Monsters in the dark and other scary things: preschoolers’ self-reports

Helene Loxton

Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa
e-mail: hsl@sun.ac.za

Objective: This study attempted to obtain normative data regarding the content and frequency of expressed fears of a culturally diverse group of 152 South African preschool children (aged 5–7 years).

Method: The study employed four measuring instruments: a biographical questionnaire, the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test, and individual drawings of feared objects by participants in conjunction with semi-structured interviews. The data analysis included descriptive statistics based on the themes that emerged from the children’s drawings and interviews.

Results: Fear of animals was the most commonly expressed fear. Other high-frequency fear categories that emerged were fear of the dark, night and bad dreams; fantasy people; real people; and physical harm. For the group as a whole, the results largely support the existing body of literature. Participants expressed between one and nine fears ($f = 429$; mean $= 2.8$).

Conclusions: This study contributed to a better understanding of both an under-researched psychological phenomenon, fear, and of an under-researched target group of young children. This knowledge is important in order for significant others, such as parents and caregivers, to understand and effectively mediate potentially stressful experiences of young children in their respective capacities.

Introduction

Fear is an integral part of normal human functioning. There are many different definitions of the term ‘fear’, as is evident from the literature. However, fear is mostly defined as a normal emotional response to a perceived threat that may be real or imagined (Morris and Kratochwill 1983; Sarafino 1986; Rachman 1998). Its first observable emergence is a reflexive response to loud noises or a sudden loss of support by infants, as reported as early as 1920 by Watson and Raynor (in Lefrancois 2001). After this the six-month-old’s typical fear of strangers and later on the six-years-old’s equally frequently expressed monster-under-the-bed fantasy fear remain, although changing in content, throughout a person’s life stages until old age. These normal fears are usually transient and not of sufficient magnitude to be problematic. When the six-year-old’s monster, however, becomes an overpowering reality for her1, and equally untameable, and becomes the centre of the family’s focus, disrupting everyday functioning, it is considered to be unhealthy and detrimental to the child’s development. Since monsters are part and parcel of real life, it is important for caretakers and professionals to know what they are in order to address potential problems and contribute meaningfully towards the well-being and development of the children in their care. Muris (2007) stresses the importance of social support as a protective factor in coping with fear and anxiety. Recent South African fear studies with older children show that environmental factors such as ineffective parenting styles (Muris et al. 2006) and negative information, especially from the media (Muris, Du Plessis and Loxton 2008), may influence fear and the level of fearfulness in children.

Gullone (2000) concludes in her review of a century’s research into the developmental patterns of normal fears in children that fear as a phenomenon has been extensively researched. Over 100 investigations had already been undertaken, starting with the documented research by Hall in 1897.
(in Gullone 2000) and escalating rapidly, especially in the 1980s and still continuing to do so. In reviewing these investigations concerned with the worries and fears of youth, certain issues seemed to be prominent in research on normal fears. Firstly, Gullone (2000) noted the importance of distinguishing normal fears from pathological fears, because the main focus of research into normal fear, as cited in her earlier work (Gullone 1996) has been to identify developmental patterns, intensity and duration as indicators against which to identify pathological fears. The literature is not always clear in identifying what ‘normal fears’ entail. In this regard the following points or criteria stated by Miller, Barrett and Hampe (1974) seemed to be acknowledged by most researchers: it is important to distinguish whether the fear is age- or stage-specific; persists over an extended period of time and/or significantly interferes with everyday functioning. Ollendick, Hagopian and King (1997: 201) also emphasised that almost all children experience some degree of fear in their development and, although ‘such fears vary in intensity and duration, they tend to be mild, age-specific and transitory’. Findings from Hampe et al. (1973) suggest that, with or without treatment, most children overcome their fears within two years.

The question of whether fear has predictive value in determining later pathology still remains a challenge to researchers in the field. As noted by Ferrari (1986), ideally longitudinal studies to gather data on the continuity of childhood fears’ behavioural expression into adulthood would produce the most meaningful answers. Unfortunately, data pertaining to the continuity of fears seemed to be mainly gathered from adults having a known problem and reconstructing data from their past. Such a study on the fear history of 139 adult phobic patients was conducted in 1966 by Marks and Gelder (in Ferrari 1986). Their results show that certain types of simple adult phobias pertaining to ‘extreme fears of animals and insects, presented the most continuous course into adulthood and had the earliest onset ages’, usually before age five (cited in Ferrari 1986: 78). Ferrari (1986: 78) noted that Erikson, in his much cited work *Childhood and Society* (1963), suggested a clear continuity between child fears and the later presentation of fear and anxiety disorder in adulthood, in his discussion of ‘infantile fears’ as the precursors of ‘irrational anxieties entertained by adults’. Gullone (2000) also noted that, apart from focusing on the identification of normal fears, researchers paid pertinent attention to differences in the content of these fears which can be predicted with regard to certain demographic or contextual factors, such as age, gender, geographical location and socio-economic status (King, Hamilton and Ollendick 1988; Gullone 1996).

In reviewing the literature it became apparent that, although childhood fears (mainly referring to primary-school going children) have been researched extensively, there still remains a shortage of research on early childhood fears. This seemed to be mainly ascribable to researchers being confronted with practical problems in assessing young children, such as time constraints, as well as reading and language barriers (La Greca and Lemanek 1996). Thus the usage of sophisticated, relatively easily administrable research methods, such as fear list investigations, were not viable options for building up substantial databases. As most studies with young children rely on time-consuming individual child-friendly interviews, the result is usually small sample-size groups. Although there are exceptions, such as the study by Slee and Cross (1989), in which the fears of 1 243 Australian children and adolescents were assessed, including a relatively large sample of 379 children between the ages of four and 7 years, it appears from the literature that kindergarten sample groups usually consisted of fewer than 100 participants per study. Many of the results for the preschoolers are obtained from cross-sectional studies, resulting in relatively small databases for the specific younger age groups; they thus need to be interpreted cautiously, and their limitations regarding generalisability taken into account.

In terms of the content of fears, the literature shows a variety of ways of reporting on this; this usually depends on the results of the assessment tools used to establish the content of fears. With young children, various assessment tools have been used in previous research such as self-rating scales (used, for example, by Neal, Lilly and Zakis 1993, Stevenson-Hinde and Shouldice 1995); parent/teacher reporting (Draper and James 1985, Bouldin and Pratt 1998); *in vivo* observations (Jersild and Holmes 1935); semi-projective play techniques (Lentz 1985, Stevenson-Hinde and Shouldice 1995); semi-structured interviews with or without projection (Maurer 1965, Bauer 1976; Mooney 1985, Vandenberg 1993); ordinary projection techniques, such as the Children’s
Apperception Test (Yatt 1996); or iconic representation of that which participants feared (Bauer 1976, Slee and Cross 1989, Martalas 1999, Keller 2001). Martalas (1999) concludes that, apart from the open-ended question method, most other methods restrict the participants’ responses. In this regard participants were either given options of what to report, such as in the self-rating scales; situations in which something could be feared, such as in the *in vivo* observations or semi-projective play technique; or their parents’/teachers’ view of their fears. These results are therefore also reflected in pre-established content categories, correlating with the content of the items being asked about. In contrast, the open-ended or semi-structured interview allows for the participants’ unsolicited responses. Although by using the latter methodology the content of expressed fears is also described in terms of categories based on already existing categories, additional categories can be added, as presented by the participants.

In a pilot study for the present research by Martalas (1999), 54 children between the ages of five and seven years attending preschools in the Atlantic Seaboard area, Western Cape, South Africa, were interviewed in order to establish the content and number of their expressed fears. The data were collected by conducting a semi-structured interview with the participants whilst they made drawings of that which they feared. The content of the participants’ fears were analysed quantitatively and grouped according to pre-established categories, based on similar previous research as a guide (Jersild and Holmes 1935, Pratt 1945, Maurer 1965, Derevensky 1974, 1979, Bauer 1976, Draper and James 1985). In the pilot study by Martalas (1999) the animal fears were subdivided into the categories ‘wild animals’, ‘domestic animals’, ‘insects’, ‘sea/water animals’, and ‘fantasy animals’. A category, ‘real people’, was used to classify fears relating to strangers, burglars, brothers and sisters. The category ‘fantasy people’ included fears of creatures such as a witch/wizard, Dracula, vampires, the boogieman, giants, aliens, devils, angels and skeletons. Fear content pertaining to volcanoes, fire, firecrackers, electricity, wind and lightning were assigned to the category fear of ‘the dark, night, bad dreams and natural phenomena’. A ninth category was established to classify any ‘other fears’ than those already mentioned, which included fears of guns, knives, tractors, cars, trains, merry-go-rounds, daddy’s watch and doors.

Martalas (1999) found that ‘animal fears’, at 77.53% of all the fears expressed by the preschoolers, comprised the largest category. The wild animal mentioned mostly as being feared was the lion, but also included the tiger, leopard and cheetah. The most feared fantasy animal was the dinosaur (mentioned by 37% of the participants). According to Martalas, the content of the fears was largely similar to that reported in the existing body of literature. Two notable exceptions, however, appear to be in the category of ‘bodily injury’, which was not explicitly mentioned by the participants in the Martalas study, as well as relatively frequent reports of fears of dinosaurs, which seemed to be the result of the realistic depictions of dinosaurs in the film *Jurassic Park*, as mentioned by several participants upon further questioning.

Keller (2001) replicated the above fear study in predominantly white South African preschool children from a lower- to middle-class socio-economic status area by using the same methodology and existing categories as basis. The results showed that the content of the fears was similar in many ways to that of previous studies and largely confirmed Martalas’ (1999) findings. ‘Animal fears’, at 57.24% of all the fears expressed, comprised by far the largest category of fears, with the lion, snake and crocodile presented in rank order of most feared animals. Keller (2001) found ‘fantasy people’ (predominantly fears of ghosts) as the second most expressed category of fears (19.31%), followed by ‘fantasy animals’ (monsters) in third place (12.41%), and the category fears of ‘real people’ (9.65%) fourth. Fears related to the other categories were reported as insignificant (less than 9.65%).

To conclude, certain fear categories, especially those categorised as ‘animal fears’ and also fears relating to ‘darkness’, ‘bed-time’, ‘being alone’ and ‘nightmares’, appeared to receive prominence in the literature. Marks (1987) confirmed that the contents of childhood fears vary across situations or objects, partly depending on age. He noted that some fears, such as ‘animal fears’, show a rapid rise during preschool years, with a fall again at a later stage; while other fears, such as ‘darkness fears’, tend to vary less with age. Also of developmental interest is that fear of animals is one of the two fears (the other is blood-injury fear) that, when found in adults, have usually persisted since
Loxton50

childhood and mostly begin before the age of seven years. He concluded that animal fears in young
children ‘tend to appear out of the blue’, whereas the rare animal phobias that start in adolescence
or adulthood for the first time are usually associated with trauma (Marks 1987: 689).

According to some earlier researchers, such as Angelino, Dollins and Mech (1956), ‘animal fears’
rapidly decline from the ages nine to 11 years in both sexes. These results were, however, contra-
dicted by a South African study (Burkhardt 2002), which found that the fear of snakes (in the ‘wild
animal’ category) was still the most common item amongst a group of 404 middle-childhood children
(ranging from ages eight to 12 years). This research was based on a comparable Free Option
Method (FOM) study. According to Burkhardt (2002), one of the explanations for her findings for
the prominence of the fear of snakes might be ascribed to the fact that South Africa has a diverse
snake population, of which many are poisonous, as noted by Broadley (1983). Another explanation
for this might be confirmation of the hypothesis on the innate nature of fears related to evolutionary
dangers and the survival value attached to these fears. According to Agras, Sylvester and Olinveau
(1969), fear of snakes usually starts in childhood. The fear of snakes appears to be very common
and one of the most frequently mentioned fears in the ‘animal fear’ category by preschoolers. It is
argued that common childhood fears, as well as specific phobias, originate from innate fears of
evolutionary dangers (Menzies and Clarke 1995). The results of the open question method support
this argument (Muris et al. 1997; Burkhardt 2002). According to an early study by Maurer (1965),
80% of the 91 overall replies of the 20 children aged between five and six years were allocated to
‘animal fears’, including, amongst others, snakes, lions, tigers and bears. A study by Bowd (1983),
where 37 five-year-olds were asked to name an animal of which they were afraid, produced ranking
results that compared closely with Maurer’s findings. The children’s order of the five most feared
animals were bear (18%), tiger (12%), snake (12%), dog (12%), and lion (12%).

According to the literature, other fear categories that appeared to be prominent around the
preschool years are fears associated with the categories ‘darkness’, ‘bed-time’, ‘being alone’ and
‘nightmares’, as well as associated ‘monsters and ghosts’. In a study by Bauer (1976), on the
developmental changes in children’s fears, children in the age groups 4–6, 6–8, and 10–12 years
were asked what they feared most and to describe their scary dreams. It became evident that
age-related patterns were found as 74% of the children in the age group 4–6 years reported fears
of ghosts and monsters, while 53% of the children in the 6-8 years group and only 5% of the 10–12
years group reported similar fears. The frequency of fears and scary dreams of imaginary creatures
were found to decrease with age. The tendency for fears of imaginary creatures to emerge at this
stage is thought to be closely linked to the typical ‘magical thinking’ during the preschool years. This
ties in with Piaget’s (1951) conceptualisation of children in the pre-operational period as progres-
sively continuing to acquire the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Various studies
verify this theory by reporting on a large number of fears relating to imaginary beings within this age
group (Bauer 1976, Derevensky 1979, Draper and James 1985, Tremewan and Strongman 1991;
Vandenberg 1993).

When considering differences in the frequency of fears, it is important to compare methodologi-
cally similar studies. It appears that, according to Bouldin and Pratt (1998), the number of fears
represents an inverted U-curve across childhood and adolescence. This tendency is indicated in
an increase in the number of fears from preschool to early school, with a decrease towards adoles-
cence. Gullone (2000) reported an average of between two and four to five fears in interviewed base
studies within the age range 4–19 years, as reported by researchers such as Eme and Schmidt
(1978) and Maurer (1965). In the two South African studies, Martalas (1999) reported an average of
4.77 expressed fears per participant (ranging between 1 to 12 per participant), while Keller (2001)
reported an average of 2.9 fears per participant (ranging between 1 to 10 per participant).

Young children’s fears as a phenomenon is under-researched and little is known from their
own viewpoints. Irrespective of age, the child’s fear phenomenon cannot be understood without
understanding the child’s world. The importance of listening to young children’s own voices on
their developmental issues has a long history of being ignored; they are thus reduced to a silent
minority, being spoken for by well-meaning adults such as parents, teachers and other profes-
Law, states that the stage has been reached where it is commonly acknowledged that children form an important interest group in society. According to Van Bueren (1998, in Davel 2000), ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has initiated a potential evolutionary revolution whereby, amongst other things, communities are required to develop a culture of listening to children and thus changing their images of childhood. In order to have access to the world of children, it is of vital importance to hear what they say in their own words; thus the motivation for this study is based on the collection of data in a primarily qualitative way.

This study aimed at understanding the content and number of fears, as expressed by a culturally diverse sample of normal five- to seven-year-old preschoolers within the South African context.

Method

Participants
The final sample of participants consisted of a culturally diverse group of 152 children aged between five and seven years, attending a preschool or day-care setting for at least three months prior to testing. To enhance generalisability, a convenience sample of participants was obtained from eight preschool settings from different socio-economic status areas in the Stellenbosch region of South Africa, according to the local school clinic's classification. The total number of 173 children attending these schools were invited to participate. An average of 88% of the children, ranging between 84 and 97% children per school, participated after their parents consented. Socio-economic status was based on a composite score derived from a combination of parents' occupation and education. According to this categorisation system, 51 children were from low, 32 from middle and 69 from upper socio-economic status backgrounds. Broad screening exclusion criteria were any known pathology, as well as extremes regarding mental age, such as mental retardation. Three other potentially stressful situations that may psychologically impact on the preschool child – namely, recent divorce, separation or remarriage of the parents; recent hospitalisation; as well as recently moving home – also served as exclusion criteria. The term 'recent' is defined as a period within three months prior to the intervention. This information was collaterally obtained from teachers/caregivers.

The 152 participants’ chronological ages ranged between 60 months (five years) and 87 months (seven years and three months). The mean chronological age of the children was 74.19 months (six years and approximately two months), with a S.D = 5.32 months. According to the preferences of the participants, the research was conducted in Afrikaans (53.3% of the participants), English (18.4% participants) and Xhosa (28.3% of the participants). The different cultural groups were represented in the following way: 48 (31.6%) white South African (30 = 19.7% boys and 18 = 11.9% girls), 59 (38.8%) coloured South African (29 = 19.1% boys and 30 = 19.7% girls) and 45 (29.6%) black South African (21 = 13.8% boys and 24 = 24.8% girls) children.

Procedure
Permission to do the research was obtained from the Western Cape Department of Education. All the children for whom informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians were incorporated as participants in the study. Two research assistants – a male and female student, both fluent in Xhosa, with honours qualifications in Psychology, experience of working with children and cross-culturally sensitive – were selected and trained by means of a workshop to assist the researcher in conducting the interviews of especially the Xhosa-speaking participants, for whom they acted as interpreters. The researcher also made use of a child-friendly preschool teacher, who was well known as a motherly figure to all the Xhosa-speaking children to facilitate small talk and put them at ease whenever necessary. During the process of collecting data, special provision was made for additional assistance to parents who indicated to either their children’s teacher or to the researcher that they experienced problems of any kind in filling out the biographical questionnaire. This was, however, only applicable to a small minority of the parents and was handled with great sensitivity. Once the parental information was obtained, arrangements were made to obtain data from the identified children. Apart from visiting the relevant schools prior to the interviews to familiarise the researcher and the research assistants with the participants, approximately 30
minutes for individual interviewing was allocated per participant; which proved to be a realistic time unit according to the pilot study of Martalas (1999). Interviews with each child were either audio-taped or video-recorded to be transcribed afterwards in order to verify or clarify written notes made by the researcher during the interviews. Afterwards, the data were analysed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Arrangements were made to discuss the results of the research individually with the interested teachers/caregivers as well as parents/guardians of the participants, should the need arise. Individual feedback was requested by approximately 10% of the participants’ parents and or teachers. For more information on the child-friendly methodology, please see Loxton (2006).

Measures

The Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test
Psychologists often make use of children’s drawings as a medium of communication. Drawing the human figure is generally experienced as a non-threatening medium of expression, which is in accordance with research findings in this regard (Richter, Griesel and Wortley 1989). For the purpose of building rapport and to put children at ease, each session was commenced with administering the child-friendly Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test (Harris 1963). Secondly, the drawings were in a few cases used for and referred to at a later stage during the interview with regard to its projective potential.

The semi-structured interview
An individual semi-structured interview was chosen as the primary method of data collection, as the interview has been claimed by many researchers (e.g. Nietzel, Bernstein and Russel 1988) to be the most efficient means of gaining access to individuals’ experiences. Although there are potential validity problems associated with any data-gathering method, self-reports constitute direct access by means of a semi-structured interview. According to Russel (1990), preschool children have a good understanding of words which describe emotions and the results of her research showed that appropriate words were better than visual presentations depicting the word. Tremewan and Strongman (1991) also confirmed that preschool children are able to recognise and describe basic emotions. Fear word choice was based on research by Ryall and Dietiker (1978) and Martalas (1999). For the purpose of the present study, a distinction was made between the participants’ primary and additional fears. Firstly, children were asked ‘What do you fear most / what are you most scared of?’ The fear that was either mentioned firstly or emphasised most by means of either elaborating on the content verbally or by means of the drawing, was indicated as the primary fear. Additional fears were indicated as those that were asked for by the question ‘Are there any other things that you are afraid / scared of?’

Drawings of fears
According to Kamphaus and Pleiss (1991), drawings are very useful for assessing children, who have been found to naturally express their ideas about things around them through art. During the semi-structured interview, the participants were asked what they are most afraid/scared of (Bauer 1976, Band and Weisz 1988, Martalas 1999) and to draw it.

Biographical questionnaire
The parents/guardians were asked to complete a biographical questionnaire regarding socio-economic status and other variables for each participant.

Data analysis
The data were collected primarily in a qualitative manner. Recorded interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim where necessary. The data were coded according to existing categories for content, based on research by Bauer (1976) and Martalas (1999). For responses that fall outside these categories, new ones were created with regard to grouping into emerging themes. Inter-rater
categorisation was done, with ratings being made by the researcher and two other psychometrists, all blind to children’s gender, culture and socio-economic status. Complete agreement was negotiated on all protocols afterwards. The data analyses were done by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) (George and Mallery 1999) to calculate descriptive statistics.

Results

Content of expressed fears for all participants

The participants’ verbatim responses and drawings (see selected extracts of drawings of wild animals in Figure 1, fantasy characters in Figure 2 and real people in Figure 3) depicting the content of their expressed fears have been grouped together to provide a representation of the 15 broad categories, as summarised in Table 1. The rank order of broad categories into which expressed fears were assigned to represent the content of the fears is as follows (see Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Primary fears categories</th>
<th>Total fears categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Wild animals</td>
<td>Wild animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Fantasy people</td>
<td>Dark, night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Real people</td>
<td>Fantasy people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Dark, night</td>
<td>Real people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Domestic animals / insects</td>
<td>Domestic animals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarities regarding the content of the first five fear categories, irrespective of rank order of these categories, are evident. The five categories primary fear rank ordered include wild animals, fantasy people, real people and dark, night, bad dreams, as well as domestic animals.

The ‘wild animals’ category (see Figure 1 for examples of participants’ drawings) was reported as most feared of all the primary fears (40.6%), as well as the total fears reported (38.5%). Of all the wild animals, the snake was reported to be the most feared (49 responses, 30% of all wild animal fears), with the lion in second place (38 responses, 23% of all wild animal fears) and crocodiles next in order, followed by other wild animals such as the tiger, cheetah, elephant, jackal, wolf, rhino, ape and baboon. The participants’ drawings of snakes varied from simple line drawings (Figure 1, participant no. 96) to very specific types of snakes, such as ‘a cobra’ (Figure 1, participant no. 49). Accompanying qualitative descriptions mostly varied between broad categorical distinctions, such as ‘a small one’ or ‘a big one’. Children mostly refer to the origin of these fears, which was discussed voluntarily and informally, as something that they experienced (‘I have really seen it in the zoo’, ‘…on TV’, ‘…in the road’, ‘…in the bushes’, ‘…a movie’).

It appeared that the fears allocated to the ‘fantasy people’ category (see Figure 2 for examples of participants’ drawings) were second in rank order for all primary fears and third in rank order for all total fears reported. This category overwhelmingly consists of ghosts (26 responses, 58% of all fantasy people fears). The latter are described, for example, as ‘big, black’, or ‘white thing’ or ‘small’. Other fantasy people that were mentioned as scary were monsters, the devil, a bogeyman, a giant, as well as Dracula, a tokoloshe, a cannibal, batman and an alien.

With regard to the content of participants’ fears of ‘real people’ (see Figure 3 for examples of participants’ drawings), a wide variety of characters emerged and qualitatively this is the most elaborate category. In order to summarise, the following content can be grouped together in a meaningful way: Responses that refer to ‘a bad guy’, a real person called ‘Ghostman’, ‘Dishonest’, ‘Person’ and other names such as ‘Norman’, ‘Morgan’, etc. add up to the majority of expressed fears in this category (a total of 17 responses, 41.5% of the total real people fears). The second-largest sub-grouping relates to fears for real people within the family circle, such as siblings and mothers (nine responses, 21.9% of all real people fears). The third sub-grouping consists of real people labelled according to crime-related activities, such as burglars, robbers, thieves and gangsters (seven responses, 17% of the total real people fears expressed). Another overlapping category refers to the fears pertaining to the ‘dark, night and bad dreams’. According to Table 1, this category of fears is ranked second when taking the total fears into account and ranked fourth...
Figure 1: Drawings of wild animals

Figure 2: Drawings fantasy people
Table 1: Frequencies of fear content for all participants (n = 152)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear categories</th>
<th>Frequency of primary fears</th>
<th>% total primary fears</th>
<th>Frequency of additional fears</th>
<th>% total additional fears</th>
<th>Frequency of total fears</th>
<th>% total fears</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wild animals</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insects</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seal/water</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real people</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy people</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark, night</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural phenomena</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being alone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical fears</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical harm</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury to others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other fears</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Not all percentages add up to 100 due to rounding. Two of the 152 participants (1.3%) reported no fears.
with regards to primary fears. Verbatim responses allocated to this category consist of the description of fear of the dark, nightmares, dreams, bad dreams, night, evening and sleep. The category ‘domestic animal fears’ is ranked fifth, both with regard to the primary and total fears categories (see Table 1).

The most frequently expressed fear within the domestic animal total fear category was overwhelmingly the fear of dogs (18 responses, 62% of all domestic animal fears), followed by cats (six responses, 21% of all domestic animal responses), cows, a horse, donkey and sheep. It is, however, important to bear in mind that, overall, domestic animal fears comprised less than 7% (4.7% of primary fears and 6.7% of total fears) of the participants’ expressed fear profile (see Table 1). The category ‘insects’ is ranked fifth, along with domestic animals, in the participants’ primary fears profile. As was the case with domestic animals, this fear accounts for only 4.7% of the primary fears (see Table 1). The specific primary fear expressed pertaining to the category of insect fears mainly consists of spider fears (three responses, 43% of the primary fear responses). It appears as if spiders were mostly described as being ‘big ones’. The category ‘sea/water animals’ mainly consists of sharks, fish, and a whale. Qualitatively sea/water animals were generally described as ‘big’. The ‘fantasy animal’ fear category in general mostly consists of dinosaurs, a monster and an animal ghost. ‘Natural phenomenon’ fears were attributed to electricity (two responses), as well as one response to each of the following: thunder, volcano, weather, fire, and a storm. The seven fear responses attributed to the category ‘being alone’ (see Table 1) ranged from fear of being alone in a room, alone in the dark, alone during the day, to be forgotten at school or to be left alone if someone has to go to jail. Only two participants (see Table 1) expressed fears related to ‘separation from parents’ in a direct way. The category ‘medical fears’ was under-represented by only one fear response relating to being scared of going to the hospital.

The content of the ‘physical harm’ category refers to the participants themselves and varied widely, ranging from vague fears of getting hurt/harmed/killed (six responses, 25% of all physical harm fears), being hit by parents (four responses; 16.7% of all physical harm fears); to more specific fears such as a car accident (two responses, 8.3% of all physical harm fears); being burned, being scolded, illness, poison, and to fall from a roof. The category ‘injury to others’ refers to fear of someone else, mainly friends or family, being hurt or injured. Responses varied from others being shot/bombed (four responses, 44.4% of all injury to others fears); followed by fears of someone being hurt/hit (three responses, 33.3% of all injury to others fears); to fire- and explosion-related fears (two responses, 22.2% of all injury to others fears. No drawings were made in this category. The last category, titled ‘other fears’, refers to 17 responses from which 16 were expressed as additional fears. These fears were mainly ascribed to seeing scary television programmes/movies/videos/hearing stories, being afraid of a bath, school and swimming.

Frequency of expressed fears for all participants
A total frequency of 429 fears were expressed, ranging from one to nine per participant. The overall sample showed an average of 2.8 fears per participant.

Discussion

Content of expressed fears
With regard to the content of all the preschoolers’ expressed fears, the largest proportion of participants reported having animal fears, especially wild animal fears (38.5% of total fears), showing that this is a relatively common type of fear in normal children between the ages five to seven (see Table 1). These results largely comply with the existing body of literature (Marks 1987). Similarities appear especially with regard to the ‘wild animal’ fear category. The latter fears were reported as being the most prominent of all the primary as well as the total fears. It appears that the fear of snakes was the most frequent response, with the lions and crocodiles next in order. These results are also consistent with those of previous South African empirical research, although the rank order for the three most frequently mentioned animal fears differ slightly (Martalas 1999, Keller 2001, Burkhardt 2002). The prominence of the reported fear of snakes within the wild
animal category is in accordance with results from previous research such as reported by Maurer (1965), Derevensky (1979), Bowd (1983), Slee and Cross (1989), Muris, Merckelbach and Collaris (1997), Muris et al. (1997), and Muris et al. (2000). The fear of snakes appears universally among children of different nationalities and is also reported to be cross-culturally consistent within the same country (Burkhardt, Loxton and Muris 2003). Explanations for this phenomenon can be found within psychodynamic social-learning as well as cognitive developmental theories. However, from an ecosystemic point of view, taking into account the practical realities of South Africa, known for its diverse snake population (Broadley 1983), the fact that Stellenbosch is surrounded by hills and that snakes are in abundance, particularly during the hot summer months (Burkhardt 2002), as well as the role of snakes in cultural beliefs and practices (Mokgoatsana 1999), it can be concluded that the fear of snakes is an example of a normal realistic fear with survival values.

Other high-frequency fear categories (which made up 5% or more of the total frequency of fears) that emerged are the fears of the dark, night, bad dreams (10.7% of total fears); fantasy people fears (10.5% of total fear profile); real people fears (9.6% of total fears); domestic animal fears (6.7% of total fears); and fear of physical harm (5.6% of the total fears). This is in accordance with findings of inter alia Maurer (1965), Bauer (1976), Derevensky (1974, 1979), Bowd (1983), Slee and Cross (1989), Muris et al. (1997), Muris et al. (1997), Martalas (1999), Keller (2001), and Muris et al. (2000).

There appear to be interesting and notable similarities and differences in the participants’ profiles when comparing the content of primary fears with the content of total fears (the latter being a combination of primary and additional fears). Similarities regarding the first five fear categories, irrespective of rank orders of these categories, are evident. The five categories (in primary fear rank order) include wild animals, fantasy people, real people and dark, night, bad dreams, as well as domestic animals. The only difference between the primary fears and total fears profiles exists with regards to the category of insects being ranked fifth, with the category domestic animals, in the participants’ primary fears profile.

**Frequency of expressed fears**

A total frequency of 429 fears were expressed, ranging from one to nine per participant. The overall sample showed an average of 2.8 fears per participant. This average per child corresponds with the results of a similar interview-based study undertaken by Keller (2001) in the Western Cape, South Africa, as well as studies elsewhere by Emé and Schmidt (1987) and Maurer (1965) who also reported an average of between two and four to five fears per child. Keller (2001) obtained her data from a low- to middle-income socio-economic status area. In contrast, Martalas (1999) reported a much higher average frequency (4.77) of fears per participant for a target group of preschoolers from a middle to high socio-economic status group in the Western Cape, South Africa. It appears that socio-economic status needs to be taken into account when comparing and reporting on fear data.

**Conclusion**

The study contributed to a better understanding both of an under-researched psychological phenomenon and of an under-researched target group. It is comforting to find that, despite the difficult South African socio-political realities that produce ‘enormous socio-economic problems’ including poverty, homelessness and exposure to violence (Duncan and Van Niekerk 2001: 327), the group of five- to seven-year-old preschoolers mainly expressed the same developmentally appropriate fear content profile that can be found elsewhere in the world (Morris and Kratchwill 1991). The study was not without its limitations and in this regard future research focusing on aspects such as temperament, environmental influences and the role of attachment and parental rearing patterns in relation to young children’s fears could add value to this knowledge base.

However, in order to better understand children throughout all their developmental phases, one of the key answers certainly relates to having knowledge of children’s emotions, preferably in personal conversation and listening to them expressing themselves ‘in their own words’. Taking into account, for example, that most parents either do not know what their children are scared of or speak for their children with regard to the contents of their fears, it seems as if there is a need for prevention
programmes aimed at disseminating the knowledge generated to caregivers, parents and significant others. When addressing information on expected fear content, it is also of vital importance to supply parents and caregivers with information regarding children’s psychological functioning during a particular developmental stage. Taking into account the limitations and challenges of the participants' functioning in the preoperational period (Piaget 1951), it is evident from the present research findings that children even as young as five years of age are able and willing to express their fears in a child-friendly environment. There is also a need for programmes aimed at facilitating children’s socio-emotional development directly. Young children’s cognitive and socio-emotional functioning and related skills to address and direct their own fears are often underestimated by adults. This notion is evident, firstly, in the shortage of fear data for this age group and, secondly, in the amount of information generated from research sources other than those reported by the children themselves (as reported, for example, by Gullone 2000).

Researchers such as Muris et al. (2008) and Muris et al. (2001) found exposure to negative information as the most prominent pathway to fear. This emphasises the need for programmes aimed at proactively guiding the psychological development of children, even as young as five years old. It also highlights the notion postulated by Muris (2007) that emphasis on the recognition of and coping with the potentially debilitating effects of unnecessary anxiety and fears will not only be mentally empowering during the early childhood stage, but has the potential to make a significant contribution towards the prevention of future psychological problems and, eventually, impacting positively on adult mental well-being.

Acknowledgements — The Western Cape Department of Education, the staff of the schools, the children and their parents are kindly thanked for their enthusiastic cooperation in the study. I also thank Professor Bodley van der Westhuysen for his valuable support during the study, as well as Professor Leslie Swartz for his constructive comments.

Endnotes

1 The feminine form of pronouns refers throughout to both sexes, unless specifically indicated otherwise.
2 The use of the terms ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ when referring to racial groupings is controversial. Nonetheless, these terms will be used descriptively in order to acknowledge differences between communities that continue to exist as a consequence of South Africa’s history.

References


