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Spirituality in Childhood Studies: Encounters with imaginary friends and angels

Many children appear to move seamlessly between the daily, material world and invisible worlds where they encounter imaginary friends, deceased people and pets and ethereal or divine beings. Often deemed to be routine elements of children's play, adults regularly dismiss them as imagination. Yet for many children, these are a fundamental part of their spiritual and/or religious life but the broader literature on childhood makes little mention of them. Instead, they focus more on social constructions or psychological development when exploring definitions of childhood(s). This paper draws on primary and secondary research to argue that for many children these spiritual experiences are not only a fundamental part of childhood but can be particularly meaningful. Therefore, academic works exploring the nature of childhood(s) would benefit from venturing into these unseen worlds.

Key words

Imaginary friends; invisible companions; angels; children's spirituality; spiritual experience; religious experience

Into the unknown

The interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of childhood studies brings rich insights into our understandings of children and childhood(s). Disciplines and fields which contribute include psychology, anthropology, education, sociology and the new sociology of childhood which centres around social constructionism (Woodhead 2008). Alongside art, religion and literature *inter alia* we gain a variety of perspectives of children and childhood(s) across the world, throughout history.

Children's spirituality and religiosity are established areas of academic research in their own right, but they largely remain separate from childhood studies. For example, James and James (2012), leading authors in the latter field, document key concepts in childhood studies in their book of the same name. Whilst they note that their list is not exhaustive and still evolving, neither spirituality nor religion appear in their 63 identified themes. Religion makes a brief appearance within their section on Innocence, where they suggest that the conceptual roots of children as innocent lie in the Christian tradition, but neither topic is considered in its own right.

This paper focuses specifically on one element of the literature on children's spirituality:

their spiritual worlds. These are not necessarily religious worlds, albeit that for some people they are, as exemplified by a Christian child encountering an angel. Widely agreed definitions of the term 'spiritual' remain elusive and any proposed definitions will inevitably be contested. As Watson (2001) noted some two decades ago, academics agreed on one thing: that the definition of spiritual is not agreed upon. Little has changed in the intervening years. Indeed, I argue that 'spiritual' is a term which is better described than defined. Here, I broadly frame 'spiritual worlds' as those which a child experiences through one or more of their five senses, and sometimes their sixth sense. The child is usually the only person who can access these worlds. In some cases the interactions contribute to the child's sense of meaning, purpose and beliefs.

Reference to these worlds does not imply a separation of the spiritual from the physical or mental worlds; as Webster (2013) and Pettersen (2015) suggest, holistic approaches to body-mind-spirit are essential. Specifically, this paper focuses on encounters with others in these worlds. Some of these will be deemed religious by either the child and/or author of the text cited. For transparency, I describe myself as spiritual but not religious and my approach to researching with children is to learn how they understand their experience by capturing their spiritual voice(s).

Studies in different parts of the world report a range of similar experiences, albeit with some cultural differences. For example, encounters with angels are common, sometimes in waking life and sometimes through dreams in sleep (see Hart 2003; Newcomb 2008; Pettersen 2015; Lovelock and Adams 2017). Many children have dreams which hold significant meaning, some of which involve meetings with the divine (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008; Bulkeley and Bulkeley 2012). Others have imaginary/invisible friends or companions (Taylor 1999; Davies 2017; Wigger 2019), whilst some report meetings with the spirits of deceased loved ones (Hoffman 1992; Lovelock and Adams 2017).

Whilst not every child will resonate with such experiences, many do and for some they are not merely parts of imagination or play, but can form a significant part of their spiritual journeys, where they seek and find meaning and purpose in life (Adams 2010). Yet these spiritual worlds are largely absent from the mainstream discourse of childhood studies.

This paper illustrates this element of childhood through two common examples: first, 'imaginary' friends and second, angels. It argues that childhood studies would benefit from engaging with young people's spiritual lives for two key reasons. First, because spirituality is an innate aspect of life yet one which is easily overlooked, passing by unnoticed, often dismissed as imagination. Second, and crucially in a field which values children's voices, it is important because many children not only describe experiences, but also ascribe meaning to them.

Imaginary friends

Sammie sits at the kitchen table waiting for her lunch. Her teddy bear sits in the chair next to her but she picks him up and places him on her lap.

'Come on Teddy, you sit with me so that George [not visible to adults present] can eat his dinner. George, you can sit down now.'

Sammie moves a piece of bread from her plate onto George's. Occasionally she whispers something inaudible to George and seems to be listening to his responses. I ask her mother how long George has been here.

'Sammie has talked about him for over a year now, since she was five. I gather it's quite normal for children to have imaginary friends, it's all a bit of fun.'

I met Sammie as part of a study with 40 children aged 4-11 in which we explored their beliefs about a range of worlds which often remain unseen to others. Invisible companions such as George emerged, with almost half of children (45%, n=18) describing them. This finding supported her mother's belief that 'imaginary friends' are indeed a common feature of many childhood(s), which numerous other studies have confirmed. Singer and Singer (1990) recorded a rate of 65% in a study with 111 children in the UK, a finding echoed by Taylor (1999) with 63% of 152 children in the USA. These intriguing friends are more commonly referred to in the literature as 'imaginary companions' or 'invisible companions' after various studies show that not all of them are as benign as the word 'friend' implies. As Taylor (1999 p.19) discovered, some are annoying because they never go away, others 'put yoghurt in my hair', 'won't share' or 'hits me on the head'.

Imaginary companions taking the form of children are common, although studies illustrate that they can take different forms. These include objects such as toys which children animate (Singer and Singer 1990; Hallowell 2007; Carter and Bath 2018; Wigger 2019). Animals are often cited (Taylor 1999; Hallowell 2007; Wigger 2019), as Solomon explains:

Solomon aged four and his brother Neil aged eight shared a friend, Baby Bear. They met him whilst on a family camping trip at Acadia National Park, Maine, USA. Since then, Baby Bear travelled with the family. He also went to school with the boys, taking the invisible slide rather than the school steps.

'He can use invisible things, since he's invisible' Solomon explained.

Baby Bear had his own playground at the school, 'like right under my playground... they look exactly the same except for smaller.'

(Wigger 2019, pp. 65-66)

Texts which explore this phenomenon are primarily located in psychology and specifically in developmental psychology (Carter and Bath 2018). Wigger (2019), however, took a different approach. He and his team spoke with children in five countries – the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal and the USA. Whilst using psychological tests including theory of mind, he also draws on wider theoretical approaches, making links between how novelists create their characters and bring them to life. In addition, drawing on his background as a pastor, he also extends his thinking to the religious imagination to explore this cross-cultural phenomenon.

These companions walk and play alongside many children. They often disappear quickly although some remain into adolescence (Taylor 1999). Most children who describe them explain they are 'pretend' but others such as Sammie do not. For this group, the companions represent an unseen world which others cannot directly access, one which seamlessly blends with their concrete world, giving most children comfort and company.

Angels

Few people would ordinarily associate angels with imaginary companions in the usual definition of the latter. Yet Taylor and Mannering (2007) and Wigger (2019) both noted descriptions of angels in their studies of invisible companions. However, encounters with winged beings descending from the skies transcending, the spiritual and earthly worlds, have a long history across cultures. As Jones (2011) notes, our ancestors depicted them in ancient stone carvings. Latterly, such winged beings

became known as angels. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam they are messengers of God/Allah, and in the contemporary secular world, they command a strong presence in the 'new age' / mind, body, spirit genre.

People, both from religious and non-religious backgrounds, have long reported encounters with what we now recognise as angels (Byrne 2008; Newcomb 2008; Jones 2011). For some, these take place during childhood. Hoffman (1992) collected adults' retrospective accounts of their childhood spiritual experiences which included a small number of angelic encounters. Christopher recalled hearing, when he was six years old,

the most sublime and beautiful music coming from the left side of my room. I looked and saw an extraordinarily beautiful winged angel gliding through my room and playing a harp. My eyes were forced closed. I opened them again to see her form exit through the right wall (p. 156)

Lorna Byrne (2008), an Irish mystic, recalls seeing angels since she was a baby. In her autobiography, she details how they appeared as,

wonderful bright, shiny beings in all the colours of the rainbow...these beings floated in the air like feathers; and I remember reaching out to touch them, but I never succeeded (p. 1)

Newcomb (2008) has been collecting accounts from both adults and children for years and publishing them for a general audience. A woman recalled a childhood experience of hearing tapping on her bedroom window one night. When she looked out, she,

saw seven angels in the back garden and they were telling me that I was very special. I remember being confused that I could hear what they were saying even though they were outside the house... they were large and had wings...one of the angels communicated with me that they would be watching over me, and he explained that my mother could not see them (pp. 93-94)

Newcomb (2008) notes that it is not uncommon that an adult cannot see what the child is describing. She takes a broad view of the term 'angel', encompassing the spirits of deceased people – usually relatives. Whether or not children call these angels is unclear. Some children told her that spherical lights (often referred to as 'orbs') are in fact angels. Byrne (2008, p. 3), in describing her own experiences, also believes that angels can appear as 'a sharp glowing light' with no human form.

Hart (2003), writing in the USA, also observes that children often report seeing angels, his own daughter included, who felt tingly sensations when her guardian angel was near her bed each night. Pettersen (2015), working with three to five year olds in two early years settings in Canada, details how children in her study conceptualised and, in some cases, experienced angels. For Pettersen's sample, they often took a caring, motherly role, akin to the concept of a guardian angel.

Wester Anderson (2012) collected 30 narratives of angelic encounters from children. One example told of a five year old American girl called Carole who crept under her porch and fell six feet into a cistern. Neither her friends nor parents could hear her cries. After some time trapped below ground, she felt a warm presence, silently telling her all would be fine. In her mind, Carole asked the presence if they would get her Daddy for her. She felt comforted and reassured that he would come soon. After several hours looking for her beyond the house, her father felt a force directing him towards the porch, where he finally found her. He explained that he would not have looked in that

location had he not had this overwhelming feeling to go there. Again, as in other studies, the child believed that the angel was looking after her.

Children who see angels do not necessarily come from religious backgrounds. In my study with 40 children, most were not from religious homes, although 70% (n=28) believed in angels. Overall the literature suggests that children often see them as having a protective role, bringing comfort. For those who believe in angels, the encounters can be meaningful and adult recollections illustrate the profound impact that they can have, often shaping their spiritual and/or religious beliefs for a lifetime.

Invisible spirituality

For those children (and adults reporting retrospectively), these other beings, which no one else can see, are a normal part of their lives. In many cases they prove, over time, to have been significant, as adults' testimonies illustrate (see Hoffman 1992; Scott 2004). However, in wider literature in childhood studies – and notably in the new sociology of childhood – there is scant, if any, serious reference to spirituality. The reasons for the lack of attention are complex and much influenced by wider culture, but three potential key reasons are considered here. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

First, attitudes to spirituality across the wider culture(s) play an important role in explaining why it may be overlooked in the academic literature on childhood, particularly for those writing on the Global North. The lack of shared definition of spirituality is certainly a factor, for what one person considers spiritual, another may describe as religious or imagination etc.

Evans (2016) summarises various surveys in the UK and USA which demonstrate an increase in the number of adults reporting spiritual experiences over the last 30 years. Despite this, an entrenched reluctance to be open about such experiences remains, as Jones (2011) notes with regards to angelic encounters.

Adults' lack of willingness to be open about spirituality in general and spiritual experience in particular is naturally emulated by children. A number of studies report children not sharing their experiences for fear of ridicule or dismissal (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008). Hence, in societies where the spiritual is not taken seriously, it can be marginalised. Children's spiritual voices are quietened and they can find themselves in an invisible space; a space where their experience is doubted or dismissed, or simply met with disinterest, as if it had never happened (Adams 2019). Furthermore, although spirituality is a field of study in its own right, the number of academics researching with children is relatively small compared to those studying adults' spirituality. Children, therefore, remain relatively invisible in the academic literature. These cultural influences, negating the importance of spirituality, potentially impacts scholars in childhood studies who may be less aware of its relevance to children.

A second reason for the relative omission of children's spirituality relates to the conceptualisation of the imagination, particularly in relation to young people. The lack of inclusion might initially seem strange. After all, literature for children has long recounted tales of ghosts, magic and fantasy, telling of travels into worlds beyond the ordinary. Perhaps that is precisely part of the problem: these stories are told as fiction. As a result, it seeps into the adult psyche that adventures with talking animals, encounters with ethereal beings, travels to different worlds, or playing with children who may have lived a hundred years ago are, quite simply, works of the imagination.

In the Global North, psychology dominates research into the imagination, where studies of invisible companions are mostly located. Majors (2013) interviewed 8 children aged between 5 and 11 years in the UK and found that the companions offered friendship, playmates and entertainment, especially when children were bored, lonely or experiencing problems. Carter and Bath (2018) note that such findings can lead adults to view companions negatively, associating them with children's poor social skills and loneliness. Indeed, Harris (2000, p.32), in his psychological investigation of imagination, writes that young children 'begin to engage in an intriguing form of sustained role play. They repeatedly conjure up an imaginary person or creature whose identity can remain stable over several months'. For Harris, as for others, they are simply a form of children's play, albeit an important one psychologically.

Of course, children's accounts may well be play or imagination but given that many understand them to be real is sufficient reason for further exploration within the umbrella of spirituality. In addition, the importance of the child's voice and their co-construction of childhood is a central theme of the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup 1994; James and James 2008) and this is mirrored in the spirituality literature. Children tell researchers about their spiritual experiences with clarity and often share how meaningful they are (see, for example Hart 2003; Adams 2010; Wester Anderson 2012; Pettersen 2015; Lovelock and Adams 2017). Listening to them, as well as hearing what they say, and understanding how they make meaning from them, is crucial to understanding this aspect of many young people's childhood. This is the case even when the adult believes it to be imagination, play or story-telling.

A third potential reason for the lack of focus in childhood studies is anxiety or fear arising from the influence of psychiatry in many western industrialised cultures. As I have argued elsewhere, (Lovelock and Adams 2017; Adams 2019), if a child is adamant that they can see or hear a person no one else can, adults may naturally worry that is a symptom of mental illness. That is a deep concern for any parent/carer. In such cases, an understandable coping strategy is to assume that an experience was simply imagination and let it pass.

The relationships between imagination, religious/spiritual experience and mental illness are fascinating and beyond the scope of this short paper; but it is important to emphasise the wider variety of understandings of such experiences to demonstrate the complexity. A diagnosis of mental illness may indeed be made in some cases, dependent on a range of indicators (Adams 2019). However, Maijer, Palmen, and Sommer (2017) studied the auditory visual hallucinations of 6-18 year olds attending a clinic for support in the Netherlands (n=95). They found that only 11.6% of the participants had a psychotic disorder.

There are other perspectives too when explaining reports of seeing/hearing/sensing other beings. This includes psychologists widely recognising seeing deceased people as a feature of the grieving process (Adams 2019). Furthermore, the perspectives of people of faith are important, many of whom may believe that the experiences are real. For example, Wester Anderson (2016), a practising Christian, believes that angels appear to young children, as does Byrne, a Catholic (2008). Of course, as noted earlier, we can and should also hear the individual child's explanation.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has only been able to highlight two types of experience which form parts of many children's lives, some others having been identified in the introduction. Despite a range of such experiences being commonplace, academic literature in childhood studies largely overlooks this spiritual dimension of childhood.

If we are to take children's voices seriously in our quest to understand children's worlds, then we need to embrace and explore what the young people say, even if it disrupts our ideas of childhood(s). An adult does not need to believe that a child's invisible playmate is 'real' or that angels exist and have appeared to them. Irrespective of adults' viewpoints, many children around the world inhabit a wide range of unseen worlds. They are, therefore, integral to our understanding of children's lives and deserve a more prominent place in our study of childhood(s).

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