

# THE IMAGINARY COMPANION EXPERIENCE IN MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER

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## ABSTRACT

*This study used a standardized written inquiry to obtain basic descriptive information on the imaginary companion experience in a small sample of individuals with multiple personality disorder. Fourteen of twenty-two multiples recalled imaginary companions from their childhood. Data on the recalled ages of the experience, the vividness of the experience, family responses to the companion, activities engaged in with the companion, and functions served by the companion are summarized. The results are compared with those for college students, and the relation between imaginary companions and alter personalities is discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

An imaginary companion is "an invisible character named in conversation with other persons, or played with directly for a period of time, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis" (Svendson, 1934, p. 988). Companions of this sort are common in children (estimates range from 33 to 66%), and are somewhat more common in females than in males (Singer, 1973; Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson, 1973; Svendson, 1934). Much of the literature on the imaginary companion phenomenon has focused on the role of the companion in dealing with rejection, loneliness, or neglect (e.g., Nagera, 1969).

Multiple personality disorder (MPD) has been likened to the imaginary companion phenomenon in normal children, though alters and imaginary companions do not appear to be identical (Bliss, 1984; Young, 1988). One difference is that the imaginary companion presumably does not act outside of the child's conscious awareness, whereas the person with MPD is often unaware of the activities of alter personalities. Moreover, alters frequently act *against* the conscious wishes of the host, whereas imaginary companions presumably do not.

The author's interviews with five MPD women about their childhood imaginary companions suggested that alters may often originate as imaginary companions. Four of the women interviewed described having had imaginary companions as children and of re-encountering them, after a long absence,

as alternative personalities. For three of the women, this reunion occurred during hypnotherapy. The fourth described first realizing that she had other "parts" when she was asked whether she had had any imaginary companions as a child, and if so, to draw them. The question seemed to her harmless enough. She proceeded to draw, and, once her drawings were completed, became aware that the three characters she had portrayed were with her still, and always had been. The fifth woman did not recall any imaginary companions as a child, though she did recall being aware of child alters.

The present study was undertaken to obtain basic descriptive information about the imaginary companion experience in MPD, as well as to develop methods for inquiring about imaginary companions in this population and in others.

In particular, this initial study sought to ascertain how common the imaginary companion phenomenon is among multiples, and whether the experience appears to be phenomenologically the same as that of nonmultiples.

## METHODS

An Imaginary Companion Questionnaire (ICQ) devised for this study was administered to a total of 22 subjects with a *DSM-III-R* diagnosis of MPD. The ICQ asks whether the subject has ever had an imaginary companion or playmate and requests names and descriptions of up to two companions; it contains questions about the ages of the experience, the vividness of the experience, family responses to the companion, whether or not there were any known models for the companion, activities engaged in with the companion, and functions served by the companion.

The five women who had participated in the preliminary interviews completed the measure, along with 17 additional MPD patients — two men and fifteen women. These latter subjects were given the survey by their therapists, each of whom made it clear that participation in the research project was optional and had nothing to do with treatment. Subjects who elected to participate completed the questionnaire outside of therapy, and either returned it in a sealed envelope to the therapist or mailed it directly to the researcher. All of the subjects signed an informed consent from prior to their participation in the project.

## RESULTS

### *Incidence*

Fourteen of the women and one of the men said that they had had an imaginary companion at some point in their life. All but one remembered the companion firsthand. The exception was a woman who reported being told that she had had an imaginary playmate as a child, but who said she did not remember this herself. Data for the fourteen subjects (64% of the sample) who remembered their imaginary companions are discussed below.

### *Description of Companions*

Eleven of the fourteen described at least one imaginary companion. (Of the three who did not describe companions, one indicated that she did not feel comfortable talking about this with anyone but her therapist; one left these questions blank; and one indicated that he could not recall the names or descriptions of his childhood companions).

The most frequently described companions were playmates of the same age and sex. For example, one was a pretty girl with curly hair, long ribbons, and ballet slippers, who had three brothers, and lived in the West in the 1800s; this companion was modelled, the subject thought, after a TV show. Another age-matched playmate, who did not like to eat lunch, was described as having pin curls, pretty shoes, and frilly socks. A third imaginary girl, small with straight brown hair, wore Mary Jane shoes, white socks, a red dress, and a red barette in her hair; she liked to sing. Another was a playful, energetic six-year-old, with long blonde curly hair, who was thin, "almost emaciated," and very responsible (she cleaned house a lot).

Also described were twin princesses: both were smart, pretty, and well-dressed; but one, who was liked by everyone, was rich, patient, and understanding (though spoiled), while the other was an impish brat, who played tricks, answered

back, and was defiant. One woman's early companions had rabbit ears and human bodies; another described a pet mouse and a tribe of miniature Indians.

### *Functions*

Seven of the subjects (50%) mentioned engaging in a play activity of some sort with their imaginary companion (e.g., house, tea parties, school, coloring), though most also mentioned other activities as well (finding places to hide, flying, or becoming invisible to escape, playing tricks on the family, talking together, and suffering abuse). Several of the playmates also took pain or abuse for the subject, while others served protective functions. An example of the latter type was a big tall male bodyguard modelled after a TV show character.

Responses to questions concerning six specific functions possibly served by the imaginary companion are shown in Table 1. These functions are not independent of one another, and subjects were allowed to check as many as were applicable. In addition to these, other functions mentioned were friendship (someone to talk to, to trust, to make the subject laugh); keeping secrets; holding memories; enduring sex; bearing pain and abuse; and being sad.

### *Models*

Five of the subjects indicated that their companions had been modelled, at least in part, after someone or something that they had known in real life (or in a story book, movie, TV show, etc.). The rest knew of no external models for their companion.

### *Ages*

The most common onset age for the imaginary companion experience was 2-4 years. Of the nine subjects who recalled the age of onset, only one gave an age outside of this range, specifying age ten.

Various ages were given for the termination of the experience: eight of the fourteen subjects responded to this question, giving ages of 4 or 5 (three subjects), 8 (one subject), 12 or 13 (two subjects), and the present (two subjects). Nonetheless, ten of the fourteen (71%) reported later in the survey that they were still in touch with their companions, this despite the fact that four of these same individuals had previously specified an earlier age at which the experience had ended. (One of the three subjects who was considered to be no longer in touch with her companion noted that she was still in touch in dreams.)

### *Vividness of Experience*

Thirteen of the fourteen (93%) said that they had been able to see their companion; twelve (86%) said they could hear their companion; and eleven (78%) believed their companion was real. With one exception, those who did not answer "yes" to these questions answered with a question mark rather than "no." The exception was a subject who had imaginary companions she had explicitly described as mute (tribe of Indians, pet mouse), who reported, quite appropriately, that she did not hear her companions.

Thus, the imaginary companion experience was extreme-

TABLE 1  
Functions Served by Imaginary Companions in  
14 MPD Subjects

Function Served	% of Subjects
Company	100%
Consolation	86%
Getting Angry	71%
Protection	64%
Doing things the subject couldn't	50%
Taking blame	36%
DIS-Q4 = absorption	

ly vivid in all, or nearly all of the cases. However, when asked whether they had believed that *others* could see the companion, only one of the fourteen answered "yes," noting that this had occurred only "sometimes." Two subjects indicated that they were unsure of whether others could see their companion or not, and the rest answered "no."

### Family Response

Many of the subjects were unsure about whether family members knew about their imaginary companions or not. Only four (28%) were sure that their family had been aware of their companion. Eight (57%) reported that they had felt a need to keep their companion secret.

## DISCUSSION

Sixty-four percent of the MPD subjects recalled having one or more imaginary companions when they were between 2 and 13 years of age. Though this incidence is within the range that has been reported for normal children, it is considerably higher than expected in a study based on retrospective reports. Comparative retrospective data are available from a recently completed study (Sanders, in preparation) in which the ICQ was administered to a large sample of college undergraduates at the University of Connecticut. Only 13% of the male students and 23% of the females reported having had an imaginary companion as a child, and only 10% of the males and 19% of the females actually remembered their companion firsthand. This comparison suggests that multiples may be particularly likely to remember their childhood imaginary companions, a fact which is hardly surprising given that over 70% of the multiples who reported having had a companion were still in touch with the companion.

The descriptions of the MPD subjects' imaginary companions and the functions they served were much like those of the college students, although there was more emphasis on protective functions and certainly more discussion of bearing pain, abuse, and sadness among the multiples.

The most striking feature of the recalled imaginary companion experience of multiples and the most striking difference between the multiples and the college students concerns the vividness of the experience. All of the multiples reported being able to see their companion, nearly all could hear the companion, and nearly all believed the companion was real. By contrast, less than 50% of the college students who recalled imaginary companions reported having been able to see them *or* hear them *or* believing they were real, and less than 25% responded positively to all three questions.

Bliss (1984) has remarked upon the subjective realness of the childhood imaginary playmates of his multiple personality patients, noting that these were "every bit as real as real friends and parents." Although the present findings endorse the vividness of the experience, they also suggest that Bliss's phrase does not accurately represent the experience of multiples, since the subjects in this study did not believe that anyone else could see their companions. Instead, the imaginary companion experience of MPD subjects

appears to resemble a hypnotic hallucination in that the companions are perceived to be "as real as real", but at the same time the individual is not particularly surprised or troubled when others do not perceive them at all. One of the subjects interviewed by the author was questioned in some detail on this point. This woman, who indicated on the ICQ that she was not sure whether anyone else could see her companions, and protested at another point in the survey that "they weren't imaginary, they were real," was asked whether she believed that her real friend could see her other friend when the three were playing together. She replied that the real friend seemed not to see her, but that sometimes she thought she might. Asked, "Did you see her?" she replied, "Yes." Asked, "How many people did you see when you were playing on the hill?" (with both her real friend and her imaginary friend), she replied, "Two." "But," she added after a moment's reflection, "that's funny — when I remembered it at night, I saw three" (the real friend, the imaginary friend, and herself).

The distinction between an imaginary companion and an alter personality, if it exists, is not easy to make. Bliss (1984) writes: "A question is how to define when imaginary companions cease and the syndrome of multiple personalities begins. It is an arbitrary decision, but my inclination is to separate the two at the point of partial or complete amnesia when the individual's autonomy is being compromised" (p. 139). In responding to the ICQ question, "Did you ever have an imaginary companion or playmate?" the multiple personality subjects in this study gave evidence of understanding what an imaginary companion was, and of acknowledging that it was different from an alter. This was particularly clear in some of the written comments. One of the women referred to the imaginary playmate of an alter in answering the question. She wrote: "I do not remember any imaginary playmates — but in therapy today a personality had a monkey playmate with her." Another answered "no" to the question, noting that "alters took care of one another, providing comfort and distractions from pain." She added, "This would be applicable if asking about alters. Sorry." (Neither of these subjects were included in the group of fourteen positive cases.)

On the other hand, although the subjects seemed to appreciate the distinction between an imaginary companion and an alter, the comments of some of them indicated that the two were subjectively equivalent from their current point of view. One woman wrote: "I understand now that my imaginary companions as a child were actually alter personalities." A very similar note by another subject was: "but they're not imaginary companions, really. They're parts of me." These remarks point to a continuity between childhood imaginary companions and alters, supporting the results of the preliminary interview study, as well as the earlier observations of others, most notably of Bliss (1984) and Young (1988).

One possible relation between an imaginary companion and an alter is that in the developmental history of the multiple there is a change in the phenomenological experience such that the imaginary companion *becomes* an alter. An alternative is that there is no real transition. It may be that for the multiple, the childhood imaginary companion

experience is subjectively *the same* as the alter personality experience, once the childhood experience is seen in a new light. That is to say, that what was once considered to be an "imaginary companion" is now seen to have been an alter personality. This view appears to be at least as plausible as the first, particularly given the very articulate comments of several of the multiples in the present study. What it implies is that the early imaginary companions of multiples may possess characteristics not ordinarily ascribed to the imaginary companions of normal children, characteristics which, indeed, are the very hallmarks of an alter. Chief among these is the capacity for "independent" action, i.e., action which runs counter to the conscious wishes of the child or for which the child is amnesic. This discussion raises the very interesting question of whether the imaginary companion experience of a multiple is in fact qualitatively different from the imaginary companion experience of other children. Unfortunately, too little is known about the subjective experience of either group to answer this question.

The studies that my students and I have initiated on the imaginary companion experience in college students address this matter. In one recently completed study (Dierker, unpublished), we compared female students who, like multiples, could see and hear their companions and believed they were real with others, who did not see or hear the companions, and did not believe they were real. The former students were not only more imaginative than the latter, they also had significantly higher scores on the Dissociative Experiences Scale (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986). Thus, students whose imaginary companion experience is more like that described by multiples are more dissociative than those whose experience is less vivid. This finding is consistent with (although not proof of) the possibility that the imaginary companion experience in highly dissociative individuals, i.e., multiples, is qualitatively different from the imaginary companion experience of other children.

It has frequently been suggested that the development of MPD is a function both of unusually adverse experiences early in life, and a genetic propensity to dissociate. Our working hypothesis is that a vivid imaginary companion experience may be a marker for the capacity to become multiple in the face of stressful or traumatic childhood experiences. We believe that these negative experiences serve to increase the degree of involvement in fantasy life (and perhaps also the degree of secrecy about the inner life), while at the same time increasing hypnotizability. Future studies with various populations, including normal children, will be undertaken to test this hypothesis. ■

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