -my peer friends weren't very nice... And I found it quite hard to make friends and stuff like that so my imaginary friends were more of a comfort I'd say, probably closer than my other friends and actually I didn't have that many (P1)*

A back and forth debate plays out in which some suggest ICs are invented to compensate for children failing to make real-life friendships (e.g. Gleason, 2004; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup 2000). Gleason and Hohmann (2006) found that

there were no differences in children's reported interactions with ICs or friends with whom the friendship was reciprocated. However, according to Hoff (2005), imaginary companions not only had a social compensatory function, but also provided social practice and enhanced the children's social competence. Gleason (2002) maintained that make believe friends may provide practice in conceptualising relationships. Harter and Chao (1992) purported that the competence of the child in general might be increased through the invention of an imaginary companion. The suggestion implied by some studies is that children with imaginary companions may be creating them precisely because they lack the social skills or opportunities to create real friends (Ames & Learned 1946; Nagera 1969; Svendsen 1934).

Compensation for family members: The IC serves to meet an attachment need created by some form of familial deficit. In one instance, the birth of a brother is remembered as perhaps a difficult or lonely time, P1: *I have one sibling who was born when I went into reception, I was like four and he was quite a sick baby, like quite colicky and stuff like that...I think it probably was because my brother was born at that age as well. And they were with me at that time... I was mainly alone and having a new born baby that was quite a big thing.* P1 later remarks: *I don't remember my dad being around much of my childhood.*

I spent some time reflecting on whether to include this excerpt from P2, uncertain as to whether it pointed to some form of familial deprivation for this person. The recalled experience led me to wonder whether at the time she had felt lonely, left out, less attended to, despite there being other siblings and a constant stream of visitors to the family home. So it is included here for the reader to make up their own mind: *we had a big family always seemed busy... We always had other children over at our house so it seemed noisy, busy.*

As a final word on the theme of relationship experience, I wish to raise the fact that none of the nine interviewed participants in this study reported having a personified object as a companion. This would have been interesting especially

in terms of understanding the different friendship experiences that adults reported back on. Findings by Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) that egalitarian relationships are formed with invisible friends whereas relationships with personified objects resemble parent-child (authoritative, asymmetrical power distribution) relationships.

## **Social comparison**

This theme arose from participant narratives concerning self-evaluation and thoughts on perceived normality. This was not in all cases seen as a bad thing. In some instances the sense of being different from others was positively perceived: *I think I like that I had them and maybe that is because they might have as being unique and different. (P4)*

Different IC's: For some participants the social comparison was around having heard about others' IC experiences and sensing a non-alignment with their own. In all instances it was the imaginary companions themselves that were different. P2 shared: *She wasn't like I've heard some others talk about imaginary friends - she wasn't naughty as far as I can remember. You do hear about little children's imaginary friends always getting the blame for bad behaviour, I've heard that before but I honestly can't remember Minnie getting into a lot of trouble.* For P5, it was her IC's name and age that served to differentiate: *I think from knowing about my friends imaginary friends this is when we are in school so we are in year one having a set of imaginary friends is quite strange and I felt almost embarrassed of Mrs Barlow and the little darlings. My other friends had imaginary friends that had pretty names... I think it's different. I think it's different to have a much older imaginary friend. I think that's one thing I'd like to know is what are these imaginary friends like because my experience from childhood is that mine was very different.*

For P1 it was the number of IC's she had that was perceived as unusual:

children normally have only one... (I had) like loads of imaginary little friends... (Mom said), well you didn't just have one you had a whole school.

Difference in Family & Culture: The following excerpt is from a young lady who had a strict and Muslim upbringing (both of which she attested to). Her father was according to her unhappy with her childhood imaginary companionship, P7: *It's not that common is it [pause] or maybe not as like normal as other things that children do like dress-up games; 'I'm the only one out of my siblings that had a little imaginary friend neither of my sisters have; As I said earlier it's quite a unique thing.* So for P7 the experience of being different may naturally include her outlier status in multiple systems, her difference in the family, the family's culture and ethos and extended social networks. To assume it normal that a child have access to a Barbie doll, Lego and a set of matchbox cars is naïve and misguided: *That's another thing my father wasn't in favour of, (when referring to not having had a Barbie doll), family and religion are very important... friends didn't come to our house a lot though to play like we didn't have sleepovers but that's a culture thing too, you just play at school or with your siblings (P7).*

In turning to the literature on culture and pretend play one notices that in western families fantasy and pretence is considered advantageous and normally encouraged. Parents tend to involve themselves in the play and in joint play adults scaffold the pretense.(Carlson, Taylor & Levin 1998). Religious ideology may then be one aspect that shapes parental attitude towards this type of play. Mills (1992) found that when East Indian children talk to 'entities' that adults cannot perceive, the entity is referred to as invisible rather than imaginary. The assumption is that the child is communicating with an actual being who exists on a spiritual realm and may be part of the child's past life. However, the suspicious attitude of parents towards imaginary play does occur in western quarters. In North America for example, certain fundamentalist Christian sectors express objection to pretend play. Taylor and colleagues unearthed concerns within this



group that a child with an 'imaginary friend' might in fact be communing with an evil entity. Pretend play was viewed as a gateway to deceitfulness (Taylor & Carlson, 2000, p.264). The researchers added too that religion-inspired attempts to discourage pretend play appear quite ineffective (Carlson et al., 1998; Taylor & Carlson, 2000).

As far as her recall of not having had friends around after school for play dates there may be a broader ethnoreligious priority of work (chores and homework) over play.

Difference of Age: This was the case for more than one participant, the feeling that compared to what they remembered about other children their behaviour had seemed developmentally inappropriate, P1 : *And do you know what I remember being quite old to have imaginary friends as well... Like I still used to play schools and doctors and nurses way into like I was in year six, year seven and I thought I was quite old to play schools.*

For P6 it was the experience of having her IC named Swampy at an older age: He genuinely was around a lot longer than others I've heard about slightly concerning [laughs]; I consider myself normal [laughs] I know a few people that had imaginary friends as kids but obviously all different. Although the theme of perceived difference is significant across cases I am careful when it comes to the interpretation of emotion. P6 for example, even though verbal and nonverbal cues suggested to me she may have been embarrassed or concerned by the fact she perceived herself too old to have an IC, she wanted me to know : I wasn't embarrassed of course I don't think my regular friends played with us.

It was of interest to me that none of the adults recalled any form of psychosocial or functional adjustments to minimise perceived differences between self and others.

## The Imaginary Companionship and Sense of Self

This theme has to do with identity, the collapsing of space and time, linking memory to an emergent and embodied sense of 'who I am'. What became evident from the nine interviews was the natural potency of memory to inform the construction of self.

As can be seen from P5, participants of their own volition included experiences from the past in describing the self: *Sometimes I have a very vivid picture of her in my imagination and I can recall that with ease and clarity or the frequency... call that up and use that just in place of either real conversations or my own thinking seems better to talk with that image.*

As far as continuity goes, Singer and Singer (1992) proposed that even if imaginary companions disappear in their most primitive form between 6 and 8 years, "the process of peopling one's private thoughts with companionable souls" (p.110) continues throughout life.

An example of identity formation would be perceiving one's adult self as creative and citing evidence from childhood of ways in which that disposition may have come about or been nurtured. In the study of imaginary companionships there is much talk of creativity as a faculty associated with rich imaginative play. Hoff and Carlsson,(2002, p.22) define it as a productive or generative novel way of experiencing reality including the perceiver's own self. The only male participant in this study, (a post-graduate student), P9 spoke at length about his relationship with fantasy and creative engagements. He showed with pride his animated fantasy sketches, an interest he had nurtured since childhood and spoke with fondness of early creative writing projects. Creativity and fantasy were obvious themes in his narrative both in terms of memory content, self-evaluation of the experience and continuity of identity : *As a kid I wrote fiction which... I wrote my first poem when I was seven... I was writing a long fantasy story when I was thirteen ...I relied on my own imagination... I think it had an*

*effect on developing my own unique language... (I) consider that they are an affliction of myself, they'd always be curious and interested...: I like writing and creating out of the world stuff ever since I was young// I don't know how far back they go but even today half of my thinking is dialogues... today I'm still planning on writing a very long fantasy story. I'm planning on eleven books now and I'm thinking one of those characters that I imagined ten years ago actually.*

Skolnick and Bloom (2006 cited in Richert, Shawber, Hoffman & Taylor 2009) have suggested that children's ideas of what is fictionally represented are seen as distinct from each other and from what constitutes 'the real world'. The mental act of 'quarantine' (p.41) describing this separation casts doubt by the authors as to whether children are able to make use of fantasy in any way in another / real world. For the participant above there does seem to be a usefulness attributed to the fantasy characters and the generative way they have come to inform his adult personality. In the article cited above, Taylor and colleagues conducted three separate experiments to test their hypothesis that "the use of a fantasy character may not be beneficial for teaching preschool children real world information". They found no evidence of improved learning or information transfer when using a fantasy character. Although I have not hypothesised that knowledge or learning is facilitated through fantasy, the memory narrative of this male participant looking back at his own childhood and in fact adolescent experiences may suggest that it holds some value, that it has informed. Perhaps this is because it was his own creation (unlike Taylor's study above where children were presented with ready-made fantasy characters), and that his characters held meaning and permanence. According to Taylor, "Children's decreased likelihood of transferring from stories about fantasy characters suggests children viewed fantasy characters as a less appropriate source for information for solving real world problems than real characters" (p.60). I reiterate that I am in no way challenging this hypothesis nor stating my own but in the case of this young man there seems little evidence of quarantined realms. He remembers being inspired by classmates (real world) and then later

coming to rely on his own imagination. A sophisticated sense of cognitive mediation is implied by his words: *these would all change I mean depending on what I want to think about and how I want to think about it.* And as far as their relevance to real world adaptation, P9 says: *it had an effect on developing as a way of understanding things and making sense of the world my own way of getting around in conversation.*

The imaginary companion relationship has been shown to support autonomy and ego integration (Klein 1985, Nagera 1969, Singer & Singer 1990). A sense of emergent selfhood could potentially be facilitated by the unconditional acceptance from an IC. And perhaps this is evident in the next example, P5 who remembers learning to read (and enjoying it) from a very early age. Her memory narratives draw together her love of reading with time spent in parental company. Her IC is a character in one of the books her parents read to her and although the exact book is (she claims sadly) no longer in her possession, she is nevertheless able to: *recall that [vivid image of her IC] with ease and clarity or the frequency...call that up and use that just in place of either real conversations or my own thinking seems better to talk with that image.* As a side, she does share that she has copies of the book series which she still loves. There is a connection to the adult self of P5, her work as an academic, when the reminiscing turns: *There was a presentation I attended at a psychology conference last year about some forms of this and I got thinking about it after that a fair amount.* At the end of the interview I ask if there is anything else she wishes to add: *I think she was important to me and still is I'd say at least linguistically and maybe socially I think.* Although a later comment casts doubt on whether this experience is altogether a positive one: *just to note that maybe one could become quite... I think I might have been better off speaking to somebody as opposed to effectively myself almost.* Reflecting back I'm unsure as to why I did not interrogate this statement further. Perhaps I sensed discomfort or maybe the comment was swept up in narrative flow.

In my search for other studies linking this theme of identity and integration of selves I came across a survey study of imaginary worlds (R. Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2006). Students and fellows at Michigan State University who had invented imaginary worlds as children perceived connections between this particular form of childhood play and their adult vocation. Fellows (61%) and students (72%) recognised imaginary–world play in their self-expressive processes and saw it as a strategy for success in the workplace. “I think make believe or hypothetical worlds or situations will be very important in teaching,” stated one participant; “My future career [in public relations] will require that I am able to look at multiple possible situations,” wrote another (pp.414-415).

In Camahalan’s (2014) grounded theoretical study (which I refer to again further on), there is a thematic component relating self-growth to childhood memory in all seventy-five of the graduate student narratives. Specifically, all the participants shared the belief that their childhood memories were integral in defining concepts of self and identity. Even negative experiences/ aversive episodes seem not to have been rejected in the self-story but instead interpreted positively as indicative of early familial support structures, a self-affirming sentiment of ‘I am loved and cared for’.

I would like to highlight at this time the possibility that adult’s recall of early memory may be a de-stabilising factor, one that alters remembered identity. What, for example, might it feel like for participants to remember being a relational or sociable child, (identity as a relational being) and see themselves as less gregarious or withdrawn as adults? I follow this up in depth in the ‘discussion’ section, pulling on the strands of other research and offering my interpretation of the nine adult narratives.

## The Influence of Mother as a Key Figure

Looking at these experiences systemically there is a sense of preserved family ecology. So much about the family and its members became apparent, the story of the family as it was – their manner of engaging, coping/ adaptation, boundaries and culture. Although not a question I set out to ask, it appeared a natural route for the narrative around childhood. Apparent in five of the nine interviews was a narrative strand pointing to the mother as a central figure in memory. A key proponent, she appeared pivotal in terms of, i)co-constructing the content of the memory (what was remembered) : *Yeah, like she said to me, like, you didn't have them for very long you had them for quite a short period and I don't remember that,* ii) providing validation or testimony : *I spoke with my mum about it; It's a bit weird but my mum remembers them too,*and, iii) adding to the emotional valence of the memory: *mum used to have to hear all my stories and nonsense about what I'd been up to with Swampy and I think she enjoyed it actually; My mother would tease me about that when I was growing up and when imaginary friends were mentioned on television or wherever and,* iv) a target for the exercise of mastery : *my mum would have to wait to seatbelt them in.*

The triangulation of mother, child and IC was a common theme in the narratives. The mother appeared to be the person that was most privy to information about the IC : *I would obviously have to explain to my Mom for example what Minnie was up to; My Mum remembers when Minnie died well you know what I mean when she disappeared (P2); I used to talk with my mum about it (P8).* According to Gleason (2004), the friendship with an IC may promote social interactions with others because of the attempt to share details with interested adults (see Gleason, 2004b). Accordingly, this researcher has suggested that adults may ask more questions about the IC than they would ordinarily do about other topics for which both adult and child shared knowledge. Information from the participants might suggest that because she is the primary

caregiver and spends more time at home with the children, it is predominantly the mother who asks the questions.

It appeared that for some participants, the control they exercised in the imaginary relationship extended to perceived control in a parental relationship. For P1 this is an extension of the attachment to the IC and implied her ability to manage her mother's behaviour around the IC: *I used to like take them in the car and my mum would have to wait to seatbelt them in; she used to like help me seatbelt them and stuff like that... So my mum played with them. Mum would take us out. I would tell her to seatbelt them in.* This excerpt from P1 is not only an example of the fondness towards the IC and the involvement of mother but is also an example of fundamental role play wherein the child models parental behaviour, practicing mothering behaviour, readying that part of herself which will later come to care for others in her charge.

For P6 one gets a sense of the perceived control over mother from her words: *My mum used to have to hear all my stories and nonsense about what I'd been up to with Swampy.* Added to this is her projection of pleasure onto her mother: *... and I think she enjoyed it actually, listening to what I'd done cause she didn't work.* P8 shares a similar memory of mother perhaps having little choice but to be involved in the relationship even if just as a spectator: *I used to talk with my mum about it... then mum would just have to sit and listen to me (P8).* Involvement of parental figures, in these cases the mother, in something akin to enforced listening may be an extension of what developmentalists term 'parallel play'. In parallel play the younger child would require another to be present alongside them in play even though there is no direct engagement. As Singer (2013, p.5) suggests, "the idea of the company is enough". So perhaps for the older child with an IC although they alone are directly engaged with their friend there is an awareness of the mother sharing an imaginative space. As she goes about her daily business the child plays alongside her, stopping at times to make sure she is in a way still present, letting her know what is going on.

The inclusion of the mother in the relationship has continued for some participants to the present day. A desire to involve or include the mother figure in the project is

evidenced in the following excerpt: *Because I said I'm doing some research help on imaginary friends with you and I asked her stuff about them, she was like, well you didn't just have one you had a whole school and you were playing with them all the time.*

Not always an explicit supporter of the IC relationship, for one of the participants the mother acted as mediator between father and daughter, relaying his disapproval of his daughter's engagement with an imagined friend. So although this participant stated that it was a positive experience for her, *I enjoyed having the friend very much... I felt a lot of love for her*, the father, a strict man she said, perceived the relationship in a negative light. *My father wouldn't speak directly to me I think he would ignore me about it he spoke to my mother; He would relay that to my mother and I must've been aware that father did not approve.* Through that narrative I got a sense of how the participant experienced her family culture as well as perhaps her ethnicity, recounted to me with emotion : *It wasn't an easy thing for me to have an imaginary friend that was like craziness or something; Although it is encouraged for children to play and have toys etcetera and a fair amount of freedom I still don't believe there is the same type of freedom as in British white families or western culture.* And, when asked how it felt reflecting back now as an adult she replied, *I have that sense now thinking about it almost not a very nice feeling.*

Dialogues between children and adults are, according to Vygotsky (1934/1978), an essential part of acquiring higher order cognitive processes such as regulation of attention and behaviour, ability to reflect and strategies for solving cognitive and social problems (Berk, Mann & Ogan 2006). These processes are said to appear first in social communication for example between mother and child and later translate to internal thinking whereby the narrative is integrated in private speech. The inclusion of mothers in the memory narratives is therefore an important theme and relates to theories of social cognition and development.



The memories have reiterated the mother's cardinal place, her voice weaved into the relationship narrative of her child and their special companion.

## **The Influence of Others in Memory**

In this theme I have included references to the larger family environment, to others in the family. It has been included because in more than one instance someone other than the mother was talked about (in relation to the IC). I did feel it would be interesting to note the juxtaposition of these two themes.

There were two participants, P2 and P7, who referenced *the family* in their narratives and in both cases initiated their interviews with a comment around family, giving me a sense of what it was like for them being a part of this family. Participant P2 began her interview by describing her family as big, noisy and busy. She remembers a house full of other children and a mum who stayed at home. She did not give any indication of how she felt as a child about the busy home or her role therein but there is a sense overall that the IC may have been an emotional buffer in this environment: *I think she was always with me; she was like one of us; I'd see if she'd listened to me; they (siblings) did know about her, she was my friend though; After Minnie was gone I may have played more with the other kids.*

For P7, it was the family culture that she wanted to talk about. Words she used to describe the familial atmosphere of her childhood included: *strict; deep respect for our parents; very strict; very respectful; My Dad was very strict; family and religion are very important; we didn't have sleepovers; you just play at school or with your siblings.* There is an awareness of her father as being strict. For P7 the home atmosphere is reflective of larger ideological systems, of faith and ethnicity. There is a comparative element to the memory wherein she states that children in westernised families are afforded more freedoms. She does not share with me any form of regret, unhappiness, anger or upset that this was the case. She does not use our interview as an opportunity to cathartically

offload. She states *it wasn't an easy thing* to have the IC in this family and that *thinking about it* gives her *not a very nice feeling*. I would go as far as to suggest that there is a measure of acceptance by this participant (P7) for what was.

P4's narrative included references to *my parents* in general, but singled out her sister in relation to talk about the IC's importance to the participant: *My sister earned her degree in education as well and she had to do a research project... I had suggested that she do imaginary friends. That's probably more my interest than hers but she was actually going to*. For P4 it seemed important to project the attachment feelings, to want others to develop an interest in IC's. Firstly she mentions wanting her sister to choose imaginary companions as a topic for a university project. She then shared how in her employment as an afterschool teaching assistant she asked the children to draw their imaginary friends: *I thought it would be quite interesting to draw; I did get some of the children to draw their imaginary friends and it was brilliant... I think a couple of them definitely were real imaginary friends. It was very interesting to see the children's drawings of them. When I told the kids to draw it I thought I should do it as well, and so I actually did draw mine*. It may be that as a child P4 simply wanted to reduce her perceived outlier status, the dissonance caused by being the one that is different. Or perhaps there is a child's wanting to share what for them is a purely joyous experience. And we see still as an adult how P4 extends the systemic range to include her charges in the day care, bringing 'Carlene' and 'Ping Ling' vicariously to life.

P5 shares a warm and heartfelt memory of her IC, the elderly *Mrs Barlow*, and how upon reflection this reminds her of her grandmother: *she shared some resemblance to my grandmother who I had a very positive relationship with, but who didn't live anywhere near us so I saw her every twice a year. And my grandmother was somebody I could relate to very well*. This participant expressed a similarity between her IC and a known individual, a person she had a close emotional attachment to but did not see very often. Whether or not Mrs. Barlow the imaginary companion was a direct substitution for the grandmother,

an opportunity for P5 to re-enact the formative attachment experience, one does not know. It is often difficult for young children to comprehend geographical separation. Whatever cognitive processes are involved in the child's making sense of it, for P5 it meant having someone that resembled her grandmother with her on a daily basis, *sitting in the chair and she is just watching...listening to me*. Her comment on picture books might just as easily be taken as a reference to grandmother: *being able to talk to people who are out of sight, but they are not out of mind as well*.

In Camahalan's (2104) study, 'Recalling Childhood Memories', she found that most of the participants, (75 graduate students), shared events that had taken place within their immediate social environments or microsystems, (family and school) because this is where children spent the majority of their time. Only a few of the stories according to the researcher had highlighted moments of solitude during childhood. Linked to narrative around the family was 'the atmosphere' within the home. Parents were described by the adult students in endearing terms – supportive, loving, and enjoyed being with the child. The family structure in terms of how things run around the house also played a factor in facilitating happy memories during childhood. About 50% of the participants reported that their parents organised house rules for them which helped them become better individuals.

Finally, it has been argued that family environment influences whether IC's have facilitative or inhibitory roles. Lefrancois (1989 p.299), claimed that in "fearful families", the imaginary companion is "seldom invited in to dinner or even to tea".

## Temporality and Loss

Included in this theme are excerpts highlighting an emergent theme of loss and the temporal, examples of the termination of the IC relationship. I have also chosen to include instances where there has been a 'felt sense' of loss in terms of participant access to images or memory content. These few cases also show the lost friend being replaced by someone else - ordinary peers, siblings or other human agents - that step in to pick up where the IC left off.

P2 spoke forthrightly about her relationship with her IC, *Minnie*, coming to an abrupt end: *She got run over by a car in the end... It's also maybe a little bit sad because she was obviously important to me; I'm not sure why I would have imagined her dying, getting run over by a car, seems horrible*. She is aware that after *Minnie* was gone she may have begun to play more with other kids and been more outgoing.

P4 shares at the beginning of her interview that an imaginary friend *could be someone that doesn't exist that [one] can play with when [one] doesn't have real people there to play with*. She recalls her friends *Carlene* and *Ping Ling* leaving : *First of all they moved down the road I think to another house but in our same area ... And one day I held the letter box open and they all disappeared and I just remember my mum said, where are they all gone? I said, 'oh, they've moved down the road to a bigger house because there was too many of them'*.

P4 goes on to say that a while later when someone enquires as to their whereabouts, her response is simply, *they moved*. Interpreting their loss, she muses over the fact that her siblings were born and the possibility her *friends may no longer have been needed*.

P5 says of *Mrs Barlow*: *I think when Mrs Barlow vanished, she vanished and in her place came other people who were real people who I would imagine where with me. Well I think she didn't pop off, she didn't disappear she just declined in*

*frequency I guess. When, at the end of the interview, I asked P5 if there was anything else she wanted to add, she added to this theme: I have a younger brother and when I was five he was three so he was becoming lingual and that probably for all I know coincided with less imaginative dialogue in that he was there to play with more.*

P9 shared with me the temporal nature of his relationships with the various characters he invented, suggesting on one hand their dispensability while on the other their permanence: *they were replaced... I'm thinking one of those characters that I imagined ten years ago actually one or two of them I think I will keep there, (a book he is writing),...I haven't spoken to them since maybe I was fifteen, but they are still there I mean. Some would last a week and they would go, other characters would last a year.*

In line with what participants P2, P4 and P5 have shared, Kastenbaum and Fox's (2008), study revealed something similar. Investigating the termination of child-IC relationships, the finding was that some endings were abrupt and definitive while other endings were described as a fading or drifting away without incident (pp.123-1520. Death of the IC was reported by 8 of the 36 respondents. Participants in the Kastenbaum study stated that changes, for example in the family, made them feel less lonely and they were therefore more involved with other people. As is the case with the current study, the Kastenbaum participants did not recollect expressing regret stemming from the parting or loss nor recalled having the subject of death mentioned in their family. Interpretation of this phenomena led Kastenbaum et al. to suggest that children with imaginary friends are able explore the notions of reality and non-reality, test boundaries and probabilities and operate within their own zone of permissiveness.

## The Memory Experience

This theme has been placed last for a reason. It is concerned not only with narrative content but the reflective process following the act of reaching into the past. For some participants it appeared as self-talk, explaining to themselves, to me or to the future readers of their stories what was going on in their minds. A meta-cognitive process of sorts. It occurred to me that they were weighing-up the experiential validity of recalled memory, testing their own evidence and determining the memory's representational standing. I noticed that in the beginning/initiation of conversation with participants more than half of them began by sharing with me either what they considered I would want to hear, *what is most interesting to you* or, by beginning the narrative with what they could recall *most clearly*.

As the aim was to understand the phenomenon of the whole memory experience – the remembered as told - I felt it would be fitting to include within this theme the findings from the post-interview feedback form. As previously explained, this form was given to participants immediately following the interview. They were asked to rate nine interview-related statements, indicating the choice that best expressed their feeling toward the following: I expected something different from this experience; I found it strange sharing my childhood memories with the researcher; I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend(s); Some details about my imaginary friend were difficult to remember; As an adult I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend(s) played in my childhood years; Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words; I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate; I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else and; I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have, even if these are at a later stage.

Table 4 Your choices are: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Undecided (U), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
I expected something different from this experience.	SD	D	U	D	D	D	D	U	D
I found it strange sharing my childhood memories with the researcher.	A	A	A	D	D	A	D	SA	D
I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend.	U	A	D	A	A	A	SD	D	SA
Some details about my imaginary friend were difficult to remember.	SA	A	A	A	D	D	A	SA	D
As an adult I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend played in my childhood years.	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	U	SD
Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words.	SA	A	SA	A	A	A	SA	A	D
I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else.	D	D	U	D	D	U	U	D	D
I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have even if these are at a later stage.	SA	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A

An interpretation of the 'memory experience' theme begins with a summarisation of the findings from the form and moves into a discussion of other experiential correlates.

Two out of the nine participants were unsure of what to expect from the interview, (item 1) and as the form did not explicate an affective component it would be left to interpretation as to how participants P3 and P8 must have felt not knowing what to expect. One could expect a feeling of increased anxiety around the not knowing and a dissonance around volunteering to do something which has elicited anxiety and loss of control. Examination of the transcripts revealed no narrative around this sentiment during either of the two interviews. In other words, neither of the two participants shared with me the fact they had no idea what to expect or that they felt anxious. For P3 the memories are not evidently very clear or well defined, the interview is comparatively short and I noted at the time that she spoke quickly, perhaps wanting to get it over and done with. P8 does appear to struggle towards the end of the interview to access her memory of the IC stating, *I'm trying to remember it's not something I've thought about in ages*, so maybe for her it was a case of not wanting to know, having no desire to think about the interview before it took place.

The form showed mixed consensus in terms of it being considered strange to share childhood memories with myself as interviewer, (item 2). I was surprisingly not asked by any of the participants to expand on or clarify the word 'strange' so there is no indication whether this was to be construed negatively or positively. Four out of nine claimed they did not consider it strange. Those who did consider the experience to be strange were P1, P2, P3, P6 and P8.

In terms of whether participants found it easy to retrieve memory content about the imaginary companionship, (item 3), P1 felt unsure, P2, P4, P5, P6 and P9 felt that it was easy to recall detail about this early relationship. P7 felt strongly that it was not an easy task for her to bring to mind this childhood memory.

Three out of the nine participants disagreed that there were at least some details from the experience that they found difficult to remember. The assumption would be that for P5, P6 and P9 they were able to recall what they considered to be a full and complete story about the childhood relationship. For responses to the statement 'As an adult I am surprised by the role my imaginary



friend played in my childhood years', there was disagreement from all except P8 who felt uncertain of her position, ambivalent as to the significance this relationship had for her. P9 strongly disagreed with the statement implying he was not at all surprised by his IC's role. There is a sense from this response that participants are self-aware, linking knowledge about their current self to an earlier child self. Item 6, 'Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words' received a largely affirmative response. The one participant who disagreed with this was P9, the male participant. The implication being that he found words, the right words perhaps, to capture the experience and to explain it to another person. As an extension of his cognitive repertoire the possibility exists that narrative fluency, or perceived narrative fluency, goes back to childhood. The ease at which he is able to find and use words to describe the IC may relate to his early dabbling in fiction writing: *As a kid I wrote fiction...creating characters then speaking to them...my own unique language...speaking to them and making them speak to each other...quite a lot of monologues. And most interesting to me, someone trying to explain something to someone else.*

Item 7 concerned the participants perceptions of the suitability of the spatial context in which the interviews took place. All nine participants agreed with the statement, 'I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate'. My rationale for including this item was to ascertain whether participants felt comfortable in the space or whether they were embarrassed, distracted or uncomfortable being in public. For ethical reasons I had chosen not to interview at participant's homes. They were however encouraged to suggest a place on campus they would feel most comfortable. As it happens, for the most part this ended up being the cafeteria or dining hall. One participant, a smoker, requested the interview take place outdoors.

Item 8, 'I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else', is a confirmatory statement tailing item 7. In my construction of the feedback form I felt the item may assist in identifying any ambiguous feelings

around the physical space in which the stories were shared and I have obviously attached some importance to environment. Participants 3,6 and 7 gave an 'unsure' response.

The last item on the form aims at understanding whether the participants would feel comfortable contacting me post-interview. This would include any questions, concerns or reflections that might arise or perhaps any new memories that are later recollected. There was overall agreement with item 9, participants confirming 'I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have, even if these are at a later stage'. This item was important for me in terms of 'closure' following the interview but also as a last reminder to participants that they had been invited to contact me with any experiential leftovers; thoughts or feelings harboured from the interview.

**Representational certainty:** This part of the experience has to do with the ease or difficulty of recall and accessibility of memory content. For some, it was the clarity of their images that facilitated a positive experience. For P6 making sure she was on the right track was important: *Can I start anywhere?.. I remember more about this aspect of my childhood than most other stuff, and I think the actual images are clearer more precise I don't know ...in my mind now I can see him... Okay good I'll carry on describing him then as that's the part I remember.* This is in line with her response on the feedback form and my interpretation that P5, P6 and P9 considered their recollections to be full storied accounts.

The importance of image retrieval and clarity for a positive autobiographical experience is revealed in the following excerpt from P1: *Yeah they are quite vivid memories quite clear actually. I had quite a happy childhood... I can keep remembering the big garden in the house we moved to.* Scenes she spoke of extended beyond just the IC to include the car, the new house, the garden and school. In examining her overall narrative however P1 makes use of the testimony of her mother a fair amount, corroborating what she believes she remembers with her mother's account. This may explain why P1 felt 'unsure' as

her response to the item 'I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend' because she is unclear as to what 'belongs' to her.

P8 began her account confidently and without hesitation: *What I think is most clear in my mind to recall. My friend's name was Claudia.* There is some talk of the IC's physical appearance and within a fairly short time the narrative appears strained, thin, and she remarks : *I'm trying to remember it's not something I've thought about ... it's not something I've really thought about in ages.* I question whether the memory experience was a positive one for P8.

In response to the item, 'As an adult I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend played in my childhood years', there is disagreement from all except P8 who felt 'unsure'. She did not know what to expect at the interview (item 1), and found it strange sharing her childhood memories with me ('the researcher', item 2). Although she spoke of how she used to share information about her imaginary friend with her mum in childhood there was surprisingly no mention of present-day talk with her mother or anybody else in her adult life. One wonders, given that she had not thought about it 'in ages', not talked about it, whether the experience of 'bringing it all back to life' was in some way unsettling for P8. In terms of the potential for memory to destabilise aspects of the self or life story, this will be followed-up in the discussion section. There is of course the possibility that having an imaginary companion was simply not a big deal for P8. In this case, there is little investment cognitively or emotionally and the arms that cradle the significances of childhood hold something else more important.

Not all participants had a clear route of access. What is remembered versus what participants were told by others is sometimes unclear. P4 stated: *I think I remember them, but also I've been told about them... It's quite a tricky age to remember but some things rather than others do stand out.... I suppose maybe I don't remember quite a lot... I think it's difficult to separate the stuff I remember from what I've been told by other people.* At the time it appeared to me that she (P4) was making a concerted effort to retrieve the content - closing her eyes at

times and long pauses noted. There were 'warnings' to me around the validity of content, suggesting more than once that she may have been told certain things as opposed to remembering them herself. Her frustration with not owning the memory is evidenced in the following: *I just wish I could remember more...it's nice actually talking to someone else about them that didn't know about them.* There was something positive for her in the knowledge that I was unacquainted with her history and perhaps therefore not perceived as a threat to the memory.

**Significance:** This part of the memory experience concerns my perception of the overall importance for participants of sharing their memory. This is for example evidenced in the narrative of P7, as the opportunity to speak out about her experiences seemed significant to her. I had received email correspondence prior to the interview assuring me she was interested and enquiring about ethnicity or religious exclusions to the study. I had informed her there were no exclusionary criteria on this basis and agreed to meet. The interview began with her statement: *Let me begin by explaining that as you may have noticed I'm Muslim and that for a start is something that will be interesting for you in your study.*

Her feelings about being Muslim, perceived as different from the other participants in the study and therefore of particular value, these are important things for P7. The message in its simplest form says, I am different and because of this difference I am interesting or important. A poignant piece of narrative, I consider its potential relevance to childhood and the idea that children with imaginary friends see themselves as different, valued because of their uniqueness. Could it be that the idea of self-as-different is not lost but translated with time into an adult who perceives themselves as different. As the IC no longer serves as a marker of distinctiveness something else can take its place. Something internalised perhaps, an aspect of the self, such as a personality

trait, an aptitude or behaviour type. For P7 the difference may lie in her ethnic identity.

Returning to the discussion on the significance of sharing the IC memories, P7 on being asked how it felt speaking to me about her experiences remarked: *I'm okay speaking about it I've been looking forward to this actually... I thought it was going to be rather strange hearing myself talk to a stranger about it... I have thought a lot about it since I heard about this.*

Following the interview I received an email stating that she had begun reading literature on imaginary companionships and had informed her sister of the project. She wanted me to know that she had been encouraging her sibling to take part.

P2 had invested effort in thinking about the study initially after seeing the advert for volunteers: I thought about it quite a bit before meeting you and after I saw the leaflet, and seemed like the more I thought the more I remembered. There is a real sense of friendship when listening to P2 talk of her companion Minnie, a warmth that is conveyed in her voice as well as her words: My clearest memories I think are of us doing stuff together, playing and talking. When asked how it felt now as an adult to talk about Minnie she replied, It's kind of strange but not in a bad or awkward way.

In short, it makes psychological sense that vague and incoherent memories may allow individuals, for instance those high on avoidance, to down-regulate their emotions. This would be an individual coping strategy that may bring short-term relief. However, the inability to reflect meaningfully on past experiences may contribute to both incoherent memories and incoherent life narratives (Sutin & Gillath 2009 p.352). This is explored further in the proceeding discussion section.

## **DISCUSSION**

Nine university students shared their memories of what it was like to have an imaginary companion. Their narratives were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data from the transcriptions was interpreted using IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis), through the emergence of themes and variations across stories, clustering like themes together and eventually arriving at seven superordinate or master themes (table 3.).

The aim here is to relate the current data to what is already known about imaginary companionships, to what has been addressed in the earlier sections on imaginary companionship in childhood. In terms of putting together all the pieces, I will discuss the important role of memory (autobiographical) and memory narratives in terms of expanding our understanding of experiences 'located' in childhood. I hope to make clear in this discussion how adult memory narratives shed further light on the experience of imaginary companionships as well as, in human geographical terms, the experiential landscape of self from young to old. Thus, how the process of remembering things from childhood may impact current notions of self and identity.

Through the use of adult memory narratives it becomes possible to show how the imaginary companion may play a role in self-representation as it is discussed as a self-event, a phenomenon that links past and present.

I have chosen to bring the participant's stories into the discussion first so that the reader may get a clear and immediate sense of what it is I am referring to above.

## Interpretation of Experience

### Participant 1: The Imaginary School

One of the most recurrent themes in this study, which was apparent to a varying degree in all of the participants, was that each of them seemed to have shaped their identities from a perceived difference of some sort. Hoff's (2005) study suggested that children with ICs may have what she terms "negative self-images" (p.170) and this may go some way towards explaining this first participant's frequent employment of words such as: "weird"; "different"; (comparatively) "quite old". In Hoff's study, the children described themselves as being "different from others", having "lower psychological wellbeing", and rated low on measures of self-image (p.176)

In spite of this, it seems she remembers the characters of her imaginary school with fondness. There is a warmth in her narrative and an emotional attachment to the characters and the memory, "...they were always with me", "they belonged to me." The images have remained "vivid" and "clear" and are associated with what this participant said was a "happy childhood".

The mother is significant in this story. It is evident she spent time listening to her young daughter's tales about the characters and facilitated the relationship by being a part of the referential narrative. The assertion, made as an adult, that the ICs 'belonged' to her, and that she allowed her mother to be privy to information regarding her ICs, links to an earlier discussion in this paper on *self-knowledge* and the hypothesis made by Davis, Meins and Fernyhough (2011), which was that those with imaginary companions would show a greater sense of authority concerning aspects of their interior knowledge states and a refined awareness of their thoughts.

My understanding is that during the time the participant was engaged in her relationship with the imaginary characters she was also going through other significant transitions such as the birth of her baby brother, the family moving

house, the start of formal schooling and her diagnosis with dyslexia. It is therefore possible that we can see evidence of what Goncu (1993) termed expansion in this participant's imaginary play. Using her imaginary school as a pathway to her own "introduction, extension, acceptance, revision and conciliation" of a new (not imagined) school, friendships etc.

In my reflective notes following the interview I state that the participant seemed excited to share what she remembered and was eager to get talking. She said she enjoyed being a student, working with children and was studying towards a degree in Education. She presented as relaxed, (confident), and listened to the audio recording twice, smiling. She chose not to add or alter any of the recorded narrative. Given the participant's relaxed confidence, her enthusiastic engagement with the topic, the fondness with which she recalls her imaginary school, one could infer that the experience was facilitative in terms of coping creatively with periods of normal developmental conflict.

### Participant 2: Minnie

The story begins with a description of a large, noisy and busy family. There are multiple siblings meaning that, between them and their friends, the home has a steady stream of children. Once I am able to understand the environment as experienced, I am able to understand the potential this participant may have had to experience loneliness there. That is, the felt sense that attention was divided among many and as such, the environment felt overwhelming for this individual who later describes herself as a 'sensitive person'. Taylor & Carlson, (1997) state that the positive association between children with an IC and their tendency to focus on mental characteristics in describing a real best friend is consistent with the notion that having an IC entails that the child becomes practiced in focusing on cognitions and emotions. This could go some way to explaining why this particular participant feels able to describe herself as a 'sensitive person'.



Minnie, the Imaginary Companion, was introduced to the narrative immediately following the setting of the bustling family scene. It is as if she emerges out of necessity, suddenly yet naturally. After listening to the vivid description of an almost chaotic home atmosphere, I began to feel that perhaps this participant uses Minnie to escape, to assist in the 'quieting of (her) mind', something suggested by Hart & Zellars (2006) and corroborated by Taylor (1997) - facilitating her coping with the 'hustle and bustle' in the home.

There was a shift in the tone of the narrative when Minnie is introduced and I get my first sense of what was a warm and genuine IC friendship. She shares initially how Minnie began going with her to "Nan's" and to "the farm", "like one of us". The "clearest" memories for this participant are intimate and personal, the two of them doing what close friends do, playing together, talking, explaining, listening.

Mum, who she recalls stayed at home and didn't work, is brought into the story initially when Minnie "dies", a memory that belongs to the mother. The mother has shared with her daughter that "Minnie was there one day and gone the next". This participant is forthcoming in sharing the experience of her loss, described as a sadness, and is aware of the emotive power of the memory. In her adult life, she has contemplated Minnie's "disappearance", confused as to why she would have imagined her companion getting run over by a car, ending in such a "horrible" way.

Much like the first participant, the inclusion of her mother into the world of Minnie and herself, along with the description of the activities carried out by the two of them: playing together; talking; explaining and listening could point to an increased sense of self- knowledge and a refined awareness of the privacy of her thoughts as a child, as hypothesised by Davis et al (2011).

In my reflective notes following the interview I state that the participant seems interested in the research project having inquired afterwards about the literature and other areas of research on the topic of imaginary companions. She does

share that she thought about it “quite a bit” before our meeting and after she had seen the volunteer recruitment poster and that this ‘thinking’ had resulted in her remembering more and more.

### Participant 3: The Old Man

The narrative begins with the participant sharing that her memories are not vivid or clear. I sense an anxiety around her perceived frailty of the images and a reciprocal sense that I have been forewarned. I had already considered the possibility that some participants would try to draw cognitive sense from their experiences, intellectualising what they recalled, choosing to do the mental work themselves before they ‘handed over’ to me a raw image. In this case however, one of the ways I interpreted the participant’s uncertainty of what she remembers as stemming from her lack of context /background information, leading her to fear that the stand-alone images would make no sense (for me as listener).

However, in spite of this, she shared with me a detailed description of her wizard-like IC, concrete images of physical appearance and place description, trusting her recollection of him living under the house. The central plot concerns an “imagined little old man” who lives under the original childhood home and whose name she cannot recall. She describes him in fairy-tale terms, looking like a wizard but with a short beard. She repeats the fact that he has a short beard and I wonder if that is to clearly differentiate him from fairy tale stereotype. I have a picture of him now in my mind and I wonder if the wizard simile implies wisdom or gentleness. She tells me that she remembers him telling her silly things, which she thought he did to make her laugh. I wonder what kinds of things he said but I don’t ask her, hoping she will tell. Then I wonder if she was a sad child that needed someone outside the family to make her happy. She must have enjoyed his company as she remembers waiting excitedly for him, and fetching her sister to wait there too.

There is a brief relationship narrative as she recalls them spending much of their “time together talking”, her being told “silly things” making her laugh.

Listening to this part of her recorded interview, I can hear her smiling, a soft giggle. This lighter side of her narrative is juxtaposed by an admission of fear. Thoughts of the old man have triggered an emotive memory which she seems to trust, "I do remember actually being afraid". This is resonant in her adult self too and she pauses to reflect out loud- "it sounds fairly scary now...the thought of it".

Experienced initially as a fragmentary memory narrative, reflexive engagement with the transcript and audio brought clarity of a different sort. I noticed how, in subtle ways, I was trying to 'close' the story, even if only in my head. I struggled, trying to make sense of how she was making sense of the experience, assuming she had.

For this participant, there may be a struggle in the re-storying process itself- the frustration of 'being stuck with images' which either don't fit an existing story or can't be used in a new one. Towards the end of the interview, she mentions that she had told her sister of the research project. Another affective component is introduced to the narrative, the first mention of embarrassment, "I'm sure I convinced my sister...she's here at Uni too, I told her I was doing this. She's more embarrassed about it".

The interview comes to an end at this point, almost without warning, a long pause, followed by "that's all I remember".

In my reflections afterwards I have noted the brevity of this interview compared to the previous ones. I was aware that the participant seemed shy, softly spoken. I sensed an embarrassment, as if she wanted to tell her story and exit the dialogue. This could equally have been a matter of time, a practical constraint or simply wanting to be outdoors on this warm sunny day.

#### Participant 4: Frogs Carlene and Ping Ling

This fourth interview was important for me in terms of reflexive process and memory, revealing how the participants themselves make sense of how and why certain things are remembered.

From the outset it seems the narrative moves between layers of abstraction, between her sharing her story and evaluating it, drawing inferences from remembered conversations with parents and from her own filed memory. In my initial readings I find the narrative rhythm difficult to follow, getting stuck in the spaces between cognitive and meta-cognitive process. I went back to the audio recordings multiple times, helping me to locate in a different way her narrative voice and my interpretive voice. This highlighted for me the importance of 'the memory experience' as an emergent theme.

Although she articulates that it is "difficult to separate the stuff" in her mind, she is willing to make explicit this process. In other instances, this could be perceived as frustrating, an affect used to support resistance in remembering. She does say, "its nice actually talking to someone else about them", going on to share detailed accounts of her two imaginary companions.

Bound to what is remembered and what is lost to memory for this participant, is a recurrent theme of temporality and loss. I noticed that the transience of memory is akin to the temporal dimension of her IC relationship, with her use of the words, "leaving", "didn't have them anymore", " they came in and out", and then "didn't have them anymore ", "they disappeared". In adult terms, she perhaps copes with the temporal nature of memory and loss of her IC relationship by getting preschool (aftercare) children in her class to draw their own imaginary companions.

This is one of two participants who related their imaginary companions to characters from children's fiction (picture books). I was informed, in this instance, that her "favourite story" in preschool was *The Frog's Holiday*,

although she cannot explain her IC's names or appearances in terms of what she remembers from the book.

In my reflections following the interview I note that the participant shows a keen interest in the topic of the imagination and appears eager to share info about the research project with others, (asks where the posters and adverts are on campus), and has requested her sibling contact me for a chance to volunteer.

#### Participant 5: Mrs Barlow and the little darlings

This participant shared with me that her imaginary companions - Mrs Barlow, Tom and Lucy - were drawn imaginatively from a series of children's stories (by Shirley Hughes), which her parents initially read to her and with which later she would read to herself. Her IC relationship is perceived as an extension of a creative engagement with fiction, early ability to read and time spent together with parents involved in the story.

Imagery appears an important component of the memory experience. This is evident in terms of the ease at which she is able to call to mind the pictorial representations of her memory as well as her focus on the clarity of what she sees in her mind. Thus, she shares confidently what she is able to "call up with ease", the "very vivid picture(s)" in mind, but narratively makes little inference or speculation around that which she 'cannot see'. This supports Bouldin's (2006) findings that children with Imaginary Companions are able to imaginatively produce vivid mental constructions. She shares detailed snapshots (memory fragments) which, interestingly, she does not attempt to augment by weaving them into larger coherent narratives.

A part of the narrative which stands out for me because of its personal value is the participant's suggestion that the IC (Mrs Barlow) "shared some resemblance" to her grandmother, of whom she was fond but sadly did not get to see that often. This is the moment when I get a sense of the importance of the relationship and how much of the self is personally invested in Mrs Barlow.

She is aware that the IC relationship served at least a social compensatory function (my sense is for both peers or adults) stating, “in place of real conversation”, it was “better to talk with that image”, “she helped because she was just there listening”. Not seeming to ever leave her chair, Mrs Barlow is consistently present, curiously attentive to the little girl, as an audience would be.

The participant, a post-graduate with a psychology background, spoke eloquently and with confidence during our time together. This was the only participant who added to their narrative after listening to the audio-recording – she felt it important, in the interests of the study, to mention that she is the eldest child and has a younger brother. She recalled that when she was five years old and he was three, his becoming lingual may have coincided with a decrease in her imaginative play and dialogue.

The information that this participant added at the end may, according to Edith Ackermann’s hypothesis, evidence that Mrs Barlow and the little darlings were used as a positive coping mechanism during the years prior to her brother developing linguistic capacities. She starts the interview saying that her parents read her to her from a book which she then went on to read to herself, perhaps alluding to the fact that once her brother was born she used her IC to cope with the effect a new family member can often have on an older sibling feeling like the attention has been divided.

#### Participant 6: Swampy

This is another descriptive narrative with the participant emphasising what is remembered and how it is remembered - image retention and clarity. As the interview starts, she explains to me potentially how significant the memories are for her, “I remember more about this aspect of my childhood than most other stuff”, “the actual images are clearer, more precise”. Much of the narrative is invested in describing what she can still see.

The “less clear” images appear to distract her from the storying process, as if she loses her way negotiating from past to present and back again. The inability to access a whole memory chunk at once causes frustration, “my memory is obviously a bit sketchy”, “now I’m stuck”, “I can’t remember for sure”. Her process of making sense of the experience thus seems thwarted by partially complete memory. Where some others may use fragments to frame or scaffold a memory narrative, this participant uses certain specific memory, (clear and precise), like a compass to navigate her way back to the past. I have considered this may well be a consequence of the type of interview, (unstructured), used in the study. Some find it more difficult to ‘talk freely’ without the directive potential of questions.

This participant felt uncomfortable when reflecting on the length of time she had her IC. Although she noted it was not embarrassment, as an adult she remembers later being concerned not only that she had the companion but that the relationship had lasted “for so long”. Her sense of having Swampy around longer than she perceives others (have their ICs) is carried through the narrative and for this reason I consider the ‘being different’ part of a larger social comparison theme.

In my reflection following the interview, I note that she was perhaps nervous, (not certain of where to place her hands, moves them around, fidgets with paperwork on the table surface). There are pauses in the narrative although at the time I did not interpret the periodic silences as feeling uncomfortable

#### Participant 7: Unnamed IC

Family culture and social comparison were strong themes in this participant’s story of her IC, speaking less about her experiences of the early companionship and more about the home environment, how it was for her to be part of this family system. I very quickly get a sense that the memories hold feelings of sadness for her child self, the belief that ‘it wasn’t fair’ , the perceived injustice

that children feel when they compare themselves to others and realise that they are indeed different. The adult mind, as hers does in this case, rationalises the injustices we feel in childhood as ‘just the way things were’ or, ‘it was good in some respects’.

The participant recalls how as a child she did not have the freedoms afforded other children such as sleepovers and Barbie dolls. This is seen by her as part of a cultural membership and not necessarily blamed on parental enforcement. So although there is talk of her father and his authoritative style of parenting I interpret that time, age and awareness has enveloped this as part of a cultural identity.

Her IC relationship is explained in these terms, defined by its impact on family relations, something her father “was not in favour of”, something she says was “unique” in the family, that elicited the attention of both mother and father and something that her siblings did not share with her. She “enjoyed having the friend very much” despite her father’s disapproval, stating that it was a special friendship.

Notes following the interview reflect what has been stated previously that is, the participant’s correspondence with me disclosing of her own volition the fact she was of a certain culture. She spoke confidently throughout, pausing to consider her thoughts and clarify memory. She verbalised that she had been thinking about her participation (in the study) and that she had been looking forward to it. Not long after, I received email correspondence thanking me.

#### Participant 8: Claudia

The story is presented with an obvious emphasis on the physical appearance and presence of the imaginary companion named Claudia. The narrative seems to be an experiential parallel which the participant felt at the time, between her child-self and her imagined friend. Recalling that the IC was inferior to her on a physical dimension it is easy to infer that the participant’s child-self felt superior



in this relationship. The power-differential is manifest in the participant's story as she remembers occasions when she would get angry, "fed up", with Claudia and "send her home", "away from me" as a punishment it seems.

The mother is a supporting figure in the narrative, reaffirming her child's early sense of self (self-identity), as beautiful, "I was prettier" and "my mum felt quite proud of how cute I was". The participant recalls how her mother "used to have to" listen to bemoaning about the IC as if ,not by choice ,drawn into the relationship and its early narrative, affirming her daughter's position of authority even through the neutral cues of 'just listening'. Support by the mother of the IC relationship status quo is implicit - there is nothing to suggest mother's countering the behaviour.

Reflecting on this interview I have mentioned a commonality amongst several of the participants whose narratives begin spontaneously with 'what is clearest in my mind...'. This particular participant shared with me that she had not thought about her IC "in ages", "it's not something I've thought about".

#### Participant 9: Stories and Fantasy Characters

For the one male participant in the study, this was an engaging narrative in terms of both the sense-making process and the experiential content. Fantasy, creativity and fiction are central features of the story.

Although there is no mention of parents, siblings or reference to family, a unique affiliative theme emerges from his talk about the characters he creates. He speaks of them in plural terms, none are referred to by name and there is little in the way of identity or personalisation. When interpreted comparatively with the other participants, this is a different sort of companionship. Despite this difference, the characters have an enduring presence which has remained through to adulthood and which continues to manifest through "dialogue" and "monologue".

For me, the narrative is self-satiating with the characters having enabled a sense of mastery. I try to imagine the cumulative impact of the self-referent messages, for instance, the idea that they (characters) were “always curious and interested (in what he had to say)...as curious as I am about my thoughts”.

He says, “they were usually detached from the rest of the world; there was the real world and there was my world and they were in my world”. This is an example of what Kantor (2013, p 265) means when explaining the interaction between the ability to pretend and imagine and the rules of social/community living, an interplay which he deems significant in development. Although the other participants do not use the same phrasing, as in ‘real world’ and ‘my world’, I believe the experiences resemble similarly the effects of ‘our/your world’ on ‘my world’ and ‘my world’ on ‘our/your World. And this, according to my interpretation, is yet another route to an understanding of self and other.

In terms of identity consolidation, the characters may at least have preserved some of his beliefs about himself - that he is interesting, unique, creative, and so forth. It is because of them he says that he is able to explain his thinking “in a much more complex way”. Edith Ackermann (2005), introduced in an earlier section of this paper [p.23], asserts that it is the sustained narrative “between *what is* and *what could be*, between actuality and possibility, which is a condition *sine qua non* to the development of both human creativity and rationality” (p2) and goes further to suggest that these “urges” contribute to helping people find their place and their voice in the world. As this *finding of voice and place* has emerged as an important component in this study it will be reflected on further in the discussion and conclusion sections.

This participant seemed relaxed throughout the interview and after listening to the audio recording he had wanted to show me some drawings, “fantasy sketches” for his next creative writing project. His predilection towards fantasy ties in with Klausen’s belief that relations between children and their imagined

constructions be taken as a “vivid merging point” between fantasy and reality (Klausen 2007, p.356).

I am reminded of Boudin & Pratt and Taylor’s studies (Bouldin & Pratt 2001, Taylor et al.1993) suggesting that children with IC’s are able to *readily and easily process the content of their fantasies*. Although this is not the case with all of the participants, he seems able to confidently elaborate on his ideas to me, explaining where his ideas were drawn from and what facilitative factors kept the creative process in flow and he is able to clearly articulate his thoughts and to want to explain the ‘inner workings’ behind his stories and drawings. When I, for example, asked P2 how it was for her to talk about Minnie, she remarked, “It’s kind of strange but not in a bad way or awkward way”. P4 is frustrated in articulating her thoughts or putting things across in a way that seemed concordant with her internal reflection and this, compared to P9, has something to do with her own sense of understanding: “I think it’s difficult to separate the stuff I remember; I just wish I could remember more but it’s nice actually talking to someone else about them; I have wanted to understand it”. P5 does not appear to struggle in narratively expressing what she sees in her mind remarked, “Sometimes I have a very vivid picture of her in my imagination and I can recall that with ease and clarity; call that up and use that”, and of her child self she says, “I was constantly verbalising what I was doing and I was doing it out loud...I just remember talking, it was about talking”. It seems for P6 that the *ease and readiness to process the content of fantasy*, or put another way, her ability to portray the details of her experience, is contingent on image quality, the fact that she feels confident in her mind’s ‘stored evidence’ :“The actual images are clearer more precise; In my mind now I can see him ;how vividly I remember”. In psychological terms, I would suggest this to be less of a content ‘process’ and more of a descriptive recall , which to varying degrees is evident in all the narratives.

Finally, parallels can be drawn between the participant's predilection for fantasy and artistic creativity and other imaginary companionship studies, for instance Myers et al (Myers 1979; Singer & Singer 1992) which showed that those who had imaginary companions in their childhoods exhibited *creative capacity* as adults. Taylor, Hodges, and Kohanyi (2003) reported that more creative writers recalled having an imaginary companion than the normal population. In this study, the authors stated that the writers had a high mean score on the *Dissociative Experiences Scale*, particularly on the 'Absorption' subscale, measuring the tendency to become highly engrossed in activities, something I could draw from P9's narrative : "I'd think about them all the time ; they were with me in my mind; I would usually have a certain character in front of me in my mind ; All my life has been filled with fantasy stuff ; even today half my thinking is in dialogues". Suggesting his 'absorption' in an active imaginative life from childhood through to his adult self.

### **The remembered as told**

This section of the discussion will pull together a number of threads, beginning with the phenomenon of the 'remembered-as-told'. This is not only a critical feature of the study but also holds potential for future study of ICs. I believe it pertinent to clarify the value that the phenomenon holds for the study as a whole and do this by re-visiting its origination.

When exploring the characteristics of memory, or what may be referred to as the 'quality' of a memory, there is often reliance on constructs such as its detail/ specificity, sensory information, the ordering or sequence of events, storyline or scene reconstruction. However, the aim in this study was to understand the memory outside traditional markers, as an experience/ series of experiences. Through the experiences other, meaning-laden elements, could be seen: the relation to sense of self, the voice of others, discourses of time and loss and, the link of recollected experiences to the personal and familial geographies of the participants.

The remembered-as-told located an experiential space in which lived-through meaning and new meanings were to be revealed. I suggest that envisioning the space began even before this, through the choice to not define the imaginary companion, allowing it to 'show itself'. I would argue that the phenomenon, defined in this way, does well to position the participants as *experiencers*, a role that is the result of their direct participation. Active agency extends to narrative and particularly to the re-storying process. A choice was made not to examine narrative structure or components through the likes of narrative /discourse analysis although the study acknowledges the embeddedness of meaning within words noting the confines of the spoken word and the potential issues that emerge from attempting to access memory through language. However, the 'intelligibility' of a speech act assumes that participants/ narrators own words can work to fend off or mitigate against misinterpretations and, that the participants are able to signal to an audience how they want to be understood (Maple & Edwards, 2005).

There is an underlying thematic strand in the study of disconnection and reconnection, and I would argue that this is measured well by the 'remembered-as-told'. The remembered-as-told was a conscious decision to link researcher to researched to reader. Through talking and listening, there was an opportunity for ordinary human connection and shared experience between myself and the nine participants. Moments of disconnection are however present in attempts to narrate their experiences, to describe the imaginary companionship to other individuals or readers in my own terms, evidenced in 'telling versus showing'. Using IPA as an interpretive tool meant I could 'show' others via narrative excerpts and participant examples, closing the gap between participant and reader. In a similar vein, I feel the phenomenon is sensitive enough to ably reveal the distance between the memory and its recollection; connecting the storyteller to their authorship through the acts of remembering and interpreting, and disconnecting through the human process of forgetting. The synchronicity of this coming-together and moving-apart coming-together and moving-apart, is evidenced throughout the participant narratives.

Extension of this thematic strand moves inevitably on to the notion of temporality. I think the phenomenon has revealed a tension between the continuity and support of memory to the unfolding self, versus the changing nature of self, memory and experience. The tensions have to do with how participants' narratives change through time yet also at certain junctures appear embedded or fixed. This may have, as is discussed later in more detail, something to do with the self and whether memories in-service to the self, form part of something longer-term (the long-term self) and antithetically, the memories that are self-discordant are housed temporarily before being let go or replaced.

Finally, there is the *phenomenological attitude* and my belief that the phenomenon, differentiated as it was, supported or at the very least represented this attitude. Along with the phenomenology's call for humanity (a rudimentary pre-condition), there is a similar call to consciousness. For when one is 'conscious of' something, an experience in this case, one is 'in-relation- to it', aware of it and importantly, it holds meaning. In my preparatory readings on phenomenology, I turned to Langeveld's (1983a) *The Secret Place in the Life of the Child*, to which I have referred previously in this study (under 'Research Examples'), and was struck by the researcher's account of this remembered experience, how he positions in-relation-to what he is looking at. This, and the sensitivity imparted in his illumination of the experience to the reader, suggested to me that memory phenomena exist in the space between who we are and who we may become which, Langeveld implies, are quite ordinary aspects of life.

### **Sense of Self**

The construction of 'a sense of self' has become an important part of the project and I do believe emerged because of the way the phenomenon was delineated. I have given examples of other studies wherein stories of remembered experiences are collected and understood in reference to the self and self-transformation. By structuring the phenomenon as I did, I felt it would be able to show that which is socially shared, how the meanings were of a social nature,

as well as revealing how imaginary companions are experienced in individual ways. I predicted that it seemed highly likely that the recollection would extend to other individuals in the family system and that their perspectives on the imaginary friend would become known. In terms of memory and autobiographical process, I had some idea that the self would be important but not to the extent that it would be considered, as Roediger and Marsh term, the “critical defining feature” (2003p.485).

Although I have referred to the memory experiences in this study as autobiographical, I have not set out to prove this. My belief is that the memories which were shared with me are meaning-full. How and why they hold meaning for each of the nine participants is left to interpretation.

If it holds that self-referential memories, (autobiographical accounts), are the building blocks in constructing and maintaining ‘a sense of self’ (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000; Robinson, 1992, McLean, 2005), it would be necessary to understand how this links to the participant narratives. The answer appears to lie in the active agency of self - a role that the current (in this case adult) self actually plays in organising and interpreting past experience. Thus, our beliefs about the kinds of people we are (present tense) influences the kinds of stories we share, and impact the specific manner in which we relate them to others. This has to do with congruence, with seeing ourselves as the same person over time, integrating past (childhood) and present (adult self), (Barclay 1987, Markus 1977 1982, Neimeyer & Raeshide 1991). It would follow that stability-maintaining narratives around self and self-events would be most prevalent in the everyday discourse of adults and that in order to maintain a stable sense of *who I am* over time, I would need to ‘adapt’ self-experiences by dismissing what is incongruent, (McLean & Pasupathi, in press; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Pasupathi, Mansour, et al., 2007). The narrating of an event that was ‘*not like me*’, may pose a struggle for the self and be reflected in incongruent narrative content. Maslow’s (1903-1970) theory of self for example states that *who I am* today provides a path to *my understanding* of my childhood experiences such

that, throughout the life span, it is the *experiencing* person that is in the centre (1903-1970).

McAdams particularises this by suggesting a role for imagery and sensory expression where, over time, an individual may accrue a set of “favourite metaphors and symbols” which become an important feature of their identity, used to affirm continuity or understand change in the ‘*me*’ (1966,p.308). In Waller and Maine’s (2011) study, discussed under ‘research examples’, their findings have suggested that adult readers who expressed “difficulty in imagining” the landscapes (from the childhood tale), who could not fully immerse themselves imaginatively, were “removed from their aesthetic experience”. Listening to the participants talk of their companionships, I agree with McAdams’ explanation for the accrual of metaphor as an integrative, sense-making and self-explanatory feature of the personality. Although it is the ego’s job to deal with dissonance, ego integrity coming from the acceptance of ‘dialectical’ behaviours and experiences, for some participants in this study, I notice the metaphorical significance of their IC experiences. P5 is an advanced postgraduate in psychology and says of her IC : “ I learnt to read when I was very little; There was a presentation I attended at a psychology conference about some forms of this (imaginary companionships)...and I got thinking about it...I have a very vivid picture of her in my imagination and I can recall that with ease and clarity...use that in real conversations...talk with that image; my parents were always reading to me...it was about talking; listening to me; important...linguistically and socially; I was constantly verbalizing out loud”. In this extract one sees evidence of what McAdams refers to in the linkage between the (past) stored images/ (present) recall, her interest in and aptitude for psychology (differentiated identity), view of herself (as different, as intelligent).

Relating further the experience of self to the literature on imaginary companionship, it has been discussed earlier that children who indulge their imaginations are better equipped to understand the mind of self and other



through observing the self *in relation to* the other and by looking at the self from both inside and outside (Taylor 2007; Taylor et al, 2008; Davis, Meins & Fernyhough, 2011). Thus said, children who remember engaging often in pretend play may also recall their experiencing the self in different roles, in an “as if” world (Burris & Raif 2015, pp.91-106). When considering the landscape of child and adult across time, IC’s may serve at least some purpose toward identity formation through what Hoff (2004) has termed an ‘inner mentorship’. As mentorship implies, the IC would facilitate exploration of ‘the self’, aspects of the personality that are tested out, possible selves that are experimented with.

It is interesting to note too how Bettelheim, (Bettelheim 1977) describes fairy tales as particularly rich microcosms to work out identity issues. The materials provided in a fairy tale are evocative of a person's psychological and emotional struggles, which growing up entails.

At this point in the discussion I would like to raise an important contextual variable from the IC narratives, that of the listener/observer. Variations in “listener-responsiveness” from those who are witness to the events and experiences in our lives have the capacity to skew the relationship between self-event and self- identity (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007). Researchers who have studied this phenomenon suggest that ‘responsive listeners’ are those who are attuned - convey their interest, contribute to the narrative, and support the telling of a story. For instance, children whose mothers are highly responsive, and adults whose friends are this way will tell more elaborative stories to those listeners and have more elaborated memories for the experiences they have narrated (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). Interestingly, highly attuned mothers are involved in supporting their child’s production of a ‘complete’ autobiographical narrative to the extent that even when the child is an adult these parents assist in linking current life experiences with lifelong proclivities and future directions. Evidenced in this study was the fact that four out of the nine participants had contacted in the

*present* tense (spoken with and emailed) their mothers to discuss the study and memory of their imaginary companions. Another two of the participants had discussed the topic with their siblings, (sisters in both cases).

The act of narrating our experiences to someone else and therefore not being-in the experience itself, relates to the work of Kegan (1982) in his *Evolving Self*, and to Edith Ackermann's paper on education and virtual reality worlds (1993). Both authors argue that experiential learning is limited as long as an individual is immersed in the experience itself. Yet, when they are able to remove or separate themselves from the experience such as in the act of remembering and narrating, they can contemplate better this experience from a distance. As time goes, they can 'encapsulate' their experiences, give it a 'form', which eventually, according to Kegan, gains a life of its own. It is plausible then that these experiences, such as for the nine participants, become 'artefacts'. Within the dialogue between "me" and "my artefact" there is, according to the authors, opportunity for new and deeper understanding. Ackermann refers to it as "the alternation between embedded-ness and emergence from embeddedness", which she relates to self-knowledge and growth. To be 'embedded' experientially, being-in the experience as the experiencer I suggest is both a *dissociative* and *integrative* process. I will not argue here against experiential narration (as this study's bedrock) nor take issue with Ackermann's 'embeddedness' in terms of the phenomenal self, both beyond the scope of this paper. My desire to understand another's unfamiliar past experience and their desire to assist in my understanding is an act of integration, absorption in the narrative, "I want to understand you", "I want you to understand me". At the same time, I am aware of the dissociative qualities attributed historically to the imaginary companion. Traditionally, the discourse around a social dissociative theme has centered on self-isolation, the only-child hypothesis, social skill deficit, lack of social closeness (no understanding or empathy from others), perceived mental incapacity leading on then to an array of cognitively dissociative factors. The point I am making is that, by 'looking at the bigger

picture', as I hope to have done with this study, one sees the *experience evolving* together with the *evolving self*.

Early on in the study I gave an overview of the historical context of IC research describing how interests have shifted, how contemporary findings have pointed to higher levels of sociability and pro-social orientation,( Roby &Kidd,2008; Seiffge,1997). There was no disclosure in the participant narratives about their personal social lives, current peer relationships, friendship ties or romantic partnerships, social pursuits or interests. From the data did emerge a common (superordinate) theme of 'others', others in the family notably the mother, that I have discussed. There is a sense of '*social closeness*' noticeable in some of the stories, a concept I am borrowing from previous IC research using the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (Tellegen 1982, cited in Kidd et al, 2010), which points to sociability, close interpersonal ties, turning to others for comfort and help.

Regarding her memory of peer friendships, P1 says, "I don't think I had many friends at the primary schools I used to play with; my imaginary friends were much more my friends, more attached and nicer to me – my peer friends weren't very nice; I found it quite hard to make friends and stuff like that". She found school "difficult" socially and academically (given her diagnosis of dyslexia and dyspraxia). So although she seems attached to the characters in her imaginary school, "my imaginary friends were more of a comfort", it is a less 'personalised' (no names or appearance qualities), hierarchical relationship.

I perceive a different closeness in P2's relationship with Minnie. In spite of her having siblings, a stay at home mum and the potential availability for peers, "big family; always had other children over" , she forms an attachment with an imagined other who, in her words, "was obviously important". She begins engaging in real friendships becoming "more outgoing" once Minnie is gone but feels "sad" about the companionship ending. There are parallels between P1 and P2's companionship in terms of teaching/ helping/ instructing, both

participants recalling how they explained things to their IC, gave them instructions, “see if she could do them, if she’d listened to me” (P2). As a source of social provision, Gleason and Hohmann’s (2006) study (a predominantly female sample), revealed that children’s imaginary friends provide much of the same social value as do real friends in terms of “conflict, power, instrumental help and nurturance” and that when examined within the context of significant social relationships, there was a “lack of statistical difference” between real and imagined companions (p.141). Following this argument, which again links the current data to previous IC research, in P4’s story she states that “an imaginary companion is someone or something...you can play with when you don’t have real people there to play with”. She does note however that even after her younger siblings are born, she recalls the continuation of the IC companionship.

For P6, social closeness is evidenced in multiple play contexts. She has her friend Swampy who was “closer” to her than her “regular friends”, she kept him separate from them although he was not a secret, and she had her brother and sister whom she considered her friends too. Her narrative provides support for Taylor’s counter-argument that imaginary friends more than likely have “special qualities” not found in real friends and that the two forms of relationship are inherently different (1999,p130). This is premised on the fact that children don’t necessarily give up their IC’s when real friends come along. P5 said, “I’d say it was certainly companionship and I’d say she shared some resemblance to my grandmother who I had a very positive relationship with...so I would say a unique companionship on those grounds; I think she was important to me and still is”. She does say that “she’s not sure about the social thing” in terms of the companionship’s facilitation. In year one at school, she disclosed being embarrassed of Mrs Barlow and the little darlings when comparing herself to her peers, “I think it’s different to have a much older imaginary friend”. Similar to P2, when Mrs Barlow is gone (vanishes), “in her place came other people who were real people”. From P7’s story, my understanding is that the companionship bares resemblance to Gleason’s explanation of a traditional friendship (even

toy-like qualities), a source of provision in a context where real friends and Barbie dolls were not sanctioned. She says, "I enjoyed having the friend very much; almost a sister just like a little sister or a doll". Interestingly, there is no name given nor little in the way of physical description as in the case of a real friend. Similarly, for P8, Claudia is similar to a real friend, "my same age ; she wasn't as pretty as me... we kind of made a good pair...I liked her and wanted her to be my friend ; I could get angry with her and send her home", revealing too the examples of social provision ,in this case conflict and power, that Gleason asserts. Lastly on the issue of sociability, of self and other, is P9's experience of his relationship with multiple fictional characters. As a child he said he got "inspiration" from his "classmates" but there is nothing in his story about peers or family (he has an older brother I find out). When asked if he ever spoke to anyone about the characters his reply was, "it's usually disguised in my writing; I can usually talk about my imaginary friends by the things I write; in a disguise; I didn't share a lot what I wrote with most people back in the day", confirming a sense of his privacy, a boundary which may serve to protect his rich inner-life.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since imaginary companionship is a difficult thing to get one's head around proving tricky to define or describe, contributions that draw on alternative perspectives such as phenomenology and that use a variety of methods should be welcomed. Phenomenology may yet prove its worth in terms of moving the imaginary companion out of some of the 'conceptual straightjackets' which have historically benefitted research in the cognitive sciences. Set against a backdrop of theoretical tensions, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has provided for this study a multi-layered way of tapping into methodological, epistemological and ontological dimensions of the imaginary companion. Phenomenological researchers can remain caught in what feels like a theoretical impasse, what Hollway and Jefferson describe as "the transparent self-problem" and the "transparent account-problem" (2000, p3). The dilemma

for me was a question of 'knowing', or rather how to know, included in the concern that I/we would never really know the full story, because the assumption that participant narratives give access to authentic parts of the self/lifeworld, may be fallacious. There seems to be no way of escaping the tensions inherent in this type of research project but I am satisfied that the study has made an honourable and worthy choice in phenomenology and that the phenomenon itself has exposed what is experientially meaningful for nine individuals.

Imaginativeness is explained as a particular kind of flexible disposition which is said to invigorate other dispositions or 'ways of being'. In everyday living, this human ability represents the novel, the resourceful, the unconventional and, the unorthodox. Imaginativeness also includes the ability to extend oneself beyond the sensorial, to experience what is extrasensory. If one then thinks of imaginativeness in such broad terms, as a human way-of-being, then imaginary companionship could be regarded as the experiential component of this way of being, an outcome or consequence of having an imaginative disposition. And when regarded such, as a type of *experience*, it is understandable that it has proved difficult to pin down or define, not alone operationally. Attempts have aimed at defining the companion, less so the relationship, and current empirical practice follows Svendsen's definition (1934), declaring the imaginary companion to be "an invisible character named and referred to in conversations 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 no apparent objective basis" (p.6). As earlier discussed, this has proved problematic in terms of its non-inclusionary characteristics, neglect of the personified object and potential negation of an entire range of other imaginal manifestations. I have also pointed to Gleason's (2004) argument that we are dealing with two or more separate phenomena and her call to examine invisible companions and personified objects as distinct experiences. The de-limiting consequence of abiding steadfastly to definitional criteria does mean that anything in the mixture

deemed subtly distinct gets washed away. This is evidenced in a personal example I have provided (see appendix 2):

Seated around the dinner table at a recent social gathering I was asked... why I had earlier said that an imaginary companion “should hold a significant place” in the child’s life and why too I had added that they usually are known by the parents or caregivers to exist. I explained that they were distinct from other forms of projective play and objects in the child’s life and that the quality and quantity of time spent engaged with them implied a certain significance. That the rest of the family unit would in due course be made aware of their presence, and that children mostly were quite happy to talk to others about this relationship. She had a look which I can only describe as concern, then asked, “So if the parents don’t know about it, then you’re saying it doesn’t exist? So what if I had one and didn’t want to share it, I just kept it all to myself, would that not be an imaginary friend then?”...

I was really taken with this response and again almost forced to pause and think. How potentially limiting our definition for this phenomenon may be, and how many stories out there will be discounted and/or extinguished. In experiential terms, this is a most crucial consideration. As this study has sought to understand and interpret personal experiences and the meanings contained therein, there was reason enough to decide that no definition would be offered to the research participants. It was in no way a prerequisite of the study that participants themselves describe or narratively define their imaginary companion(s). The idea was to reflect questions (such as those concerning definition) back to the participant. A position of naïve curiosity on my part was relatively easy to adopt as my personal history does not include an imaginary companion.

Aside from choosing to leave open the definitional space, the intent was also to move away from historical, binary interpretations by looking at the IC with its lived exchanges. Imaginary companion studies examining ‘those-with’ versus ‘those-without’ are referenced earlier in this current study, their findings credited for identifying with pinpoint accuracy the intra-individual elements of the relationship. Developmental

literature on free play, creativity and imagination, and imaginary companionships proffers links to other cognitive and psycho-social markers, valuable indicators when understood in terms of a traditional developmental trajectory. The intention was for this study to attempt a purposeful collapsing of boundary de-stabilising the categories hitherto employed in researching the IC, to reveal another type of personalised understanding.

When children's drawings are used for research they are often commissioned and thus directed, to some extent, by the adult driven research process, so too with play for example. Of the categories that were re-visited, perhaps the most significant is that of child-adult. From a human geographical perspective, it made sense to negotiate the landscapes of/between each through the collapsing of space and time, imagination and memory being the portals through which such a thing is possible. The loosening of constraints around child-adult encourages a freedom similar to that of imaginative play- freedom to choose who to be, how to be, switching and swapping one role to another, one rule for another, abandoning and beginning again. Through liberation, when we can look beyond child-adult, at *ways of being* and connect those to the traditions, places and practices of society, we may begin to notice something quite encompassing in the form of whole ecologies. More than bringing something of the inner self to the external world, ecology refers to the web of *relationships* that exist between living things and their environments. Benhabib talks in ecological terms of "interrelational selves" whereby lives interact and connect whilst being grounded in the "material reality" of everyday life (1999,p.354). A relevant key component, according to the author, of the grounding is formed by the narrations of selves and other selves-in-relation. The remembered-as-told, in Benhabib's terms, is constituted through "webs of interlocution" (354), as a phenomenal encounter managing to reveal the intersection of participant stories with other social factors and selves. It was hoped that ecologies would be discernible to the reader through participant storylines and apparent links to



other remembered experiences. And it does appear that the laying down of narratives gives form to a kind of multi-storied ecology, their narratives moving back and forth through chronological time as Elspeth Probyn has described , “...where images of childhood brush up against other images, where the past quickens a lust for the present and for the possible” (1996,p. 123).

Defining the phenomenon as ‘the remembered as told’ achieved certain crucial ends, one of which is the preservation of ecological integrity. Essentially to do with how participants have experienced and made their own sense of the memory, I would suggest the phenomenon has managed to capture the sense of wonderment which accompanies forays into the past. Further, through drawing on personalised accounts the phenomenon has highlighted the idiosyncrasies of the self- storying process, exposed my positionality as listener and has managed not to sentimentalise nor trivialise the recounted experiences. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) supported an authentic interpretation of the experiences, moving from individual representations to a sense of what was shared between all nine participants. This method permitted reflexivity in terms of both myself as researcher and reader being able to see *how* the experiences have been interpreted and made meaningful. The core themes for example, emerged from the narratives in a way that is accessible to the reader, does not depend on implication or expertise: the relationship experience, social- comparison, sense of self, influence of mother and others in the memory, temporality and loss and, the memory experience.

Throughout our lives the narratives that we construct for ourselves change, as do the meanings we take from them. Some narrative theorists suggest, so important is our self- storying, that a more ‘coherent’ and organised life story contributes to psychological health/ or wellbeing (McAdams,2006). I do not take this to imply such a finely choreographed ordering of life that it ultimately becomes impossible to re-author for with its haste and contradiction, there must be room enough in life for re-interpretation, opportunity for it and acceptance that this is so. Somers refers to the temporal and relational aspects of self-related narratives as “ontological narratives”, and this resonates with my view on participant stories, how the individuals fitted themselves into their stories,

masterfully negotiating their own place within the narrative, and where they had opportunity to speak about who they believe they are (1994,p.61). “Ontological narratives make identity...something that one *becomes*” (p.61). The study was an opportunity for participants to reorganise the meanings attached to their IC experiences, to explore through narration their sense of self and to share some of the private sense-making out loud.

Readers may be aware of a parallel process of interlocution which took place involving myself as listener, the intersubjective space and history repeating itself. In a remarkably similar manner to participant’s early experiences with their mothers (and others), they have interpreted the companionship, making accessible through narrative reporting that which is personal. As immersive as this experience was for me, I was unaware of the parallels at the time, only realising during thematic emergence of ‘others’. Interestingly, none of the participants commented on this parallel process which is not to say they weren’t aware of it.

My understanding of the experience is that it does permit not only children but adults who have had the companionships earlier in life an opportunity to privately work through the conundrum of what it means to be ‘self’ and ‘other’. The mental simulations that begin in childhood I see as continuing through to adulthood. The introjected ‘other’ seems to remain available to the adult self in a narrative way, as ‘internal-state talk’, a faculty that at the very least must assist in self-understanding and self-other discernment. After all, to relate (even to an internalised ‘other’) is to negotiate boundaries, to regulate exchanges and to continue to reconfigure both outer and inner worlds. My sense from listening to the experiences is that they have much to do with identity- renewal and negotiation. I noticed how the IC’s have ‘grown’ with the adults as they continue to reconfigure ideas of self and others in their lives.

This study has provided a novel contribution to imaginary companionship research and literature, flagging up the limitations of psychological, cognitive-

developmental approaches and identifying the tensions between coherent theoretical explanations on the one hand and experiential appreciation on the other. We cannot know everything and this study certainly does not profess to have provided any deeper knowledge than a series of interpretations, a view of nine experiences. All I can know is what has been told to me by the participants and what I have shared with readers through excerpt and example. There will certainly be things beneath or behind these nine stories, things that are kept private, the 'real self' of participants, and their narratives regarding their imaginary companionships will change as they continue on a lifelong course of making sense of themselves. Benhabib declared, there will always be "retelling, remembering, and reconfiguring" (p.348) but this does not negate the capturing of rich and salient experiences. I believe the study provided an opportunity for these young adults to give voice to a marginalised and historically pathological experience. I concede that there is a measure of 'risk' involved in memory work, in the veracity of personal testimony and selectivity of memory but this is mitigated, evidenced in the study narratives, by participants themselves noting the limits of their memory. The memories in this study have linked together in a way that reaches beyond the IC, telling us something of families and friends, time and change, reaching all around the imaginary companionship without being-in it. Interpretive phenomenological analysis permitted an experiential proximity sufficient for meaningful themes to emerge: The relationship experience, Social comparison, Self-evaluation, Impact of the imaginary companion relationship on identity formation, Influence of mother, Influence of others in memory, Temporality and loss.

Within an emerging field, the study is set apart in its examination of the personal meanings attached to and the lived experiencing of these companionships, permitting a new understanding of the experience within a context of intentionality and temporality. Through an interpretive lens, the study has shown that this experience holds personal and social meaning, facilitating for those who have had an imaginary companionship, a complex understanding

of themselves and others through observing the self-in-relation to the other, through looking at the self from both inside and outside. Themes from this study point to an introjected 'other', an increased awareness of 'the other' in life, which remain available to the (adult) self and which meaningfully assist in self-understanding and self-other discernment...“the process of peopling one’s private thoughts” (Singer and Singer 1992,p.110)

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Interview Transcripts P1- P9

**Interviewer:** **Caroline W.**

**Respondent:** **P-1**

**Respondent:** Have you got any specific questions?

**Interviewer:** **Alright so how we can start is, if you're happy with this – by telling me what you remember about your imaginary friend or friends. I'm just going to try and see if I can turn this up a bit more – I also want to mention to you that I didn't have an imaginary friend of any sort and that makes me very interested in your story.**

**Respondent:** Okay. I'll hopefully remember.

**Interviewer:** **Whatever memory comes first**

**Respondent:** So I didn't have an imaginary friend I had an imaginary school.

**Interviewer:** **Okay.**

**Respondent:** Yeah, I used to have like loads of imaginary little friends. But not one, like you know lots of children normally have only one imaginary friend that they form an attachment to I think, I had one and we used to play schools together and I used to do that for hours on end. So I used to like take them in the car and my mum would have to wait to seatbelt them in and I used to take them on school trips together and teach them maths and teach them English and play with them in the garden. I loved being with them in the garden .

**Interviewer:** **Do you have any idea how old you may have been?**

**Respondent:** No I can't. I just remember them being there. I must have been about 5/6 – pre-like reception age and I think it probably was because my brother was born at that age as well. And they were with me at that time.

**Interviewer:** **Okay.**

**Respondent:** Yeah, and so – that's how far back I can remember

**Interviewer:** **So you remember them ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah [pause]. My Mum does too [ pause] ; she used to like help me seatbelt them and then stuff like that. So my mum played with them and then my brother was small- so he did . I don't remember my dad being around much of my childhood. We used to stop and have places laid for them at the table at my school. A bit weird? Is that weird? [pause] I think that's a bit weird.

**Interviewer:** **I find it very interesting. I'm interested in hearing more.**

**Respondent:** I don't know. So I think that's quite weird the whole school thing and that they were always with me.

**Interviewer:** **May I ask what you remember about their physical being , what they looked like ?**

**Respondent:** Like young girls and boys - like a mixture and I used to line them up and teach them. And do you know what - I remember being quite old to have imaginary friends as well. Like I still used to play schools and doctors and nurses way into like I was in year six, year seven and I thought I was quite old to play schools.

**Interviewer:** **So you remember these friends as being quite significant would you say ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah I mean I don't think I had many friends at the primary schools I used to play with, until like year six, year seven so again I was quite old. Like I used to play in schools- I'm like the teacher and then have a little clipboard and I used to teach them maths and science and do notes and mark their paperwork and they had homework.

**Interviewer:** **You did this at home ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah [pause] A lot

**Interviewer:** **So you would play schools with them at home . And did you include your other friends in this play ?**

**Respondent:**

**Interviewer:** No I don't think I did, probably not they didn't play with my imaginary friends  
**They didn't?**

**Respondent:** No [pause] just me

**Interviewer:** **Much of your play was homed based ?**

**Respondent:** Just home based.

**Interviewer:** **The activity that you most remember - is it just teaching them or do you remember doing other stuff ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah and going in the garden together because we had a big garden. So we moved from a small flat with like a little bit of an extension and then we moved into a house up the road and it had a massive garden. We had to move. My little brother used to climb into bed with me and I must have been four and my bother was just one and that's when I remember specifically having imaginary friends.

**Interviewer:** **ok**

**Respondent:** Yeah I used to take them into the garden and I specifically remember like putting seatbelts on all my imaginary friends to go out, mum would take us out. I would tell her to seatbelt them in.

**Interviewer:** **You remember wanting them too be safe, that's a significant memory for you.**

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** **As an adult do you get to speak much about them?**

**Respondent:** No. I spoke with my mum about it.

**Interviewer:** **How do you feel about talking about them and remembering them?**

**Respondent:** It's a bit weird but my mum remembers them too

**Interviewer:** **Are they vivid memories?**

**Respondent:** Yeah they are quite vivid memories quite clear actually. I had quite a happy childhood.

**Interviewer:** **ok**

**Respondent:** Yeah, they are quite vivid and I'm remembering more when I'm talking

**Interviewer:** **I'm interested - what things has your mum said about your imaginary friends ?**

**Interviewer:** **So you confirmed your memories with your mum ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah like she said, to me like you didn't have them for very long you had them for quite a short period and I don't remember that.

**Interviewer:** You don't ?

**Respondent:** I remember them being quite a long time actually and being quite old. So it could have been like how she noticed or something because she's a parent.

**Interviewer:** **Yeah because sometimes I guess as children our perception of time is different. And it seems this is a clear memory for you ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah and I think from going from, because transition to school is quite a big one and I was mainly alone and having a new born baby that was quite a big thing- I think they must have been.

**Interviewer:** **Were they different from your other friendships ?**

**Respondent:** I just knew they were companions and that they belonged to me.

**Interviewer:** **Companions?**

**Respondent:** Yeah close to me.

**Interviewer:** **Ok [pause]**

**Respondent:** My imaginary friends were much more my friends, more attached and nicer to me i think my peer friends weren't very nice. And also I was actually diagnosed dyslexic at primary school so I found it quite traumatic. Maybe that's why maybe.

**Interviewer:** **At primary school you were diagnosed with dyslexia ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** **Okay.**

**Respondent:** And I found it quite hard to make friends and stuff like that so my imaginary friends were more of a comfort I'd say.

**Interviewer:** **Yeah.**

**Respondent:** Thinking back I dont think they came with me to school . No I think I had them at home when I like came home from school, but I had them through school so they were at home for me.

**Interviewer:** **Okay**

**Respondent:** Yeah to be with after school and other times.

**Interviewer:** **right...**



**Respondent:** Teaching them like stuff. And then maybe because I found it difficult at school like they were diagnosing me with dyslexia and dyspraxia. My mum used to go to meetings regularly and the school couldn't really deal with it because of me being dyslexic.

**Interviewer:** **So you went through a difficult time then ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah quite difficult but I did have a happy childhood like I said earlier, and I had my baby brother.

**Interviewer:** **Right.**

**Respondent:** We played, and I can keep remembering the big garden in the house we moved to whole school and you were playing with them all the time .

**Interviewer:** **So you have one sibling ?**

**Respondent:** I have one sibling who was born when I went into reception – I was like four - and he was quite a sick baby, like quite colicky and stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** **Do you remember if your brother played with your imaginary friends ?**

**Respondent:** He might have but I don't think - he was quite a colicky baby. I don't think ... maybe? Maybe, I think he did, yeah, I think he did - maybe like a little because I'd invite him to. There are four years between us.

**Interviewer:** **Okay**

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** **So to summarize what you've said we can play this back if you'd like. And if you want to add or take out anything you can.**

**Respondent:** ok

**Interviewer:** **[Recorded conversation is played back - nothing is changed]**

**Respondent:** **Are you satisfied with your words and story ?**

Yeah , its fine , just strange hearing my voice.

=====

**Interviewer:** **Caroline W.**

**Respondent:** **P-2**

**Interviewer:** Thank you for choosing to participate and you've been through the explanation for the study on this sheet. So really it's a case of you sharing what you remember about your imaginary companion or companions and these like I explained earlier can be of your own defining. [pause] If you're ok with the tape recorder I'll move it a little closer just because there's a little background noise. So please feel free to start whenever you're ready.

**Respondent:** Ok I'm guessing it was early childhood maybe four or five and we had a big family always seemed busy playing or doing stuff . My Mum didn't work then she was a fulltime mum so she was around for us .I don't think my brothers or my sister had any imaginary friends but I know I did, her name was minnie not sure why and I think I had her for quite a while. She got run over by a car in the end [pause] That was when I started school. Minnie just wasn't around anymore. My Mum remembers when Minnie died well you know what I mean when she disappeared.

**Interviewer:** So you had Minnie in your life for quite a while ?

**Respondent:** Yes yes , definately and I remember going to my Nan's with her and to the farm, I think she was always with me, that's what it seems like. My family knew about her 'cause she was like one of us and I would obviously have to explain to my Mom for example what Minnie was up to. She wasn't like I've heard some others talk about imaginary friends - she wasn't naughty as far as I can remember. You do hear about little children's imaginary friends always getting the blame for bad behaviour, I've heard that before but I honestly can't remember Minnie getting into alot of trouble. I wasn't really naughty as a child anyway.[pause] My youngest sister was probably the naughty one.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like you have some really clear memories of Minnie ?

**Respondent:** My clearest memories I think are of us doing stuff together,playing and talking. I could explain things to Minnie and then I'd see if she could do them, if she'd listened to me. It probably seemed more fun to play with her than my sister or brothers.We always had other children over at our house so it seemed noisy ,busy. I can't remember any clear instances of my brothers or sister playing with Minnie[pause] or teasing me, but they did know about her. She was my friend though.

**Interviewer:** How is it for you now, as an adult, to talk about Minnie ?

**Respondent:** It's kind of strange but not in a bad way or awkward way. I thought about it quite a bit before meeting you and after I saw the leaflet, and seemed like the more I thought the more I remembered. It's also maybe a little bit sad because she was obviously important to me [pause] I'm not sure why I would have imagined her dying, getting run over by a car ,seems horrible. But I don't remember crying or being upset at all [pause] and I'm quite a sensitive person. My mum says that Minnie was there one day and literally gone the next. [pause] After Minnie was gone I may have played more with other kids and just been more outgoing .

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you would like to add or to say? We'll listen to the recording and then you can decide. { Participant satisfied, no changes are made }

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**Interviewer:** Caroline W.

**Respondent:** P 3

**Interviewer:** We'll put the recorder here if that's alright. We can start whenever you're ready and with whatever memories you want to talk about first. Okay?

**Respondent:** My memories aren't very clear but what I do remember is that a little old man like a wizard from a fairytale used to live under the house and I used to talk to him. It sounds fairly scary now and I do remember actually being afraid sometimes [pause] afraid probably more so by the thought of it. I'm also sure I convinced my sister, if that's possible. [pause] She's here at Uni too and I told her I was doing this this study.[pause] She's more embarrassed about it.

**Interviewer:** So it was a little old man that you can recall and you say he lived beneath your house?

**Respondent:** Yes if I had to describe him to you I'd say he looked like a character out of a fairy tale,[laughs] almost like an old wizard. Not a very long beard, white and he was short but I honestly couldn't tell you his name. I think he would tell me silly things to make me laugh and I would wait for him at the side of the house. It was exciting for me to wait there for him and then I'd get my sister to come there too. I know it was me who would try and convince her.

**Interviewer:** So you remember being excited waiting for him and then wanting your sister to join

**Respondent:** Yes [pause] but some of the time maybe more of the time it would just be me chatting away to him and also I remember wondering what it was like under our house where he lived.[ lengthy pause] That's really all I can remember.

**Interviewer:** That's fine if that's all you can remember. We'll just listen to the recording to make sure you're happy with it with what you've said.

=====  
**Interviewer:** Caroline W

**Respondent:** P4

**Interviewer:** So we can start as I said whenever you would like as I explained also it's up to you to talk about whatever memories you have, I don't have any specific questions to begin with.

**Interviewer:** Yes please.

**Respondent:** I suppose an imaginary friend or such like could well be someone or some of sort of creature or animal that doesn't exist that you can play with when you don't have real people there to play with. For example in the childhood years that would be quite a special thing if you were alone or rather just lonely.

**Interviewer:** Yes I suppose that could be the case. What was it like for you

**Respondent:** I did have an imaginary friend or rather friends plural as a child and I think I think I remember them, but also I've been told about them by my parents. It's quite a tricky age to remember but some things rather than others do stand out.

**Interviewer:** Okay so your parents remember this too.

**Respondent:** Yes I think I remember having them but I also probably remember more from being, from talking to my parents about me and childhood. They were frogs.

**Interviewer:** Okay

**Respondent:** And there was more than more of them it was like there was a family [laughs]

**Interviewer:** A family, okay.

**Respondent:** There were two frogs, I guess they were a mum and dad frog I don't really you know and they had names. They were called Carlene and Ping Ling and I have no idea why. Maybe because my parents had a friend who was called Carlene, but I have no idea where the name Ping Ling came from. [pause] Quite honestly it's a bit weird but those were their names and when I think back I can't remember the other names of the others.

**Interviewer:** So you recall there being a few frogs and you can remember the names of two.

**Respondent:** I don't remember the others in the family only the mum and dad frogs and I do remember having them [pause] I remember them leaving as well because at some point I obviously didn't have them anymore. Strange that I'm now talking about them leaving I'm not sure why [short pause and laughs]

**Interviewer:** Is there a feeling or thought behind that memory of them leaving

**Respondent:** Not really anything in particular. First of all they moved down the road I think to another house but in our same area.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Respondent:** They used to come in and out the front door through the letter box [laughs].

**Interviewer:** So they just came and went as they chose

**Respondent:** Yeah and then one day I held the letter box open and they all disappeared and I just remember my mum said, where have they all gone and I said to her, "Oh, they've moved down the road to a bigger house because there were too many of them".[laugh]

**Interviewer:** And you didn't see them again

**Respondent:** A little while later they hadn't been around for a very long time and I think somebody asked what happened to them and I said, "well they moved".

**Interviewer:** So that made sense to you as a child the idea that they had just moved on.

**Respondent:** Just moved on, pretty much like that.

**Interviewer:** Can you remember roughly what age you were

**Respondent:** I think it probably would have started initially when I was quite young I had a brother and a sister who were younger than me. So I imagine it was before they came around, but then they were still there later on. I think it was probably around infant school age when they left sort of at the end of infant school, but I'm not really sure.

**Interviewer:** Okay

**Respondent:** Yeah by the end of infant school I'd guess

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else that you can remember about your imaginary companions?

**Respondent:** I don't think I remember a lot actually.[pause] I think I remember that I had them but I don't remember a lot of what we did together. I remember them coming and going, going out with them.

**Interviewer:** Going out, leaving the house?

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay .

**Respondent:** But I don't remember if I was playing with other people, I don't remember whether they came into that or I think so. I suppose maybe I don't actually remember quite a lot.

**Interviewer:** Yes it can sometimes be difficult remembering things from the past

**Respondent:** I do know also that when I was at that age I had a big thing about frogs and I collected frogs. I had cuddly frogs and I had little watermelon frogs and my favourite story was The Frog's Holiday which at preschool I would insist that they read to me everyday.

**Interviewer:** **So there was something special about frogs**

**Respondent:** Must've ,there were a lot of frogs around so it would make sense that my imaginary friends would be frogs. I obviously had some kind of thing for frogs

**Interviewer:** **And in terms of friends if we are talking about imaginary friendships could you say something about that**

**Respondent:** I suppose it was more like a friendship with yourself because you create the imaginary friends. So you kind of have more control over that friendship than over the interaction with others whereas with friends like real friends they have their own personalities and you hadn't created them so its a very different sort of relationship but then they are real as well so that's a more real relationship if that sort of makes sense.

**Interviewer:** **Yeah.**

**Respondent:** I think I suppose , yeah you want to do something and you think, oh my friends would do that with me because they are mine. They don't like belong to anyone or not having to share them and probably also get to do more unusual things.

**Interviewer:** **yeah that's a nice way of putting it.**

**Respondent:** I think it's difficult to separate the stuff I remember from what I've been told by other people and what I've heard about imaginary friends.

**Interviewer:** **Yes, do you mean by talking about the memories in adulthood**

**Respondent:** Yeah, because I have sort of read here and there about imaginary friends over the years and differences between people who did have them and who didn't have them and that kind of thing. So I don't know it's difficult to answer that question really because I might say yes, but then that might actually just be what I... because I've been told. I obviously have wanted to understand it because I thought it was different maybe to whether other children have them.

**Interviewer:** **Okay that's interesting you have an awareness of them as maybe being something that's different.**

**Respondent:** I think I like that I had them and maybe that is because they might have as being unique and different. I think that they probably were because before my brother and sister came along I was an only child so I mean its only for two years and obviously my memories of that age, I don't have memories of that age its just why I think that they might have come about then but like I said before that they lasted past that.

**Interviewer:** **okay**

**Respondent:** I don't know whether they helped me to make real friendships or whether they got to be included in my other friendships – and it's so difficult to remember the smaller details from childhood .

**Interviewer:** **May I ask if you've spoken with your mum about it as an adult or maybe shared about the study?**

**Respondent:** Yeah we've talked about it before. My sister earned her degree in Education as well and she had to do a research project I think it was something to do with Art or children's literature and I had suggested that she do imaginary friends. That's probably more my interest than hers but she was actually going to.

**Interviewer:** **You thought it might be interesting ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah because I thought it would be quite interesting to draw children's imaginary friends or fantasy images. But she couldn't actually do that project, she did something else, but before she changed her mind I was working in Afterschool class and I did get some of the children to draw their imaginary friends and it was brilliant, but I don't know whether children drew the imaginary friends they'd really had because I'd said, do you have any imaginary friends and a couple of them had said yes, maybe others thought I want an imaginary friend too and then they drew them as well.

**Interviewer:** **It sounds like a great idea**

**Respondent:** Yeah so I think a couple of them definitely were real imaginary friends. It was very interesting to see the children's drawings of them. [pause] So yeah back to what you asked earlier I've talked to my mum about my imaginary friends and she definitely remembers them being around.

**Interviewer:** **Yes it does happen that our parents help us remember things from our early years and clarify adult memories**

**Respondent:** When I told the kids to draw it I thought I should do it as well, and so I actually did draw mine but they came out just looking like frogs. I kind of imagine they look a little bit like a cross between Jeremy Fisher and the frogs from Rupert and the Frog song they are quite small, but light green with lovely kind big eyes.

**Interviewer:** **Okay is there anything else before we play the recording back anything you'd like to add**

**Respondent:** I think it was nice having them and I'm glad I did I just wish I could remember more but it's nice actually talking to someone else about them that didn't know about them

**Interviewer:** Thank you we'll play this back hopefully loud enough but there are headphones too so take a listen

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**Interviewer:** Caroline W

**Respondent:** P-5

**Interviewer:** So we just start off with what you remember about your imaginary friend or friends whatever you remember and we'll just take it from there . I'll leave this here and hopefully it won't be a distraction so whenever you're ready go ahead

**Respondent:** Okay so I learnt to read when I was very little when I was four or so I could read, read things to myself and then my parents were always reading picture books to me and they read a series of books to me about two characters called Lucy and Tom. The books are by somebody called Shirley Hughes and I still have them and still love them and in one of these picture books Lucy and Tom do Christmas and they have all their relatives around and one of the relatives they have around is their elderly Aunt Mrs Barlow and I had a lot of imaginary conversations with Mrs Barlow who is their elderly aunt, and with the little darlings. Mrs Barlow and her little darlings of course. She called Lucy and Tom her 'little darlings'. So I had Lucy and Tom who I normally called the 'little darlings' and Mrs Barlow and I just had imaginary conversations with them and that was when I was about five or six I'd say - so that's my starting point if you like.

**Interviewer:** So your memory is of a picture book and a set of fictional characters which you clearly recall having conversations with

**Respondent:** Yes Mrs Barlow and the little darlings.

**Interviewer:** And what do you remember about Mrs Barlow? And I'm going to call her as you refer to her what kinds of things do you remember about her?  
-

**Respondent:** Only this kind of picture and I can vividly remember this picture from the picture book of her; she's sitting in the chair and she is just watching what's going on and I think she was someone who would just sit and there weren't many adults in my life I guess that would just sit and listen to a four or five year old kind of talking at them so, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Since already you mention a picture, you've got a picture can you describe that picture to me?

**Respondent:** Yeah, so she's a little old lady with a very small frame, curly grey hair, glasses, sat on a chair maybe a rocking chair but I'm not certain, sat on it frontways looking sideways at what was going on and with a party hat on, purple party hat and a brown dress and high heeled shoes.

**Interviewer:** And high heeled shoes.



**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** **And is there any narrative or story around that picture you remember ?**

**Respondent:** Not with that.

**Interviewer:** **Okay**

**Respondent:** No I just remember talking, it was about talking.

**Interviewer:** **Talking, talking about dialogue or can you describe to me what you mean.**

**Respondent:** Yes a conversation but more of me talking

**Interviewer:** **Okay**

**Respondent:** I think it was more about her listening to me than it was about her talking to me, but yes. I knew it was just an outlet; it was just talking and it was probably child stuff

**Interviewer:** **And so you said maybe you are about four or five**

**Respondent:** Go for five, yes.

**Interviewer:** **Was it frequently can you remember**

**Respondent:** Yes I'd say it was as in it was on a regular basis

**Interviewer:** **Do you get to share about your imaginary relationship ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah. There was a presentation I attended at a Psychology conference last year about some forms of this and I got thinking about it after that a fair amount

**Interviewer:** **I'm so sorry I missed that –**

**Respondent:** And I remembered that normally I have Mrs Barlow and the little darlings [laughs] My mother would tease me about that when I was growing up and when imaginary friends were mentioned on television or wherever and yeah. I checked out what age I was so that was January this year and she thought about five, it was when I was reading this picture books which was when I was about five. I don't have the picture book anymore with that particular story in it and I'm very sad about that.

**Interviewer:** **Yeah there is something special about our childhood picture books**

**Respondent:** Yes indeed especially when they are an important part of your life even growing up.

**Interviewer:** **How does it feel for you talking about this**

**Respondent:** I certainly haven't told it to anyone else simply because its quite, I think from knowing about my friends imaginary friends this is when we are in school so we are in year one having a set of imaginary friends is quite strange and I felt almost embarrassed of Mrs Barlow and the little darlings. My other friends had imaginary friends that had pretty names and I didn't feel quite able to share when I was a child and then my mother teases me about having this imaginary friends so its kind of like yeah. And I said, how old was I? She said, oh about 19. Thank you very much [laughs]

**Interviewer:** **So maybe strange for you talking about it ?**

**Respondent:**

I think it's different. I think it's different to have a much older imaginary friend. I think that's one thing I'd like to know is what are these imaginary friends like because my experience from childhood and obviously your friends have imaginary friends is that mine was very different the very fact it being based on a picture book so having at least some sort of visual image and then also that it was me talking to an old lady

**Interviewer:** **My feeling is that imaginary friends vary quite considerably from person to person**

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** **It's a personal story**

**Respondent:** It's a fond childhood memory I think – at the moment. I think when Mrs Barlow vanished, she vanished and in her place came other people who were real people who I would imagine where with me if that makes sense and I'd talk to them as if they were, but they weren't there and its about conversation. I think she was safer than to talking to adults, not having the adults there to talk to. Having picture books and then being able to talk to people who are out of sight, but they are not out of mind as well. So I don't know that kind of developmental stage I guess. It was a bridge between the solid reality adults need to be there to talk to me and I can talk to people when they are not there or I can, I don't know.

**Interviewer:** **Would it be fair to say it was meaningful, a meaningful relationship**

**Respondent:** I'd say it was certainly companionship and I'd say that she shared some resemblance to my grandmother who I had a very positive relationship with, but who didn't live anywhere near us so I saw her every twice a year. And my grandmother was somebody I could relate to very well. So I would say a unique companionship on those grounds and

**Interviewer:** **Right.**

**Respondent:** Yeah fairly unique.

**Interviewer:** **And did the imaginary relationship terminate**

**Respondent:** Well I think she didn't pop off, she didn't disappear she just declined in frequency I guess. Sometimes I have a very vivid picture of her in my imagination and I can recall that with ease and clarity or the frequency.

**Interviewer:** **Which you hold still.**

**Respondent:** Which I hold still, but the frequency with which I would call that up and use that just in place of either real conversations or my own thinking seems better to talk with that image.

**Interviewer:** **So there was no definitive parting or finishing off in that sense**

**Respondent:** She didn't just vanish, no that's not what the case was for me she gently faded

**Interviewer:** **Okay so before we play the tape back would it be alright to kind of recap so I make sure I've understood your story in a way you would want**

**Respondent:** Yeah sure I think she was important to me and still is I'd say at least linguistically and maybe socially I think . Helped because she was there just listening and I was constantly verbalizing what I was doing and I was doing it out loud. My friends at school is that, you know, 'you can't sit there, my imaginary friend's sitting there', kind of ... yeah weird. So socially other people's best friends [laughs] ... other people's, sorry, imaginary friends didn't help at all. So I'm not sure about the social thing and also just to note that maybe one could become quite... I think I might have been better off speaking to somebody as opposed to effectively myself almost.

**Interviewer:** **Anything else you'd like to add**

**Respondent:** I'm the eldest not sure if you were going to ask that but may be worth something. I have a younger brother and when I was five he was three so he was becoming lingual and that probably for all I know coincided with less imaginative dialogue in that he was there to play with more but I think you've captured it all

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**Interviewer:** **Caroline W.**

**Respondent:** **P-6**

**Interviewer:** Okay so if it gets too noisy in here I may just move this closer to you as long as it's not a distraction whenever you want you can start just chatting about what you remember of your imaginary friend or friends

**Respondent:** Is it recording now?

**Interviewer:** Yes I'm just going to adjust the volume

**Respondent:** Yip that's fine so I can start now then

**Interviewer:** Yes please

**Respondent:** My memory is obviously a bit sketchy just because of the time that's passed but I remember more about this aspect of my childhood than most other stuff, and I think the actual images are clearer more precise I don't know but I can say that my friend was called swampy [laughs] seriously I don't know why that name at all. He was an orphan and the closest character I can compare him to would be Tom Sawyer although if I'm honest I've only read that story once or twice so I'm fairly certain it didn't originally start from there but in my mind now I can see him he was older than me and always had a straw hat with dirty denims and a red and blue checked shirt. Please tell me if I'm going off topic here or if what I'm going on about is relevant at all or should I talk about what we did

**Interviewer:** Please carry on it's whatever you remember and however you remember it

**Respondent:** Okay good I'll carry on describing him then as that's the part I remember the most or maybe easiest to explain. As I was saying he wore the dirty denims and no shoes [pause] now I'm stuck I can't remember for sure its frustrating I think he was barefoot he definitely wore a straw hat and always had the same clothes on. He was older than me like a big brother even though I do have a younger brother and sister so it's not like I was an only child and I think I had him as my friend maybe til nine or ten I'm sure definitely through early stages of my schooling cause I'd play with him after school in the field next to our house and in the garden cause we had quite a large garden well we still do my parents live there it's still the family home. That's really what I remember best about it all about swampy he genuinely was around a lot longer than others I've heard about slightly concerning [laughs] but he was like a genuine friend

**Interviewer:** Yes so you say he was like a real friend to you and you had him for quite some time maybe until you were nine or ten you say

**Respondent:** He was well it felt like he was my real friend probably closer in a way than my my other friends and actually I didn't have that many. My brother and sister were my friends and I did play with them too but mainly we'd play together when it was a family thing like going camping or when my folks were around but I think for me swampy was special and it felt like a close relationship maybe in terms of not having to share him or I don't know that sounds selfish. I don't remember being sad around him maybe angry once or twice [laughs]

**Interviewer:** Was the rest of the family aware of your friendship

**Respondent:** Yes I know they were well definitely my folks my mum used to have to ear all my stories and nonsense about what I'd been up to with swampy and I think she enjoyed it actually, listening to what I'd done cause she didn't work and stayed at home with us. My Dad I'm not sure about he may have known and my brother and sister did they definitely knew, he wasn't a secret I don't remember trying to keep him a secret at all

**Interviewer:** So you spoke about him and there is no memory of trying to keep him a secret

**Respondent:** No no he wasn't a secret definitely not I did speak about him and Mum did know that we played together and what we did she never seemed to be upset about it I wasn't embarrassed of course I don't think my regular friends played with us sure they didn't

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you want to say

**Respondent:** Just maybe that it was a good time for me and even though I was later a bit worried about the fact that I not only had an imaginary friend but also that I had him for so long well at least until I was nine or ten, other than that I think that's all the most important part I did want to say in this is how vividly remember him and what a happy time it was for me, and I consider myself normal [laughs] I know a few people who had imaginary friends as kids but obviously all different [pause] I feel quite glad I had one

**Interviewer:** Thank you. I'll play the recording back for you to listen and as I said before we started if there's anything you want to add maybe other things you remember or anything you want to take out then we can do that.

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**Interviewer:** Caroline

**Respondent:** P- 7

**Interviewer:** If you want to start by telling me whatever you remember about your imaginary friend and I may ask questions if I need to clarify something but I'm really wanting this to be your story as I said so just go ahead whenever you're ready

**Respondent:** Okay sure let me begin by explaining that as you may have noticed I'm Muslim and that for a start is something that will be interesting for you in your study. We come from a very strict upbringing and although it is encouraged for children to play and have toys etcetera and a fair amount of freedom I still don't believe there is the same type of freedom as in British white families or western culture. That is the way we are brought up there is a deep respect for our parents especially our fathers and we are expected to do well at school. So how's this of relevance to my story well it's because it wasn't an easy thing for me to have an imaginary friend that was like craziness or something, not as in like having a doll or dress up games I have no problem saying that telling you that it wasn't an everyday occurrence so to speak

**Interviewer:** Okay that's interesting the cultural aspect and the awareness that it seemed different

**Respondent:** Yes I believe so and there may be a few reasons for that but I would say much has to do with the nature of culture and actually my family environment as it was

**Interviewer:** Could you describe a little more

**Respondent:** My Dad was very strict and we were all very respectful that's just the way it is. Family and religion are very important and although I'm not saying it was like evil me having something imaginary following me around it was still weird but my Father wouldn't speak directly to me I think he would ignore me about it like if I spoke to him tried to tell him about something I was playing but he spoke to my mother and kind of said to her look we've got to sort this out kinda thing [laughs] like make it stop and don't encourage it or anything. So he would relay that to my mother and I must've been aware that father did not approve I have that sense now thinking about it almost not a very nice feeling [pause] But I'm not saying that he punished me or yelled or anything no ridicule but my mother would talk to me explaining it was a silly game and not to do it.

**Interviewer:** So you were aware of that ...? And how was it for you to have this relationship with something imaginary then?

**Respondent:** I enjoyed having the friend very much. If I describe her to you she was a little girl like almost a sister with black hair and cute just like a little sister or a doll which I could play with and I felt a lot of love for her [laughs] my father would kill me if he heard me speaking like this [laughs]. I'm okay speaking about it I've been looking forward to this actually [laughs] [pause] I think she was Muslim with dark hair and brown eyes just a cute little girl coming over to my house to play like a friend [pause] and just games and things that little girls do.

**Interviewer:** How has it been for you to talk to me about this ?

**Respondent:** Less nervous that I thought I would be I thought it was going to be rather strange hearing myself talk to a stranger about it after all it's not that common is it [pause] or maybe not as like normal as other things that children do like dress-up games or just playing with a Barbie doll or whatever actually I didn't have a Barbie to be honest [laughs] that's another thing my father wasn't in favour of but I definitely did have dolls I was not a deprived child [laughs] I think he was more into pushing us to be clever or educated like doing educational stuff as kids maybe that he considered worthwhile to our development. [pause] And we've all done fairly well academically so it can't have been that bad of a childhood but I'm the only one out of my siblings that had a little imaginary friend neither of my sisters have.[pause]

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience anything you feel is important or that you'd like to share

**Respondent:** Mmm, think that is about all I can remember I have thought a lot about it since I heard about this but nothing new that I haven't said. I could just emphasise that it was an enjoyable experience as most childhood things are and probably quite special for me in terms of why I had one of that I am uncertain and that's what I've given quite a bit of thought too maybe because again as I said earlier it's quite a unique thing [pause] and I wondered if it was obviously there are some theories about only children and being lonely but I can say I wasn't an only child and I never felt lonely or lacking friends friends didn't come to our house alot though to play like we didn't have sleepovers but that's a culture thing too you just play at school or with your siblings.

**Interviewer: Anything else you would like to add [pause] If not, then we'll take a listen to the recording just to check and make sure you're satisfied with what you've said and if you want to add or omit any wording. Okay**

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Interviewer: Caroline

**Respondent: P- 8**

**Interviewer: I'd like to know as much about your imaginary friends or friendships as possible and so there is not a specific format for our conversation today just whatever you remember.**

**Respondent:** Okay. I'll hopefully remember think I will [pause] some of the images are very clear in my mind.

**Interviewer: Yes in your own time and in your own words**

**Respondent:** Alright then I'll begin by telling you what I think you'd be most interested in or what I think is most clear in my mind to recall. My friend's name was Claudia and she was about my age maybe my same age and was the opposite to me in looks. This may sound strange but I do want to be honest and say she wasn't as pretty as me maybe again that's how I purposely wanted her to be so I was prettier but she had the opposite looks like dark hair dark brown eyes and dark tanned skin .She was opposite to me my opposite self maybe I don't know.

**Interviewer: Okay so there is quite a clear sense of what she was like ?**

**Respondent:** Yes like I said it's clear to me how we were how opposite in looks and personality but that I liked her cause she was different in these ways so maybe no threat to me or just other parts of myself that I wasn't comfortable with but I'm sure there many reasons which you know about why people have imaginary friends . I was very aware as a child of my physical appearance what I looked like and I think my mum especially felt quite proud of how cute I was cause of the wavy blonde hair and blue eyes and in other ways too I just seemed like the typical English rose and I know that probably sounds quite weird or silly it's just what I remember.

**Interviewer: So for you there is a sense of your imaginary friend Claudia being different or opposite ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah but in a complimentary way all the things I wasn't so we kind of made a good pair if that makes any sense.

**Interviewer: And what was the friendship like ?**

**Respondent:** I liked her and wanted her to be my friend but I do remember we didn't always get on I could angry with her and send her home away from me when I would get fed up. I used to talk with my mum about it especially if I was angry or frustrated with Claudia then mum would just have to sit and listen to me going on about something that Claudia had done or something that I was pissed off about

[laughs] I guess I probably did talk to mum my mum about other nice stuff we'd done like when we were playing together it probably was just me trying to get the sympathy vote from her my mum.

**Interviewer:** So your mum knew about the friendship ?

**Respondent:** yes

**Interviewer:** And what about the rest of the family

**Respondent:** I'm an only child [laughs] that's the stereotype for imaginary playmates isn't it being an only child I've heard. For me though I wasn't lonely or bored we have family I've got cousins not far away that I played with growing up. So being an only child although that's what I've heard in my case I'm not sure I would take that as the reason [laughs]

**Interviewer:** So for you it wasn't a case of being lonely or bored you say and you spoke to your mum about it did you take Claudia to school or play with her and other friends at the same time

**Respondent:** [long pause] I don't recall playing with other friends and her at the same time no for example as I said I've got cousins and I don't think I played with them and Claudia at the same time [pause] , I'm trying to remember and it's not something I've thought about but I think if it happened I would remember that [pause] it was probably just me and her.

**Interviewer:** Just you and Claudia ?

**Respondent:** Yes us

**Interviewer:** Any other memories about this relationship that you'd like to tell about, to share

**Respondent:** [laughs] I actually can't believe I've said this much already it's not something I've really thought about in ages like I said in the beginning there are some images memories that are clear and then other things I'm not sure about I don't want to make up anything that's not in my actual memory

**Interviewer:** It's all about what you remember as it's your story here that I'm interested in and I do appreciate it. So there's no rush for me but if you've finished then we can listen to the recording I've got earphones for listening privately and as I said at the start if there's anything you want added or removed we can do that

=====

**Interviewer:** Caroline W

**Respondent:** P-9

**Interviewer:** Okay as I said it's up to you wherever you would like to begin [pause], if you'd like to start with maybe your memories of the companionship and we can go from there

**Respondent:** There was never one single character as an imaginary friend, but what I had instead was I was interested in writing as a kid and, of course, as a kid I wrote fiction which is basically creating imaginary characters and then speaking to them and making them speak to each other. The earliest I can remember is, I wrote my first poem when I was seven so. I like writing and creating out of the world stuff ever since I was young.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little about the characters ?



**Respondent:** Yes but there were quite a few

**Interviewer:** **Okay. That's fine.**

**Respondent:** I think something around, well I can't give an exact age, but somewhere between five and eight, I would have started to creating these characters speaking to them and again then they speak to each other. I remember writing this one story, I don't know how old I was, might have been eight or nine. I had two cats and then I created something I called snow cats instead of snow man. That was pretty cool.

**Interviewer:** **That sounds interesting, snow cats .**

**Respondent:** And they go to Brighton on an adventure. But I'd been to Brighton so I'm wondering if that's how I knew what to imagine.

**Interviewer:** **And these are now your imaginary characters, these two cats?**

**Respondent:** Yeah, they were with me in my mind for the time being and then they were replaced by other characters later on. I started to get inspiration from my classmates back in the day, but then I relied on my own imagination.

**Interviewer:** **Sorry it's a bit noisy, that's fine ,carry on you were saying about your imagination ?**

**Respondent:** Yeah and then I'd play around with the characters a little bit and then use them in all sorts of ways.

**Interviewer:** **Like?**

**Respondent:** The stories that I wrote and their lives off the pages as well. All my life has been filled with fantasy stuff. They did start as characters in a story of mine but I'd think about them all the time. They had their own lives.

**Interviewer:** **Yeah ?**

**Respondent:** And then I think that stuck to me as I had that almost I don't know as I said I don't know how far back they go but even today half of my thinking is dialogues and usually that dialogue is between me and some other person and that some other person usually is someone instead of some random person. Especially when thinking about something abstract. It's much easier to, imagine your talking to someone gives it much more structure your thoughts can follow a certain order. Imagine your speaking to someone and depending on who I imagine I'm speaking with if I'm imagining that I'm speaking to someone like in academics I can explain what I'm thinking in a much more complex way or if I'm trying to explain to a friend who has no idea about what I'm doing I will imagine explaining to that person in a much more watered down diluted way, sort of a complex way.

**Interviewer:** **You've mentioned that you got inspiration or some ideas from classmates**

**Respondent:** One of the stories I wrote like a diary. Was like a diary, but a fantasy and I had all my classmates with different names and pretty much the way they were. I would also imagine the school that I was in as well and it was quite a large school about the size of this campus I think and there were some underground water depots or something like that. One of the stories that these three characters that I created by myself would go down that and then whatever adventures they had there. So one of them was, it was basically about discovering something. Discovering mysteries. I mean I think that's a recurring theme in most of the stories I wrote. Discovering something and there are quite a lot of monologues as well. Someone trying to explain something to someone else. Trying to get a better understanding of something.

**Interviewer:** **If I ask how significant were they to you how would you respond to that?**

**Respondent:** Well they weren't significant in my family at all. There was the real world and there was my world and they were in my world.

**Interviewer:** **Okay alright.**

**Respondent:** In my world there were quite a lot of different characters. Sometimes I'd speak to one character, sometimes I'd speak to another character. And these would all change I mean depending on what I want to think about and how I want to think about it. I would usually have a certain character in front of me in my mind and then I'd be talking to that character and usually that character would keep on asking as if it was as curious as I am about my thoughts.

**Interviewer:** **So they would ask you things?**

**Respondent:** Yes, about what I know. So to be a bit definitive it had a certain amount of significance but they were usually detached from the rest of the world.

**Interviewer:** **Private?**

**Respondent:** Yeah absolutely they were private.

**Interviewer:** **Okay.**

**Respondent:** I mean they had inspiration from the outside I'm sure, but they didn't inspire anything in the outside world they were for me.

**Interviewer:** **Okay correct me if I'm wrong So you had certain characters that were interchangeable in other words in a particular situation you would utilize one, but the others wouldn't necessarily disappear?**

**Respondent:** Yeah that's right.

**Interviewer:** **Okay, were they kind of continuous or were they transient?**

**Respondent:** Both. Some characters would last a week and they would go, other characters would last a year.

**Interviewer:** **Okay**

**Respondent:** I was writing a long fantasy story when I was 13 and there I had five characters and today I'm still planning on writing a very long fantasy story. I'm planning on 11 books now and I'm thinking one of those characters that I imagined 10 years ago. Actually one or two of them I think I will keep there. I mean those characters I haven't spoken to them since maybe I was 15, but they are still there I mean.

**Interviewer:** **They are still in your mind?**

**Respondent:** They are still there I mean don't speak to them, but I will write them probably I will write about them.

**Interviewer:** Do you ever talk about this experience

**Respondent:** Well it's usually disguised in my writing so I can usually talk about my imaginary friends by the things I write so in a disguise. Well its pretty much the same thing anyways I mean from one perspective either as a disguise as the same thing. I have been able to talk about it as in my writings to whoever I'm talking about I write.

**Interviewer:** So compared to say real friendships, say in childhood?

**Respondent:** They were much more interesting I can say that for certain.

**Interviewer:** Okay

**Respondent:** I mean consider that they are an affliction of myself at the end of the day they'd always be curious and interested.

**Interviewer:** About ?

**Respondent:** Whatever I am curious about as well, wanting to understand things that I could explain to them.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Respondent:** I mean back in the day when I was trying to understand some philosophy concepts when I was 13 I would, the best way of understanding them would be trying to explain it, trying to explain it to one of these characters. That would be the best way of understanding a philosophy concept. It's not me, its nothing to do with me, but a clear effective way of understanding something actually in dialogue. I bet Socrates came up [laughs] with the dialogue the same way [laughs].

**Interviewer:** Yes. Okay anything else you would like to add before we listen to the tape?

**Respondent:** I think that one thing they have added to me is a certain part of creativity and a certain amount of, what was the word? [pause] I can't remember but every person has a unique language and a way of explaining and understanding things.

**Interviewer:** okay

**Respondent:** I think these characters helped me to develop that, my own way of getting around in conversations.

**Interviewer:** Yes .

**Respondent:** And plus I think they fostered a lot of creativity as well because although I didn't share a lot what I wrote with most people back in the day these were part of it always, there was always something to share my creativity with and because I – well although I was quite silent I wrote them down. That's basically how I started writing.

**Interviewer:** That's interesting .

**Respondent:** So I think it had an effect in developing my own unique language just as everyone else and I think they fostered a certain amount of creativity as well.

**Interviewer:** Do you have brothers or sisters?

**Respondent:** I have a brother who is six years older.

**Interviewer:** Great thanks for this for sharing and your time. We'll just take a listen to the tape to see if there's anything you'd like changed to your story okay.

## Appendix 2 : Reflective Field Notes

The following are diary reflections made during the course of this project.

A fellow PhD research student asked me to share a little more about my research with him, and in particular seemed eager to know about what 'constituted' an imaginary companion. "*What exactly is it Caroline?*" was his question.

I felt, as I have felt before, that I did not want to provide a definition – someone else's definition- in the likelihood that this colleague wanted to share a story, his story. So I did what I've done before. I offered a loosely crafted explanation of my understanding of an imaginary companion. I said that it was a "fictitious other" with which children "regularly and consistently" engage, over an "extended period of time", and that the relationship between child and imagined other is "pretty significant". I added that it may well be an object, that some research has shown objects like teddies and dolls, (personified objects), to be conceptually equivalent to the traditionally defined imaginary friend. And that is where I ended my academic explanation and paused.

This was a reflective pause, done almost subconsciously, to process what I'd just said. To make sure it made 'academic sense', that it was right and valid. The pause didn't seem uncomfortable, and it was spontaneously followed by his sharing of a story. I will not go into details other than to say that his childhood experience of an imaginary relationship was richly informative and most unique.

Seated around the dinner table at a recent social gathering I was asked what my occupation was and this took the inevitable turn to my research. There was general chatter about who'd had an imaginary friend and various descriptions of the forms these had taken. It was all quite light-hearted and spontaneous. Then a Swedish lady sitting alongside me moved in closely and, in a low voice, asked why I had earlier said that an imaginary companion "should hold a significant place" in the child's life and why too I had added that they usually are known by the parents or caregivers to exist. I explained that they were distinct from other forms of projective play and objects in the child's life and that the quality and quantity of time spent engaged with them implied a certain significance. That the rest of the family unit would in due course be made aware of their presence, and that children mostly were quite happy to talk to others about this relationship. She had a look which I can only describe as concern, then asked, "So if the parents don't know about it, then you're saying it doesn't exist? So what if I had one and didn't want to share it, I just kept it all to myself, would that not be an imaginary friend then?".

I was really taken with this response and again almost forced to pause and think. How potentially limiting our definition for this phenomenon may be, and how many stories out there will be discounted and/or extinguished.

Annual progress monitoring interview – have I made any ‘progress’? I feel certain I’ve worked thoroughly but what can be shown for it? So much of the process is undocumented – reading, supervision, rough drafts, reading more, deleting, and so it goes with little trace of my efforts. I have to take this as an academic requirement and that’s that. Do I go boldly into this dark moment or with cap-in-hand?

I’m stuck. The methodology write up is not happening. Not happening as it should nor as I want it to. The supervisory team seem to be feeding back the same thing over and over. So they too are now stuck. Pages of writing are being erased because I’ve lost my authorial voice. Then I begin overcompensating and the voice is loud and impeding. A borrowed voice?

A month passes and I’m still stuck. I went on a vacation – to vacate my head, to be empty. It was of little practical benefit as I didn’t return with beautifully crafted methodological chapters, in fact I wrote nothing. The break did something to ease the mental fatigue perhaps. I’ve returned with a suntan and some wooden handcrafted curios.

I had my now bi-monthly supervision meeting and am grateful for their understanding. I know this balancing act of how much pressure to exert must be difficult more so because I am erratic. I am an erratic Doctoral student. Is this every supervisors bad dream? The ontological interrogation is incessant and exhausting but I’ve finally got something to show for it.

Collapsing space and time.

Human Geography wasn’t something I’d considered but seems to work. It makes sense to use it as a way of explicating my idea of temporality/ temporal landscape. One life, multiple selves / multiple lives and one negotiated self? The ecology of memory – Is it really a case of reconstructing previous selves? I’m not so sure, perhaps a debate left for another time.

Feel content with the writing I’ve done around Chris Philo and Owain Jones. My writing is flowing but flowery, too lyrical for a thesis methodology. I frantically read archived theses and dissertations, getting a sense of where I need to aim. Scrutinizing my work for academic rigour – I’m reminded of the ‘Good enough’ philosophy. There’ll have to come a point where I stop re-doing work. So stop re-doing it!

Committed myself to researching phenomenology. I would like to get my head around both the philosophical and practical ideas of this discipline. Small steps, lots of reading and consolidation. My last supervision meeting has lessened anxiety around using phenomenology. Moving more towards ideas of Heidegger and van Manen. Will start reading Edward Casey’s work : ‘Imagining’ and ‘Remembering’. How apt: The phenomenological theme of ‘ Interruption vs. Continuity’ ... describes my writing and this entire research process!

Today met with a faculty member not of my supervisory team but an experienced researcher and philosopher, someone who may share their ideas on phenomenology. There is obviously a measure of anxiety – academic insecurity? This is new for me, not only the area of phenomenology but the act of ‘reaching out’. I feel out of my depth despite having done the mental preparation.

A few days and one supervision meeting later I am feeling positive, optimistic. I feel confident that the data will be authentically represented and I will do justice to the participants. The actual write up has not happened yet, this is where I lose my legs.

Auspicious time. I’ve taken the transcripts out the bottom drawer in a manner of speaking. Allowed myself to begin reading through the narrated interviews and my own memory is at work; seems like yesterday that I was sitting listening to these stories. Reading the transcripts is less evocative than listening to the audio recordings. I must do both.

I’ve given up on using The Listening Guide – that was going to be my unique contribution to the field and I am fond of the I-POEM as a way of making sense. I really thought this was it ! I’ve got notes on the theory and have started working through the stages of the analysis... Seems a ridiculous notion at this late stage to change methods but I feel I have to. After really looking at the transcripts again there is no room for otherness in the listening guide, is there... I get a clear, strong sense of agency and ego presence but little scope for context so what do I do? Is it literally back to the drawing board?? There is of course the probability that I’m not understanding all of the listening guide. It is an interpretive approach and that’s what I’m wanting. Not sure where to turn for help on this. Is it used to capture multiple voices of one self? The whole point of my work is not to lose anything – that’s how I work therapeutically, no stone unturned. This is not a psychological case study !

The analysis, or better described as the interpretation, is pleasant. I feel engaged, on a daily basis I’ve been seated at my desk with my companions – the participants, their stories, some of their family members. It’s really quite a sociable affair! And somehow as I am the designated researcher there is the part where I make sense of all the talking at the table. My understanding of the phenomenological analysis is to step behind the voices, the images, reaching into the sense-of. I have been working hard. Well, I’ve been doing a lot of work on paper but it hasn’t felt like work. Why? Today is an important supervision meeting for me. I will feel lost without this project. And lonely I’m sure. The voice is a strange thing. I’ve recorded my voice today and the feeling when listening to it played back is one of discomfort. Dissociation is a word that pops to mind. Although I’m tempted to erase it that hardly seems fair – none of the participants I interviewed asked for their recordings to be erased. In fact, there was I gleaned a sense of ownership, of pride for some at having left their mark.



## Appendix 3: Participant Invitation



### **Study title : Re-presentations of Childhood Imaginary Friendships : A Narrative Account**

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.*

**Purpose:** The aims of this study are to explore adult memories of their childhood imaginary companions. Narrative methodology is a form of story collection and in this study we seek to collect stories from those Brookes students who believe themselves to have had an imaginary companion. The study is part of a PhD research thesis, and will run from April 2013 to September 2013.

There is a great deal of interest in children's various forms of symbolic play as well as early friendships and much can be learnt from listening to adult memories of their own unique forms of play. Imaginary friendships are an important part of childhood and social science researchers are eager to find out more about this key phase in development.

**Why have you been invited to participate?** If you have a) seen the recruitment notice on campus or the message on Facebook, b) are a registered Oxford Brookes student, c) have good conversational English ability and, d) you feel willing and able to share your imaginary friendship experiences, then you are among a group of

approximately 30 other Brookes students who have also volunteered. Participants are sought from a range of backgrounds.

**Do you have to take part?** It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Your decision to take part, decline to take part or withdraw at any time will in no way have any impact on any academic assessment or programme of studies at Oxford Brookes University.

**What does your participation involve?** If you volunteer to be a part of this study you will be asked to meet the researcher on campus at a time and place, for example the library, an outside area, or a quiet spot in the cafeteria.

The researcher will go through the consent forms with you, explaining the voluntary nature of the study and its purposes, and will ask you to sign a participant consent form.

The researcher will ask your permission to use an audio recording device (tape recorder), and if you are comfortable with this, then you will begin in any manner you choose to share what you remember about your childhood imaginary friend.

If you decide you do not want to be recorded, then you are free at any stage to ask the researcher to turn the recorder off.

Once you have finished sharing your story, the researcher will play back the recording so that you have the opportunity to add or remove anything from the conversation.

You will also be asked to complete a short 9-item feedback form. This form requires no writing, only that you select a choice of statement which best matches how you feel. The purpose of the feedback form is 1) for you to be able to summarise your experience(s) of the interview, 2) get a sense of closure following your sharing of early memories, and 3) provide the researcher with information that may assist in addressing future research efforts.

All of this should take between 30-60 minutes.

If at any stage during this time you are uncomfortable for any reason, or need to take a drink or toilet break for instance, you are free to do so.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?** Volunteers will get an opportunity to share their experiences of having an imaginary friend, something that they may not have had the opportunity to do before. The themes gathered from all the stories

will inform further research on this topic and ultimately contribute to the body of knowledge in this area.

### **Will what you say in this study be kept confidential?**

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations).

Your words will not be connected to your name, unless you specifically choose otherwise. Once the stories shared have been thematically sorted, a number will be used for identification purposes. Unless prior consent has been given by you in writing, your words will not be used in academic presentations, journal articles and the like.

Data generated by the study must be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of this research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?** This narrative study and its results form part of a larger PhD project undertaken in the School of Education, Oxford Brookes University. The results from this study can be obtained from the researcher towards the end of the academic year 2013, and participants are encouraged to contact the researcher at this time for a copy.

**Who is organising and funding the research?** I am conducting this project as a student at Oxford Brookes University, Department of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Life Sciences, Oxford, UK.

**Who has reviewed the study?** The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

**What should you do if you want to take part?** Contact the researcher, Caroline Way, by email : 12046447@brookes.ac.uk

Or, contact the research Supervisor, Georgina Glenny : goglenny@brookes.ac.uk

**Contact for Further Information** Researcher : Caroline Way 07856469747 / 12046447@brookes.ac.uk

Supervisor :Georgina Glenny 01865488570 / goglenny@brookes.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on [ethics@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@brookes.ac.uk)

**Thank You for taking time to read the information sheet.**

## **Appendix 4: Consent Form**



**Full title of Project :** Imaginary Companionship and Adult Memory Narratives: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:** Caroline D. Way, PhD research student, Tel 07856469747, email : [12046447@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:12046447@brookes.ac.uk).  
Department of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Harcourt Hill Campus, Oxford, OX2 9AT.

### **Please initial**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the  
above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw  
at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study

Please circle

4. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications **Yes / No**

## **Appendix 5**

### ***Narrative Fluency Prompts***

*Researcher's Narrative Fluency Prompts : Imaginary Companion Study 2013*

*Researcher to establish rapport with volunteer at the beginning of the meeting :*

*“ Hi ABC I'm Caroline, nice to meet you. Thanks for volunteering for this study, it's really appreciated. Would you like a tea/coffee/ before we get started. I'm hoping the cafeteria won't get too busy at this time, but if it does, we can just move over there where it's quieter.*

*As I mentioned when you first volunteered, I will have this little tape recorder on so as to make certain I don't miss anything or forget anything, but if at any stage you feel you'd be more comfortable speaking without it on, then that's not a problem.*

*I'm just going to go through a few forms with you, basically making sure you understand the purpose of the study and are comfortable with the entire process. And if you have any questions or concerns as we go through these forms, please just stop me and ask.*

*(Researcher will go through participant information sheet and consent form, and mention that there will be a short feedback form at the end).*

*The following are a list of potential questions to be asked should the narrative flow be interrupted by, for example, extended silences or when it is obvious that the participant is struggling, for example, getting frustrated with accessing memory content.*

- If you would like, you could start by telling me what you remember about your imaginary friend*
- What are some of your clearest memories of your companion?*
- What role, if any at all, did your friend have in your family?*

- *How do you think your childhood, (or other time in your life when you had the imaginary friend), may have been different had you not had this friendship?*
  - *Looking back at your relationship with your imaginary companion, how do you think that friendship compared to other friendship(s) say with your peers? ... In what ways?*
- 

Appendix 6: Information Poster



# *Imaginary Friend ?*

## Students at Brookes

As part of my PhD research, I am interested in hearing stories from any of you who had an *imaginary friend* as

a child. If you are happy to share your memories of your imaginary friend with me, or would like to find out more about my study, please email me. We will arrange a time that best suits you, and will meet on campus for about 30 minutes.

THANK YOU ..... CAROLINE

## Appendix 7: Feedback Form

### PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK : Imaginary Companion Study 2013

Directions: Please indicate the choice that best expresses your feelings about the statements below by circling one of the five choices. Your choices are Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Undecided (U), Agree (A), or Strongly Agree (SA).

1. I expected something different from this experience	SD	D	U	A	SA
2. I found it strange sharing my childhood memories with the researcher	SD	D	U	A	SA
3. I found it relatively easy to recall details about my imaginary friend	SD	D	U	A	SA
4. Some details about my imaginary friend were difficult to remember	SD	D	U	A	SA
5. As an adult, I am surprised by the role my imaginary friend played in my childhood years	SD	D	U	A	SA
6. Some of the things I remember about my imaginary friend were difficult to put into words	SD	D	U	A	SA
7. I feel the location on campus was suitable and appropriate	SD	D	U	A	SA
8. I would have been more comfortable sharing my stories somewhere else	SD	D	U	A	SA
9. I am able and willing to contact the researcher with any questions I might have, even if these are at a later stage.	SD	D	U	A	SA







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