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Materialism in Play: Imaginary Companions Versus Personified Objects and their relations to Later Self-talk

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Pretend play, self-talk, and the creation of imaginary companions (ICs) are normative childhood behaviors associated with positive cognitive outcomes (Davis, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2013; Roby & Kidd, 2008; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). When examining ICs, the convention in current research is to combine invisible friend and personified object (PO) play because both behaviors incorporate play with a being that has a self-created stable personality and mind. However, when examining cognitive change, there may be developmental implications to playing with a material versus an immaterial being, thus the conventional grouping (IC and PO combined) may not be sufficient. This study aimed to examine differences in IC/PO status as a child and subsequent reporting of adult self-talk; the act of talking to oneself silently or out loud. Participants consisted of 372 (261 Female) university students aged 18 to 71 years ($M = 23.83$, $SD = 7.90$) who answered questions on whether they played with an IC or PO in childhood based on Taylor & Carlson's (1997) IC interview. Present self-talk behavior was also assessed using the standardized Self-talk Scale (Brinthaup, Hein, & Kramer 2009). Findings were in line with previous research indicating that adults who reported playing with ICs as children in the conventional IC grouping, used significantly more self-talk than those not reporting an IC, $F(1,325) = 6.223$, $p = .002$. However, when groups were separated into IC, PO, and NIC, and reanalyzed in a second ANOVA, it became clear that the PO group was responsible for the significant differences in self-talk report between the conventional IC and NIC group. Furthermore, the PO group was trending toward producing significantly more self-talk than the IC group $p = .058$. Results will be discussed in terms of developmental trajectories focusing on two main themes. 1) The impact of material play on the development of self-talk, focusing on how certain types of play may impact differently on the evolution of internal dialogue. 2) How being able to interact and play with an immaterial entity, as opposed to a material one, may result in different sociocognitive developmental outcomes.

Keywords: Imaginary Companions, Personified Objects, Childhood Play, Self-talk,