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How Children Make Sense of Fear of the Dark: A Qualitative Study of Russian Preschoolers

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HOW CHILDREN MAKE SENSE OF FEAR OF THE DARK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RUSSIAN PRESCHOOLERS

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ABSTRACT

Children's fear of the dark—as well as its more extreme manifestation in the form of nyctophobia—is a major problem for many families with smaller children. Different treatments exist for nyctophobia, but no consensus has yet emerged on why these treatments work or on what facets of the treatments are more effective than others. Several methodologies and assessments allow for the quantitative measurement of children's "normative," or typically developing, fear of the dark, but most were created and conducted from an adult perspective. How children themselves explain what makes darkness scary remains largely unknown, in large part because children have traditionally been regarded as relatively flawed, if not wholly unreliable, informants concerning their own experience. Furthermore, relatively little research on fear of the dark has been conducted on non-Western populations. The purpose of this study was to investigate how preschoolers themselves make sense of fear of darkness. To answer this question, I recruited 4- to 5-year-old Russian children who were afraid of the dark according to parental report (n = 31). I conducted interviews with these children through Zoom, and

two coders analyzed children's transcripts, employing reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Analysis generated two overarching themes: *What makes darkness more scary?* and *What makes darkness less scary?* Three specific themes addressed the first overarching question: *Darkness is scary because various entities inhabit it; Something bad can happen in the dark;* and *Darkness is scary because it is darkness.* Three more specific themes addressed the second overarching question: *Dealing with fear of darkness with people and objects; Dealing with fear of the dark with action;* and *Dealing with fear of the dark with nice qualities.* I discuss all of these themes in the context of Russian folklore tradition, school-age children's horror story-telling, and causal theories of how fear of the dark develops. I also address possible ways in which children's lived experience in this study may inform a richer understanding of the nature of their ability to differentiate fantasy from reality, an ability that is still undergoing developmental consolidation in early childhood. Finally, findings from this study may inform a clinical understanding of why and for whom certain treatments of nyctophobia work, in addition to shedding light in general on children's lived experience and sense-making concerning fear of darkness.

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Introduction

Background

Fears are ubiquitous during childhood (Gullone, 2000; Muris, Merckelbach, & Luitjen, 2002; Murphy, 1985). Almost three quarters of preschoolers and close to 90% of school-age children report experiencing a variety of both mild and moderate intensity fears (Muris, Merckelbach, Gadet, & Moulaert, 2000). Though differences in both content and extent routinely distinguish the fears of any one child from another, a strikingly stable and predictable sequence characterizes the emergence of specific kinds of fear across childhood development. For example, fears of strangers, separation from parents, novelty, and heights first emerge in the second half of the first year of life and signal a broad developmental transition in infants' engagement with the world, from impulsiveness (evident in the early months of postnatal life) to a decided wariness (Emde et al., 1976; Scarr & Salapatek, 1970; Schaffer, 1974). Between the ages of 2 and 6 (the period of early childhood), fears of animals (both wild and domestic), darkness, being alone, and imaginary creatures, developmentally emerge and predominate in children's experience (Bauer, 1976; Derevensky, 1974; Draper & James, 1985; Jersild & Holmes, 1935a, b; Maurer, 1965). With the advent of middle childhood (ages 6-12), however, the fears of early childhood—especially those involving "fanciful, subjective, supernatural" content (Jersild & Holmes, 1935b, p. 136)—substantially decline in prominence, to be replaced by more concrete and realistic fears of physical injury and harm; natural events; death; and of interpersonal situations relating to failure and criticism, being teased and ridiculed, etc. (Bauer, 1976; Muris et al., 2000; Murphy, 1985; Ollendick et al., 1985).

Both in its general sequencing and timing, this "ontogenetic parade of fears" (Marks, 1987) appears to be a universal feature of typical childhood development (e.g., Gullone, 2000; Loxton, 2009; Meltzer et al., 2009; Ollendick et al., 1989; Ollendick et al., 1996), though claims of universality are unfounded as they largely derive from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples (Henrich et al., 2010).

Of all of the fears that characterize childhood, perhaps none is more "prototypical" as a childhood fear than fear of the dark. Adults, for example, tend to identify fear of the dark—above all other fears—as both the first remembered and most intense fear of their own childhoods (Jersild & Holmes, 1935a). For children, fear of the dark routinely ranks second only to fear of animals as the most prominent fear of the early childhood period (Draper & James, 1985; Jersild & Holmes, 1935a; Loxton, 2009; Ollendick et al., 1985). What we know about the specific developmental course of fear of the dark comes largely from the pioneering research of Jersild and Holmes (1935a, b) and Valentine (1930). Wholly absent during infancy, fear of the dark first emerges in children around the age of 24 months (Valentine, 1930). Both naturalistic and experimental observations of children over time point to a substantial rise in the prevalence of fear of the dark between the ages of 2 and 3, with a peak in intensity for most children between 3 and 4 years of age and a gradual decline in both prevalence and intensity thereafter (Jersild & Holmes, 1935a, b; Murphy, 1985; see also Draper & James, 1985, with regard to mirrored findings from parental report). By the ages of 6 to 7 years, fear of the dark is largely absent from most children's fear repertoire (Jersild & Holmes, 1935a; Maurer, 1965).

Within child clinical populations, 20% to 30% of children have fears of the dark so severe that debilitating sleep disturbances can occur (Bauer, 1976; Gordon et al., 2007a; Ollendick & Muris, 2018 Sadeh, 2005). Moreover, up to 15% of phobias treated in childhood relate to the dark (nyctophobia) and being alone (Graziano et al., 1979; Ollendick & Muris, 2018). Despite its prominence within child clinical populations, however, fear of the dark is rarely examined as a separate phenomenon (Lewis et al., 2021). Instead, it is routinely conflated with other nighttime fears such as fear of being alone and the having of nightmares and is often considered part of a broader symptom package, as with children who meet DSM-5 criteria for pervasive anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder or separation anxiety disorder (Kushnir & Sadeh, 2011; Lewis et al., 2021). The most effective treatments for nighttime fears include cognitive-behavioral approaches such as systematic desensitization, modeling, and reinforcement, as well as combinations of systematic desensitization, reinforcement procedures, emotive imagery, and cognitive self-instruction (i.e., bedtime stories, drawings, bibliotherapy, games) to make cognitive-behavioral treatment more age appropriate and easier to implement for clinicians (Compton et al., 2002; Gordon et al., 2007; King et al., 1988 1997). Fear of the dark, specifically, is often treated using the story *Uncle Lightfoot* (Miculas et al., 1986). Bibliotherapy alone and in conjunction with other techniques have demonstrated effectiveness in decreasing child-reported nighttime fears and parent-reported separation anxiety, as well as in increasing the number of nights children slept alone in their own bed (Lewis et al., 2015, 2021). Self-statements and verbal mediations such as “The dark is a fun place to be” have also proven to be effective strategies for reducing anxiety and fear (Ollendick & King, 1998; Kanfer et al., 1975). How these

treatments work, however, and the implication of such treatments for understanding what accounts for children's fear of the dark, are far from transparent (Lewis et al., 2021). How do children in early childhood develop fear of the dark to begin with? What is it about darkness that scares children? Theories abound, but empirical investigations are largely lacking.

Theories of Fear of the Dark

Theoretical speculation over how children develop a fear of the dark has traditionally appealed to other fears of early childhood as the basis for their specific fear of the dark. Both Freud (1917/1966) and Bowlby (1969, 1973), for example, argued that children's fear of the dark ultimately derives from early experiences of longing for or being separated from a caregiver. Other explanations, first articulated by Jersild and Holmes (1935a, b) and Valentine (1930), point to either the fear of imaginary creatures or the fear of being alone as likely sources of children's fear of the dark. Bowlby (1973), in fact, considered fear of imaginary monsters as a rationalization for people's fear of darkness. By these theoretical accounts, it is what darkness could potentially contain (i.e., monsters) or what darkness might lead to (i.e., getting lost, being alone) that imbues darkness with negative emotional significance for preschoolers. Other accounts, more broadly applicable to phobic reactions of fear, have implicated processes such as conditioning, modeling, and exposure to negative information to account for the emergence and persistence of such fears (King et al., 1988; Muris, 2010; Rachman, 1977). Muris and colleagues have also concluded that the main cause of nighttime fears is negative information from television (Muris et al.,1997; 2001). Despite such theoretical

speculation, however, little empirical research has examined the question of why children become afraid of the dark.

One exception was found in a study by Zisenwine and her colleagues (2013) on the relation between nighttime fears and children's developing abilities to distinguish between reality and imagination or fantasy. Separating positive and negative emotional fantasies from reality is generally harder for children than separating neutral imaginations from fantasies. Some scholars especially emphasize the influence of cultural traditions and adult encouragement on the development of fantasy-reality differentiation. Caregivers, for example, often try to protect children from negative events and dissuade them from believing in negative fantasies (such as ghosts or monsters) but promote their beliefs in positive entities such as Santa Claus and the tooth fairy (Carrick & Quas, 2006; Zisenwine et al., 2013; Woolley et al., 2004). Woolley suggested that children's ability to disregard the possibility of imaginary events is weaker than that of adults. And because emotional fantasies are harder to discount, children's fear of imaginary entities becomes very real for them (Woolley, 1997). Zisenwine et al. (2013) compared a group of children ranging in age from 4 to 6 who suffered from severe nighttime fears with nonfearful controls. In addition to several standardized scales and ratings concerning general and nighttime fears, children were tested on their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Results showed that children with nighttime fears distinguished fantasy from reality less readily than nonfearful controls. However, when the sample was further divided into younger and older children, older children in both the nighttime fear and nonfearful control groups demonstrated improvement in their ability of to differentiate fantasy from reality relative to younger children.

Despite interesting findings, Zisenwine et al.'s (2013) work is limited in application with respect to an understanding of why children fear the dark. First, the study was not specific to fear of the dark and, as a correlational study, offers no real explanation as to why a delay in fantasy-reality differentiation exists for children with nighttime fears. Second, the study provided no clues about how the children themselves experienced fantasy or about what they went through when they had nighttime fears. Qualitative studies of individual children and the meaning they ascribe to fear of the dark are needed. However, literature on fear of the dark is largely if not wholly bereft of such foundational qualitative work, both in the area of childhood fears generally and in the area of fear of the dark specifically. In fact, methodologies associated with the literature on children's fears are largely quantitative and standardized in orientation, significantly delimiting our understanding of how children make individual sense of their own fears.

Methodologies in Fear of the Dark Literature

Over the past century, a wide variety of indices and methodologies have been employed in the study of children's normative and clinically significant fears generally, as well as in studies of their fear of the dark, though most research in this area is not specific to children's fear of the dark per se. Probably the most well established technique, traceable to the early studies of Jersild and Holmes (1935a), is the use of retrospective reports from parents and/or other caregivers. Unfortunately, this method has questionable validity, given longstanding evidence that caregivers tend to underreport their children's fears by as much as 41% (Murphy, 1985; see also Lapouse & Monk, 1959; Jersild & Holmes, 1935a). Behavioral observations, conducted in laboratory or home settings, offer another prominent technique employed in the literature. Jersild and

Holmes (1935a), for example, implemented one of the earliest observational studies of children's fear of the dark specifically by recording children's response to a dark room. At-home caregiver's observations and observational rating scales became especially popular toward the end of the last century with the availability of video cameras; however, this approach is usually applied to children meeting clinical criteria of specific nighttime fears or anxiety. In a recent review of studies conducted on clinical populations with nighttime fears, home monitoring measures were the most common instruments (Lewis et al., 2021).

In addition, research on children's fears has also employed more child-centered assessments, schedules, and scales that children themselves answer. The most well known and frequently used self-report questionnaire for assessing the fears in youth is the Fear Survey Schedule for Children (FSSC-R; Ollendick, 1983; Gullone, 1999), derived from the adult Fears Survey Schedule developed by Wolpe and Lang (1964; Gullone, 2000). To assess self-report of fears in younger children, different types of iconic representations of their feelings have been developed. One of the earliest is Kelley's (1976) "Fear Thermometer" that allowed children ages 4-5 to quantitatively distinguish their fear of the dark intensity according to different colors (Murphy, 1985). The Koala Fear Questionnaire is another standardized self-report scale for assessing fears in children aged 4-12; this scale also employs iconic representations to index the intensity of children's feelings (Muris et al., 2003). In recent years, researchers have tried to get as close as possible to the children's perspective of their experience of fears. To achieve this, different techniques have been employed, such as listing (children are asked to list what they are afraid of), drawings, storytelling, and structured and semistructured

interviews (Gullone, 2000; Kayyal & Widden, 2015; Loxton, 2009; Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2008). Despite a variety of different instruments having been developed in the past few years, however, Lewis and his colleagues (2021) argued that there was "a lack of validated self-report instruments for children to complete specific to dark fears." It should be noted that all of these self-reports focus exclusively on *what* children are afraid of, not on *why* they are afraid or on how they make sense of their fears.

Traditionally, young children, such as preschoolers, have not been considered reliable sources of meaning. In fact, research with young children is usually a process that is devised by adults, applied to children with results interpreted by adults, generalized and presented as a theory of childhood (Hill et al., 1996). Longstanding doubt in science that children 5 and younger can have cognitive and communicational skills needed for meaningful qualitative enquiry has persisted even into the 21st century (Birbeck & Drummond, 2005). To the extent that qualitative research with young children has occurred in modern developmental science, it has tended to be part of the pilot stages of larger quantitative studies that seek standardized results. However, the study of qualitative, first-person phenomenological accounts of preschoolers' experience has enjoyed a revival of interest in recent years (e.g., Celik & Sahin-Sak, 2019; Fielden et al., 2011; Noggle & Stites, 2018; Peters & Kelly, 2011), confirming that children, even preschoolers, can meaningfully participate as respondents (Hatch, 1995; Scott, 2000). Advocates for inclusion of children in these studies suggest designs that concentrate on their abilities rather than on their inabilities (Spencer & Flinn, 1993; Hill et al., 1996; Alderson, 2008; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000; see also Birbeck & Drummond, 2005). The quality and quantity of preschoolers' responses can be improved by creating

supportive and accepting environments and fostering a feeling of well-being (Carter et al., 1996; Powel & Thomson, 2001). But there is still a lack of qualitative interviewing of children with respect to the nature and content of their fears generally and fear of the dark in particular. The purpose of this study was to address this deficit—and in the process add critical first-person experience to inform the field's understanding of why children are afraid of the dark.

To summarize, fear of the dark in studies of normally developing and clinical populations is often conflated with other fears and conditions (nighttime fears, phobias, and anxieties). Lacking is research that is child centered in the sense of probing the meaning that children assign to their fears. Work on children's fears is filtered largely through adult perspectives; it is adults, not children, who are ultimately supplying the questionnaires or vignettes for stories or semistructured interviews. Therefore, even though several explanations—and even some initial empirical work—exist for why darkness is normatively scary for children in early childhood, how children themselves make sense of darkness and find it scary has yet to be investigated.

The Current Study

This study investigated how 4- to 5-year-old Russian children who, according to their parents, are afraid of the dark made sense of and experienced their fear, through the voices and words of the preschoolers themselves.

What we know about fear of the dark largely comes from studies conducted in Western societies. Despite recent interest in studying non-English-speaking children and their fears, such studies remain rare (Kayyal & Widden, 2015). In fact, almost all of the research related to childhood fears comes from English-speaking populations, though

more recently, non-Western societies have been examined to some extent (e.g., Kayyal & Widden, 2015; Ollendick et al., 1996). I chose to sample a Russian population for my study because no research that specifically concentrated on children's fear of the dark had been conducted on Russian children. The largest study evaluating fears in Russian children was implemented more than 40 years ago, by Alexander Zaharov in Saint-Petersburg in 1982 (Zaharov, 2000). Zaharov assessed a sample of 2,134 children and adolescents using The Fears in the Houses questionnaire (Panfilova, 1999). The Zaharov studies found that the three most prominent nighttime fears for preschoolers were fear of the dark, fear of being left alone, and fear of being in an enclosed space. In his monograph, Zaharov psychodynamically explained the emergence of fear of the dark by speculative appeal to birth trauma, specifically, the experience of babies in the womb and during delivery (Zaharov, 2000; Shelkovnikova, 2009).

The following research question guided my study: How do preschoolers make sense of fear of the dark? In a semistructured interview that targeted children's fears and fantasies related to darkness, I asked the children what made the darkness scary. To make children feel more comfortable during the interviews, I invited them to play a game involving a cat puppet named Sasha, who was scared of the dark. I specifically asked them why they thought Sasha might be afraid of the dark. In most cases, discussions of Sasha's fear spontaneously moved toward discussions of the children's own experiences with and ideas about fear of the dark.

This research and its data analysis are embedded in several theoretical assumptive frameworks. First, I employed an experiential qualitative approach, with the expressed goal of giving voice to the lived experience and sense-making of children (Braun &

Clarke, 2021. In this respect, I adopted a perspective on my participants' language as a means of communicating their lived experience and sense-making—as a tool for targeting children's perspectival, lived experience, and the phenomenological realities they construct, informed by a hermeneutics of empathy (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; see also Potter & Wetherell, 1987, and Widdicombe, 1995). Ontologically, my work was informed by a critical realist perspective and was motivated by my view of reality as neither reducible to a mind-independent set of truths nor to a purely contingent and wholly local set of social constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Epistemologically, my study was informed broadly by a contextualist framework—emphasizing the importance of embedding people in context—and more narrowly by a constructivist framework, with a specific focus on the individual construction of meaning (Madill et al., 2000; Overton, 2015). With respect to data analysis, I employed an inductive or bottom-up approach to my reflexive thematic analysis (TA), designed to ground and organize analysis as thoroughly as possible in the themes that children spontaneously constructed without constraining those themes through any specific theoretical lens concerning how fear of the dark develops in children. I also adopted a semantic or explicit form of reflexive TA, endeavoring to ground examination of interview transcripts in surface meaning to remain as close as possible to the meanings that preschoolers themselves seemed to convey (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Method

Participants

The target participant population were Russian children 4 and 5 years old (M = 4 years, 11 months, SD = 6.94 months) living in Russia who, according to their parents' report, were afraid of the dark. Thirty-one children participated in the study; 42% of the sample were girls (n = 13) and 58% were boys (n = 18). Most of the sample hailed from either Moscow or its suburbs, but one child lived in St. Petersburg, and one lived in Kaluga. All of the participants were ethnically Russian (one was of Russian and Turkish ethnicity). Seventy-seven percent of the parents reported having a college degree (n = 24, which in Russia means five years of college); 10% held a master's degree (n = 3; the lower percentage of master's degrees is understandable, because Russia did not have bachelor's and master's degrees during the Soviet era, and not all colleges and universities still offer this opportunity); and 13% held a doctoral degree (n = 4). Eighty-one percent of the parents said they had an average income (n = 25), whereas 19% reported an income higher than average (n = 6). Ninety-five percent of the parents were married (n = 29), 3% were divorced (n = 1), and 3% were in a civil partnerships (n = 1).

I selected children who were 4 and 5 years old because fear of the dark peaks in intensity by age 4 (Bauer, 1976; Derevensky, 1974; Draper & James, 1985; Jersild & Holmes, 1935a, b; Maurer, 1965) and children of that age and slightly older are eloquent enough to be able to talk about their experiences. All of the participants were able to comprehend and speak Russian to the degree expected of their developmental period. I, as a native Russian speaker, conducted all of the interviews remotely in Russian, employing the video conference call platform Zoom.

Inclusion criteria for the study included the following: all children had to be between 4 and 5 years of age; all children had to be afraid of the dark per caregiver report; all children had to be native Russian speakers, again per caregiver report; a caregiver for each child had to consent for the child to participate in the study; and all children needed to indicate a willingness to talk about things that scare children.

Recruitment

I reached out to parents of potential child participants through social media, specifically by posting a recruitment advertisement on my Facebook page in a format that could be shared. My initial plan was to also publicize the study in Russian mom's groups on Facebook, but because I received 35 responses within three weeks of my initial posting, I decided to stop the advertisement. Of the 35 families that contacted me, I selected 31 because they matched my inclusion criteria.

Procedure

The University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board approved the study in the late fall of 2020. I collected all of the interviews during the New Year holidays of 2020-2021. I chose the Zoom platform because of limitations on person-to-person contact imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Caregivers who responded to social media posts and were selected for research participation received electronic letters that explained the nature of the study and its procedures; a consent form was attached. After receiving the signed consent form back from them, I sent to the caregivers the Personal Information Form and scheduled the Zoom meetings. The Personal Information Form asked general questions such as marital status, annual income, and ethnicity of the parents/guardians as well as questions

regarding child ethnicity, native language, age, and gender. Caregivers filled out the Personal Information Form on behalf of the household.

I administered all Zoom interviews. An adult caregiver was asked to be present during each entire interview session to help the child to feel more comfortable; that adult caregiver was not allowed to contribute in any way while the child was participating in the interview in order to prevent any undue influence on the child's responses. Most caregivers were involved in the early minutes of the interview, yet many subsequently left once their children got going. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to about one hour.

All of the interviews had a similar structure: I started by establishing rapport with the child by asking her what she had been doing during the day, what her favorite toys were, and so on. After establishing rapport, I began a preinterview task: the listing task. Its goal was to generate a list of things or situations that each preschooler (children aged 4 and 5 years old) fears, volunteered spontaneously (without being provided exemplars or specific content) by the children themselves. Such tasks have been commonly employed in past research on fear in preschoolers (e.g., Bauer, 1976; Derevensky, 1974; Jersild & Holmes, 1935a, b; Loxton, 2009; Maurer, 1965). To administer the listing task, I began by saying to the child, "All of us are scared of some things, but we are scared of some things more than others. What are you most scared of?" I then gave the child the opportunity to volunteer her most salient fear. Following this, I asked, "Are there any other things that you are scared of?" and followed up that question with, "Anything else?" If the child answered the initial question by indicating that she should not be afraid of anything, I instead said, "Some children are afraid of some things some of the time,

aren't they? What are these children sometimes afraid of?" (after Derevensky, 1974; Maurer, 1965). The purpose of beginning each study session with this listing task was to establish a child-based record of what each child was most afraid of and to corroborate parental assertions of children's fear of the dark. Despite their parents' claims that their children were afraid of the dark, more than half of the children in my sample initially denied having such fear (see section on The Listing Task in Analysis and Interpretation).

Then I presented each child with a toy cat-puppet named Sasha. In the Russian language, cats have genders that affect conjugation of verbs and forms of adjectives. The gender of the puppet in each interview depended on the gender of the child—she-cat for the girls and he-cat for the boys (Sasha is a gender-neutral name in the Russian language). I created a playful atmosphere by pretending to talk for the puppet, saying that it was very scared and that its main fear was darkness.

After introducing the puppet, I asked each child the same open-ended question: "What makes Sasha scared of the dark?" I followed that question with other open-ended questions that targeted various contexts of darkness and the extent to which children are afraid of them. As each child elaborated on the specific contexts of darkness that scared her, I asked more-specific confirmatory yes/no questions. Not all of the questions were asked in each interview, as I accommodated to the natural flow of the conversations.

The following is a list of the questions I asked most often in the interviews; the order of the questions asked depended on the content dynamics that unfolded during each interview:

- What might happen to Sasha in the dark?

- Is Sasha afraid when Sasha is in the dark alone or with someone too? Why or why not?
- Is Sasha afraid of the dark only at night or during the day too? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Sasha might be afraid of the dark because Sasha cannot see very well?
- Would Sasha be afraid if Sasha covers the eyes and will not be able to see? Why or why not?
- If there is something hiding in the dark, what can it do to Sasha?
- Where is fear of the dark located in your body?

After asking my first open-ended question ("What makes Sasha scared of the dark?"), I provided children time to spontaneously volunteer and elaborate upon their answers; therefore, each conversation followed its unique course, largely contingent on the interests that the children spontaneously volunteered. I anticipated some of the themes that might arise during these child-driven conversations (such as the theme of monsters) but endeavored to not impose any a priori conceptualizations on my participants, following up instead on whatever explanatory agenda each child pursued.

Interviews were video-recorded with the adult caregiver's consent and the assent of each child. Video recordings were transcribed and translated from Russian into English by native Russian and English speakers and back-translated into Russian to ensure accuracy of the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed qualitatively using NVivo program software by two researchers working independently—Maria McCready and Mattilyn Wiseman, who are doctoral students at UNM's Department of Psychology. We employed reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), specifically reflexive TA, which is an interpretative method of analysis that revolves around generating recurrent patterns or themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive TA analysis has been effectively employed in the study of first-person experiential accounts of preschooler understanding and sense-making (Fielden et al., 2011; Peters & Kelly, 2011).

Data analysis consisted of an iterative, six-step approach as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The first step involved initial familiarization with the data and repeated reading of the interviews. Because one of the coders was also the person who conducted all of the interviews, we dedicated time for the second coder to read all of the materials and to correct English grammar.

During the second step, we uploaded all of the interviews into NVivo software and line-by-line coded them (names of the codes stayed as close as possible to the words of the children; the first round of coding yielded 1,774 codes for McCready and 1,492 for Wiseman) and collated the codes into broader reoccurring patterns (24 parental codes, each of which included child codes—McCready, 15 parental codes—Wiseman).

The third step involved creating overarching themes for codes and placing them into a hierarchy. We used visual representation, or what Braun and Clarke (2006) have termed a thematic map, for this stage. The themes were developed creatively, produced at the intersection of our theoretical assumptions and the data. We generated themes, or

interpretive stories, about the data in order to achieve richer, more nuanced understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After creating the set of themes independently, both coders met and compared their results. The themes we came up with were similar, but the hierarchies of the themes were different for each coder. We also discussed how inconsistent many children were and what that might indicate. Therefore, we decided to return to the second step of reflexive TA—to the codes themselves and interviews—in order to ensure that the specific content of children's responses dovetailed with the created set of themes.

The fourth step consisted of reviewing the themes. During this step, the two researchers met again and discussed their candidate themes and refined them until consensus was reached between the coders, though ideal consensus of meaning was not our goal (according to Braun and Clarke, "collaborative coding is used to enhance understanding, interpretation and reflexivity, rather than to reach a consensus about data coding" (2021). The purpose of the collaboration was to check our assumptions and to make them more explicit for the readers.

The fifth step involved the final defining and naming of the themes; we established the essence of each theme and determined what aspect of the data each theme captures. We also searched for quotes from the data that represented each theme appropriately.

The last step consisted of producing the report and organizing the final write-up to marry thematic elaboration with illustrative transcript extracts. It is important to note that this analytic process "requires a continual bending back on oneself—questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpreting and coding the data" (Braun &

Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Thus, the process was inherently nonlinear, and describing it as a set of steps belies "the open, exploratory, flexible and iterative nature of the approach" (p. 593).

Analysis and Interpretation

The basic research question guiding this study revolved around how preschoolers make sense of fear of the dark. Reflexive TA of participants' responses yielded two major components of meaning, or overarching themes, addressing this question: (a) *What makes darkness more scary?* and (b) *What makes darkness less scary?* Wiseman and I had several discussions concerning inclusion of the second overarching theme because it revolved around different protective mechanisms against fear-inducing characteristics of darkness. However, we decided to maintain the second theme because many children spontaneously talked about it in elaborative detail, suggesting this was important for them in relationship to fear of the dark. In subsequent interviews, I started asking about protection, and those questions provided even more details. Moreover, talking about what children find protective might be helpful in creating treatments for those children with high levels of distress related to the fear of the dark.

We mutually agreed upon six major themes, or focal points of meaning, that characterized participants' responses, three of which applied to the first question and three to the second. There is a level of mirroring between these two overarching themes. Table 1 presents a summary of them. With respect to the first overarching theme—What makes darkness more scary?—the three specific themes are: *Darkness is scary because various entities inhabit it* ("entities"); *Something bad can happen in the dark* ("happenings"); and *Darkness is scary because it is darkness* ("qualities"). As to the

second overarching theme—What makes darkness less scary?—the three specific themes are: *Dealing with fear of darkness with people and objects* ("entities"); *Dealing with fear of the dark with action* ("happenings"); and *Dealing with fear of the dark with nice qualities* ("qualities"). It is important to note that, in our data corpus, themes were rarely presented as wholly isolable concepts but instead were intertwined. Nonetheless, despite some aspects of children's meaning-making clearly overlapping across the themes, the themes, both at an overarching level and at a more specific level, provide a good categorical breakdown of children's understanding.

Table 1.

List of Focal Points of Meaning and Examples

	What makes darkness more scary?	**What makes darkness less scary?**
Entities	*Darkness is scary because various entities inhabit it* (e.g., monsters, ghosts, thieves, animals).	*Dealing with fear of the dark with people and objects* (e.g., mommy, toy, blanket, flashlight, candy, Christmas tree).
Happenings	*Something bad can happen in the dark* (e.g., getting hurt or lost, nightmares, feeling lonely, scary cartoons or stories, noises, thunderstorms).	*Dealing with fear of the dark with action* (e.g., listening to music, fairy tales, looking at light, hugging mommy or toys).
Qualities	*Darkness is scary because it is scary* (qualities of darkness and entities appearing in the dark: scary,	*Dealing with fear of the dark with nice qualities* (e.g., nice, new, old,

	frightening, black, dark, cowardly, noisy, dirty, loud, bright).	loved, sharp, strong, brave, soft, loud, bright).

Darkness is associated mostly with negative entities, happenings, and qualities; protection is associated mostly with positive ones. In the next sections, I discuss each cell of the previous table and provide specific data that refer to the themes. I start with themes that answer the first question–*What makes darkness more scary?*—and proceed with the second overarching theme—*What makes darkness less scary*?

There are three levels of hierarchy of themes: overarching themes (darkness and protection from darkness); main themes (entities, happenings, and qualities that apply to each of the overarching themes); and subthemes that will be cited in the context of discussion of each cell of the table.

After completing the fifth step of reflexive TA (final defining and naming of the themes), I created a word cloud in NVivo from all of the children's answers from the interviews. All nouns; adjectives; and most verbs, except for auxiliary ones, were kept. Removed were my name; names of the participants and Sasha the cat-puppet; words such as "yes," "no," "please," "thank you," and "OK;" adverbs such as "else," "more," and "less;" prepositions; articles; and conjunctions.

Figure 1.

NVivo created Word Cloud of the children's answers from the interviews

As shown in Figure 1, the most popular nouns from participants' interviews were "monsters," "light," "ghosts," "mom," "darkness," "people," "bed," "flashlight," "smell," "sounds," "help," "blanket," and "toy." That demonstrates that, despite the meaning of darkness being at the forefront of each interview, children in my sample also frequently appealed to "light" and objects that minimize the harm of darkness (e.g., "mom," "blanket," and "toy"). The most popular adjectives or qualities across interviews were "dark," "scary" or "scarier," "afraid," and "dangerous" but also "good." Common verbs included "scare," "light," "hide," "sound" and "smell," "protect," "help," "hide," and "fall." Those words align well with the table of themes I created, but this is addressed in more detail when discussing main themes.

As recommended by Braun and Clarke in their practical guide to reflexive TA (2021, I avoided quantification language in discussion of this study's reflexive TA. However, I think it is important to show that certain main themes and subthemes had high prevalence across the data corpus, whereas other themes and subthemes were less prevalent. Accordingly, the terms "majority" and "most" were used for themes mentioned by from between 15 and 28 children. Terms such as "almost all," "commonly," and "most popular" were applied for themes mentioned in more than 28 interviews. "Sometimes" and "some" were used in conjunction with themes that appeared in more

than four but in fewer than 15 interviews. The word “few” refers to two, three, or four participants.

All of the participants were deidentified and renamed. I reported the gender of children and their age when quoting them (corresponding to information their parents endorsed on the personal information forms) but replaced their actual names with arbitrary yet common Russian female and male names, e.g., Vasilisa, 5 years, 8 months.

The Listing Task

The listing task, during which children volunteered different things or events that were scary for them, yielded the following results. A total of 14 children reported being afraid of fantastical creatures (e.g., monsters, ghosts, spirits, vampires, Baba Yaga, witches, zombies), and 11 named darkness as one of their fears. Ten children found animals and insects to be scary, such as wolves, tigers, lions, dogs, cats, mice, sharks, spiders, and worms. And seven children said they were afraid of scary people (e.g., robbers, soldiers, criminals, strangers, and scary people). Two children reported fear of thunderstorms; two were afraid of getting hurt; two mentioned heights; and two named scary sounds. Some idiosyncratic fears that children mentioned included fire, black holes, death, feeling shame, horror movies, and making scary faces in the mirror. Finally, six children said they were not afraid of anything.

It is important to note that little to no one-to-one correspondence arose between entities or situations that children mentioned during the listing task and their responses to the open-ended interview question, “What makes Sasha scared of the dark?” Children who mentioned ghosts as feared entities during the listing task ($N = 8$), for example, raised different concerns in response to the first question of the semistructured interview,

talking about glowing things, animals, blackness of darkness, and nothing being seen (Ludmila, 4 years, 6 months); about thieves (Anastasia, 4 years, 8 months); about wolves (Konstantin, 4 years, 11 months); about darkness itself and lights in the dark (Lev, 4 years, 1 month); about hitting something (Anton, 4 years, 1 month); and so on. Only two children cited ghosts as reasons for darkness to be scary for Sasha. Children who talked about animals during the listing task brought up getting lost as a reason for darkness to be scary (Vasilisa, 5 years, 8 months); as well as monsters (Olga, 5 years, 7 months, and Irina, 5 years, 8 months); impaired vision and getting hurt (Sophia, 5 years, 4 months, and Aleksey, 4 years, 1 month); something big coming (Igor, 5 years, 9 months); bright lights (Demid, 4 years, 8 months); and strangers in black clothes (Pelageia, 5 years, 6 months). Participants who said they were not afraid of anything during the listing task generated a wide variety of answers to the main question of the interview about Sasha. Alexander (4 years, 5 months) and Vera (5 years, 6 months), for example, despite claiming not to be afraid of anything, brought up monsters as the main reason for darkness to be scary for Sasha the cat. Feeling lonely was the main reason for darkness to be scary for Anna (5 years, 1 month), whereas dragons in the dark were especially scary for Egor (5 years). According to Stepan (4 years, 1 month), dogs made of Legos can scare Sasha because everything can be imagined in the dark. Finally, the 11 children who explicitly mentioned darkness as something they were afraid of were not qualitatively different as a group from the other 22 children.

Darkness is Scary Because Various Entities Inhabit it

Olga's (5 years, 7 months) response to the lead-off question, "What makes Sasha scared of the dark?" was representative of the most popular answer to that question:

"Because there are monsters in the dark." That reply also is reflected in the word cloud, see Figure 1. The majority of the children in my sample mentioned various entities or creatures in the dark—both real and fantastical ones—as sources of fear. Among fantastic entities mentioned were monsters, ghosts, aliens, Baba Yaga, Koschei the Immortal, dragons, and idiosyncratic fantastical creatures. Real entities included thieves, robbers, and various animals. That aligns well with the idea that the main source of nighttime fears derives from TV and children's books (Muris et al., 1997, 2001) but deviates significantly from Zaharov's (2000) research, in which creatures from Russian fairy tales and literature—such as wolves, Baba Yaga, Barmalei, and Karabas-Barabas—were the most widely mentioned sources of fear for Russian children (Zaharov, 2000). Zaharov's scholarship retains the normative status in Russian psychological science circles, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, many more Western cartoons and books have become available to Russian children and may well constitute more-prominent sources of fear for these children than Russian traditional folklore.

Most children enthusiastically talked about fantastical creatures. I was particularly struck by this during my first interviews and thus began, in subsequent interviews, to ask additional questions, resulting in children producing longer narrations about entities in the dark. Some children specifically focused on describing the looks of darkness inhabitants. What follows provides a vivid example of such description, recorded from Olga, 5 years, during the second interview that I conducted in response to the lead-off question, "What makes Sasha scared of the dark?"

Olga:	Well, because there are monsters in the dark.
Maria:	Are there monsters? What do they look like?

Olga: They are tusky with big ears. *(She showed how they look, very artistically.)*

Maria: What do their eyes look like?

Olga: They can have even a million eyes!

Maria: What color are they?

Olga: Black.

Maria: And what do they do?

Olga: They crawl over my blanket at night.

As demonstrated, Olga readily described the monsters that she believed inhabited her darkness, and they looked nothing like the humans or animals with which she was familiar. She also talked about monsters crawling over her blanket at night. For some children, blankets seemed to serve as an object of protection (see section *Dealing with fear of the dark with people and objects*) so monsters crawling over her blanket may represent for her their attempt to cross into her world.

Some children, such as Vera (5 years, 6 months), also described where monsters lived or hid during the day:

Maria: Why is Sasha afraid of the dark?

Vera: Well, because some monsters can appear.

Maria: Monsters! I see. Where do they come from?

Vera: Well, they can hide somewhere in the morning, and when the evening comes, they appear and walk around. They brush their teeth. I do not know why. . . . Maybe they come through the door. Maybe they

come through the window and clean it, too (laughing).

Maria: Where do they hide during the day?

Vera: In dark places. For example, under a bed. Someone will get up, and they will drag him by the leg. They also hide in dark corners, basements, attics—where people do not go. You go there to take a toy before going to bed, and there is a monster!

Maria: Tell me, what do they look like.

Vera: They are one-eyed, toothy, thorny, one-legged, one-handed.

In this example from Vera, monsters behaved more like humans—they brushed their teeth, cleaned the window, but they did it during the night. During the day they hid "where people do not go"—in dark corners, attics, under the bed. Occasionally, children also said monsters hide in caves, woods, between the walls or underground. When children mentioned ghosts as inhabitants of the dark, they talked about them having their own houses or castles far away from human homes. However, according to the same children, monsters and other inhabitants of the dark also entered their houses at night through doors, windows, mirrors, and ladders. It seemed like our human world became more penetrable for these creatures at night. And that was scary for children.

What can monsters do to children? Some children reported that monsters can make scary sounds, could drag children into dark places or caves, and, scariest of all, they could kill them by tearing people to pieces and cutting or eating them:

Maria: OK. What else do the monsters do?

Irina, 5 years, 8 months:	They frighten.
Maria:	How?
Irina:	A-a-a-a-a (she is screaming).
Mikhail, 4 years 5 months:	They can kidnap because a kid is very expensive.
Maria:	What else?
Mikhail:	They can eat you up.

Inhabitants of the dark have unworldly, inverted characteristics—they make frightening sounds, have too many or too few eyes or extremities, can be shaped as squares (Igor, 5 years, 9 months) or have a TV screen where their face would be (Ludmila, 4 years, 6 months). Some children mentioned that monster's eyes glow and that that was especially scary for them (the word "eyes" had high frequency on the word cloud as well; see Figure 1). These inhabitants walked through windows and mirrors; they lived where humans do not normally venture. Occasionally, children knew that monsters were not real, but because the presence of monsters was emotionally charged, it was hard for the children to put their fear aside under circumstances in which monsters could be present, namely in the darkness. Some of the children said they believed monster lives resembled overturned human lives; if people get up in the morning and proceed with their morning routines, monsters engage in similar activities in the evening and continue with their frightening lives in the dark.

Ghosts were second in endorsed popularity for fantastical inhabitants of darkness. Except for their having a more stable appearance—being white ("They are made of napkins" (Sergei, 4 years)) and living in a castle—they behaved similarly to monsters. Some children reported that ghosts made scary sounds, hid during the day, and could drag people into their realm.

Maria: You said that ghosts appear in the dark. My kitty is very afraid of ghosts. Why do they appear only in the dark and not during the day?

Pavel, 5 years, 2 months: Because ghosts are afraid of the light. When you are not asleep, they can attack you.

Maria: What could they do to our kitty if they attack him?

Pavel: They do it like this: “Oo-oo-oo-oo-oo!” (He showed how ghosts can attack by making intimidating sounds).

Monsters and ghosts were not the only creatures who inhabited darkness. According to most of the children, darkness seemed to be overrun by different entities, from germs to unknown “big ones.” Among the real entities mentioned by children were robbers and animals. The thieves and robbers could break into the house during the night, so mostly, children described their actions realistically.

Maria: I see. You said that thieves can get into the house. When are they more dangerous, in the dark or in the light?

Vera, 5 years: At night. That is why we need cameras. We can put them around our summerhouse and keep the door unlocked. Bandits can come and rob us because everyone is asleep and cannot fight back. Therefore, we need cameras everywhere—underground,

undersea. Otherwise, you wake up in the morning, want to take your favorite toy, and there is nothing.

The children also said robbers could assume unrealistic qualities in the dark:

Dmitry, 4 years 1 month: Because they can cut you.

Maria: Who?

Dmitry: Criminals.

Maria: . . . Where do they come from in the dark?

Dmitry: They can appear out of walls.

Maria: Can it also happen in the light?

Dmitry: Only in the dark.

Maria: How do they get through walls?

Dmitry: [They] just suddenly appear near a wall, a million of them.

Those comments were other examples of our human world could become more penetrable for evil during the dark. It corresponded well to traditional Russian beliefs that during the night, the boundary between the human world and other worlds becomes less solid, and evil can penetrate our world through walls, doors, windows, and mirrors, all of which require specific protection (Osorina, 2000).

Among the real entities that could appear or become especially dangerous or scary in the dark were different animals. One of the participants explained it well in evolutionary terms:

Natalia, 5 years, 1 month: I think that since ancient times, animals and different people were afraid of the dark because of

different wild animals that can spring out of the darkness. Bears, for instance, and other wild things.

Some children feared that animals, no matter the size, would appear unexpectedly and hurt them, jumping, running, or crawling around without being seen. Certain animals that were not frightening during the day, such as snails or birds, could become scary for some children because of their physical characteristics, such as being slimy or having feathers. As in their descriptions of robbers, some children reported the qualities of animals in the dark realistically to the best of their knowledge. However, sometimes animals gained fantastical qualities such as becoming unrealistically big or they only existed in the dark and could penetrate children's homes only in the darkness.

Maria: And when are they [animals] scarier, during the day or at night?

Vera, 5 years: I think at night because it can sneak up. You can lie quietly in your bed and hear 'roar,' look around, turn the lights on, and there is a panther under your feet.

Maria: Are you afraid of snails?

Anastasia, 4 years, 8 months: No, I am not. I love them. I like to play with them.

Maria: Would you play with a snail in the dark?

Anastasia: No, because in the dark it can crawl under your shirt.

Maria: And what will happen if it crawls under your shirt?

Anastasia: The person will become slippery and sticky.

Maria: . . . When do you think animals are scarier—in the dark or the light? For example, wolves.

Anastasia: Wolves are scarier in the dark because they can bite.

Maria: Can they bite in the light?

Anastasia: No, in the light they run away.

Maria: When are all sorts of insects scarier—in the dark or the light?

Pelageia, 5 years, 6 months: Also, in the dark, because it seems as if an evil person is touching you.

Maria: When are big animals more dangerous—in the dark or in the light?

Yuriy, 5 years, 7 months: Of course, in the dark.

Maria: Why are you saying ‘of course?’

Yuriy: Because they can bite you ’til death.

Maria: Can they bite like that in the light?

Yuriy: They can. They always can.

Maria: Then why are you saying they’re more dangerous in the dark?

Yuriy: Because you will not see them.

Maria: How do they frighten children?

Kira, 5 years, 5 months: In short, there is also a wolf. He bites their heads off.

Maria: Do all these animals live only in the dark? Do not they exist in the light?

Kira: They do not. They appear only when night falls.

It is important to note that not all of the children endorsed scary qualities for animals or insects in the dark. Some children, such as Egor, age 5, did not find them frightening during the night. For some, animals were scary and insects were not, whereas for others who were afraid of animals in the dark, some particular animals were especially scary, such as wolves, bats, black widows, or cobras. I found the fear of black widows and cobras especially interesting because there are no black widows or cobras in central Russia, which shows how information received from media sources or heard during trips could influence the children's understanding of the world and fears in particular.

Different entities in the dark were by far the most popular theme across transcripts, as most children mentioned either fantastical creatures and real negative characters such as thieves or criminals or animals as the reason for darkness to be scary. Fantastical creatures looked nothing like humans. They often received human characteristics but in an inverted way; they could have human routines during the night, but their main "job" was to scare children. Real entities, on the other hand, might act in an unrealistic way, with their negative qualities being exaggerated, which made them especially scary. Despite modern children not mentioning traditional Russian folklore characters as readily as previous generations of children have (only one child mentioned

Baba Yaga and Koschei the Immortal and another one Barabashka), the actions that these characters performed—such as penetration into houses through walls or mirrors, dragging children into their realms, eating, or tearing them apart—thematically resembled the texts of traditional Russian children's folklore (Osorina, 2000).

Darkness is Scary Because Something Bad Can Happen in the Dark

Many children said they could not see as well in the dark as they could in the light. Thus, another important theme that emerged from the children's transcripts was that something bad could happen to them because their vision was impaired. These children explained darkness through negative happenings in the dark, e.g., one could get hurt or lost:

Maria:	When is it scarier to get hurt, yourself?
Daniil, 5 years, 4 months:	In the dark.
Maria:	Why?
Daniil:	Because I cannot see it.

Maria:	Why do you think our kitty is afraid of the dark?
Sophia, 5 years, 4 months:	Because when it is dark, she does not see well and can stumble over something and get hurt.

Maria:	OK. What might happen to Sasha in the dark?
Vasilisa, 5 years:	She might get lost.

Though children sometimes explained those happenings as a consequence of impaired sight, it was not just the absence of vision that placed the child in more danger. For a few

children, darkness itself seemed to make the body more susceptible to injury and to render their surroundings more hazardous. For instance, one of the girls said the bones of her toy ferret became so fragile that "he [ferret] can break them, . . . you cannot fix it" (Sophia, 5 years); three boys said that you can get a hole in your foot (Egor, 5 years) or run into a door or a wall (Daniil, 5 years; Aleksey, 4 years, 1 month); and one girl said you can make a summersault and hit the closet in darkness (Natalia, 5 years). Some of the children said it was scarier to be sick in the dark than in the light, though for others it did not matter. When I asked why it was scarier to get hurt or sick in the dark, some children replied because no one would come to help:

Maria:	When is it scarier to get hurt—in the dark or in the light?
Yuriy, 5 years:	In the dark.
Maria:	Why?
Yuriy:	Because no one is there. No one will help.

Yuriy's response raises another subtheme or feeling that some children reported in the darkness—"loneliness." Some of the children mentioned loneliness mostly in the context of getting lost, hurt, or sick, and suggested that adults were less likely to help them in darkness. Some children talked about that particular moment when their mom or dad left the room, which meant they would be alone for the rest of the night. Some children mentioned their feelings of sadness or fright when their caregiver left. Though they talked mostly about themselves, some of the children brought up the cat-puppet Sasha and said being alone was also especially scary for the puppet because it might not be able to find its bed and would need to curl up in a ball somewhere.

Maria: I see! You also said that the darkness can be scary. What could be terrible about it?

Anna, 5 years, 1 month: Well, in the dark, it seems to you that you are alone when there is nobody with you.

According to the children, when you are alone, anything bad can happen; monsters or other evil creatures can appear, and the world in general becomes a precarious place. Responses similar to that also were typical of children's traditional horror stories, where bad things usually happen in the absence of adults (Cherednikova, 2002).

Nightmares were another nighttime occurrence that some of the children described. Despite spontaneously raising the topic, these children were not eager to talk about nightmares in detail. One child, for example, foreclosed my question by saying that she would have a hard time falling asleep that night if we talked about nightmares anymore (Pelageia, 4 years, 5 years). Other children said they had ways to overcome their fear of nightmares by saying, "This is just a dream. . . ." (Natalia, 5 years) or "Dreams are only in your head" (Anastasia, 4 years). Such phrases likely were taught by the children's parents to help them to manage fears.

I brought up listening to scary stories or watching scary cartoons in the dark. I asked such questions because I remembered enjoying listening to them myself. Some children said it was scarier to listen to a story or watch a cartoon in the dark than in the light. Some of the children still watched cartoons in the dark (for instance, on their mother's phone (Irina, 5 years), but sometimes it was too uncomfortable if an older sibling, for instance, told scary stories (Yuriy, 5 years).

The fact that there was an inconsistency for participants between craving scary

stories or cartoons in the dark and being afraid of them aligns well with the results of anthropological research on Russian children, demonstrating that children begin showing interest in telling horror stories in the dark at around the age of 6 to 7 (when they also start elementary school in Russia). However, 4- to 5-year-olds already have the fears that are metaphorically expressed in children's horror stories, and the children are too afraid to enjoy listening to them (Osorina, 2000).

Maria: . . . When is it scarier to watch a scary cartoon—in the dark or the light?

Pavel, 5 years: In the dark, because you can't see anything around, and there will be a knife, like Freddy's, and it will cut all people. You will not see anything.

That fragment appears out of context because I asked about cartoons, and Pavel's reply likely referred to the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series that was popular in Russia in the 1990s (so much so that Freddy Krueger became a part of jokes and horror stories). But the way Pavel described Freddy dovetailed with the description of scary creatures in the dark, i.e., impaired vision and the sudden appearance of a person who has a knife who is about to hurt people around him.

Other occurrences that were particularly scary for many of the children in the dark were unknown noises and thunderstorms. Because vision is impaired in the dark, other senses become more prominent, so it is only natural that children must rely on their hearing to access their surroundings. The subtheme of scary sounds often accompanied mention of different entities that inhabited the darkness, such as monsters and ghosts, which were scary because they could scream or roar. However, for some children, quiet

noises in the dark were especially uncomfortable despite their understanding where such noises came from. One participant, for example, mentioned her dislike of snails in the dark because she said they made a quiet, scratchy noise (Anna, 5 years). Another participant, in response to my question of where the fear of the dark was located, replied:

Egor, 5 years:	In the pipes, actually. At night, sometimes it looks very scary in the pipes.
Maria:	What pipes do you mean?
Egor:	Pipes in houses, in which the water flows.
Maria:	Why are the pipes scary?
Egor:	If someone walks on them, then a sound is made. If someone speaks there, an echo is made.
Maria:	Who can walk on them?
Egor:	Some mice or a cat.

Egor was clearly afraid of the dark, and his account of what makes the darkness scary was realistic. Only once did he mention that there might be scary creatures in the dark, such as Baba Yaga or Koschei the Immortal. Mostly, he described darkness using real entities and what they can do to you, which wasn't very horrible, but he was still afraid of the unknown noises.

The sound of thunder was another nighttime fright that some children mentioned. One child even got upset talking about it (Sergei, 4 years), though for other children, thunderstorms were scarier during daylight or were not scary at all. For children who found thunderstorms scary in the dark, the unexpected nature of the thunder and its pairing with lightning were the most uncomfortable:

Maria:	Are you afraid of thunderstorms?
Vera, 5 years:	No, I am not. I just do not like when there is a loud bang. I can even make a jerk.
Maria:	When do you jerk harder, in the dark or in the light?
Vera:	In the dark. You are sitting quietly, watching cartoons, and there is a kaboom outside the window! You check the whole apartment, nothing fell. Kaboom, again! You turn around; there is nothing, too.
Maria:	Tell me, please, when is a thunderstorm scarier?
Elena, 5 years, 6 months:	In the dark.
Maria:	Why?
Elena:	Because it can cause lightning, and it will be very scary.

Despite creatures being the most popular theme, not all children were eager to explain the scary nature of darkness by mentioning its inhabitants. A few of the children said that adults in their lives had told them that fantastical beings were not real, so they were embarrassed to confirm such beliefs with me or just did not believe in them at all. For some of the children, discussion of inhabitants of darkness was too scary to do openly, so they would try to find more realistic explanations, such as what can happen to you in the dark. For the majority of the children, darkness was associated with negative happenings,

such as getting hurt; lost; feeling lonely; hearing scary noises; or watching or hearing creepy cartoons, stories, or nightmares.

Darkness is Scary Because it is Darkness

For the majority of the children, darkness had an inherently negative quality to it. As illustrated in the word cloud, adjectives such as "scary," "afraid," and "dangerous" were among the most popular words spoken by the children (see Figure 1). I halted interviews with two children because talking about darkness became too uncomfortable for them. And children did not simply argue that darkness itself was bad; they also suggested that darkness conferred negative qualities to the world around them and produced evil creatures. Here are some examples of how children talked about darkness in general:

Maria:	And what is the darkness like?
Vasilisa, 5 years:	It is dark.
Maria:	How can the darkness be described?
Vasilisa:	It is scary.
Maria:	OK. What is the darkness, itself?
Anton, 4 years, 1 month:	It is scary.
Maria:	OK. Is the darkness good or bad?
Anton:	It is bad.
Anastasia's mom:	What else is scary in the dark?
Anastasia, 4 years:	Everything! Everything is scary!

Maria: And how does it [darkness] smell?

Mikhail, 4 years: It smells scary.

For some of the children, talking about darkness was so scary that they got emotionally agitated. Often, they could not put their finger on what it was, in particular, that frightened them; instead, they simply explained the darkness as scary because it was darkness. If I asked why, they sometimes said: “I do not know.”

The next fragment of interview proved most dramatic for me. In the beginning of the interview, Sergei, a 4-year-old boy, was interested in discussing darkness with me, so much so that his mom left the room because he seemed so comfortable. Yet at a later point, he got upset, and I had to conclude the meeting:

Sergei: If it is very dark, then it gets somewhat creepy, especially if it is cluttered and dirty around. There can also be scary sounds. Mom, could you close the door, and I will tell you! (Yelling at his mom). Not that one! (He starts crying. His mom closes a different door.) I am really scared of the dark, awfully! Because it is creepy.

His mom and I consoled him by discussing his favorite toys, saying he was very brave, so he left happy. But I did not believe it was ethical to continue discussing darkness with him. For Sergei, darkness was even worse or scarier when it involved “scary noises” or was “cluttered and dirty around.” It was like darkness was not just bad by itself, it got worse in the world that was full of bad qualities—dirty and cluttered.

Some of the children explained what made darkness scary in more detail:

Maria: Where is it scarier—in the forest or the room?

Aleksey, 4 years: It is scarier here. The darkness is scary both in the forest and in the room. It is just that everything is close here, and nothing is visible at all. You need a flashlight. . . .

Maria: Does everything look different in the dark?

Aleksey: Yes.

Maria: Why does everything look different in the dark?

Aleksey: Because it is black.

For Aleksey, the absence of vision and blackness of the environment rendered darkness scary (black was also the most popular color in children's traditional horror stories [Cherednikova, 2002]). He also said "everything looks different," and that was a subtheme that appeared in a few interviews. For some children, darkness really changed the quality of the world around them to be more negative; it accentuated the badness of the environment.

Maria: Tell me, please, do things change in the dark or do they just become not visible?

Dmitry, 4 years: They change.

Maria: If there is a Christmas tree in a room, will it be scary there in the dark?

Anastasia, 4 years: If you turn it on, then no. It will be beautiful and not scary.

Maria: If the string lights are off, it will be scary?

Anastasia: It will be scary and not pretty!

Children talked about objects in their rooms becoming different in darkness, such as a picture on the wall peacefully depicting construction work "changed" into a drawing of a scary bear (Daniil, 5 years). One girl told me that a friend's toy snake became alive and crawled on her bed at night (Pelageia, 4 years, 5 months). Another boy advised me to not take a toy car to the room where my cat-puppet slept because it had teeth, and it was very scary in the dark:

Maria: What can it [the toy car] do in the dark?

Aleksey, 4 years: It can bite the kitty to death.

For Daria, darkness affected the world to such an extent that, even though tigers and lions were frightening by themselves, darkness made them even scarier:

Maria: When are lions and tigers scarier—in the dark or the light?

Daria, 5 years, 1 month: In the dark.

Maria: Why?

Daria: Because the dark is the scariest thing.

Another reason reported by a few children for darkness being inherently scary was the blank slate quality it has. One cannot see anything, leaving darkness a void that children's imagination can fill.

Maria: Why is it scary in the dark but not in the light?

Stepan, 4 years, 1 month: In the dark, everything can be imagined because everything is black. For example, if I approach a curtain, I can get a bit scared.

By distorting vision, darkness affords children time and space to turn inward and to inhabit their environment with the products of their imagination—an imagination previously influenced by a developmental history of cartoons, books, and story consumption. Darkness being unnatural (children spend most of their waking hours in the light) and connected with negative qualities may facilitate children's imagining negative, bad, scary creatures inhabiting it. According to some of the children, monsters and ghosts did not just look repulsive, they also smelled bad, liked disorder, could live at a landfill, and hated everything positive and nice.

Yuriy, 5 years: But they [monsters] can be made from garbage. Then they smell.

Maria: Well, garbage. Do the monsters like order or disorder?

Yuriy: Disorder.

Maria: And what about monsters?

Ludmila, 4 years: Monsters smell like poop.

Maria: Does the blanket protect you somehow?

Elena, 5 years: It serves as a disguise. They [monsters] might think it is just a coffin there. Because they're as stupid as a tree stump.

Maria: Do they [ghosts] smell like anything?

Ludmila, 4 years: Bad. They also stomp and stomp and stomp their wheels and have a big round eye instead of their face.

Igor, 5 years: I like the smell of mint.

Maria: If we put a mint bush in your bedroom, and it will smell so delicious, will that thing come at night? (He talked earlier about a "big thing" that can come in the dark.)

Igor, 5 years: It will think that something smells bad here and immediately run away.

Maria: So, this big thing doesn't like good smells, does it?

Igor: Yes, it likes very bad smells but not good ones.

Maria: They do not like any good things?

Elena, 5 years: They like a little bit of good stuff. For them, the good things are the dirt in the house, different puddles.

Maria: Do they like disorder?

Elena: Sure. Most often they can be found in landfills.

Darkness was not just negative by itself; for the children, it spread the negative qualities to the broader environment, even sometimes physically changing it. Bad qualities such as cowardice of toys or cruelty of monsters became associated with darkness as well. For these children, darkness was inherently bad, and its negativity or badness was the main focal point of meaning.

Dealing with Fear of the Dark with People and Objects

Though my central research question targeted the issue of what makes darkness scary, children also spontaneously addressed concerns about how to protect themselves from darkness.

The presence of an adult, especially their mother, provided excellent protection from darkness, the children said. All of them agreed that being with their mom in the dark made darkness no longer scary; moreover, a few children who otherwise were not talkative, gave me a clear answer that darkness was not scary with their mother present. For my sample, then, the mother figure constituted the ultimate source of protection, though fathers sometimes served that function, too. Examples:

Maria: But how can a person protect himself from monsters? He has no claws.

Daria, 5 years: His mom or dad can.

Maria: If a baby is scared, who can he go to so that it becomes less scary?

Yuriy, 5 years: To his mom.

To my follow-up question about how a mother or any other adult can help in the dark, some children had difficulty answering, but others elaborated in great detail, with some explanations more realistic in orientation and others more fantastical.

Maria: Why does a mother or an owner help in the dark?

Yuriy, 5 years: Mom can turn on the lights everywhere.

Maria: But what do you think mom or dad can do in the dark?

Lev, 4 years, 1 month: They can protect.

Maria: How?

Lev: They will fight by a wardrobe and cut down nightmares.

Maria: How else can we help her [Sasha the puppet] to overcome her fear?

Anna, 5 years: You.

Maria: I can help? How?

Anna: My mother always holds my hand when I am scared.

Maria: Why [is it that] if mom comes, it will get less scary? What can mom do?

Anna: Mom can do anything. . . .

Maria:	If mom comes, then the monsters also burn out?
Anna:	Yes, mom's eyes are very bright.
Maria:	Is it scary if she is with her mom?
Anastasia, 4 years:	It is not scary with her mom at all, but it is scary without mom.
Maria:	Why?
Anastasia:	Because mom is brave. . . .
Maria:	How could Mommy protect the kitty in the dark?
Anastasia:	With toys. She will take the sword, the helmet, and the shields, and save the kitty.
Maria:	So, mommy is that strong?
Anastasia, 4 years:	Yes, mommy is strong and brave!
Maria:	Can the ghosts attack mom?
Anastasia:	No, no, no. They will not attack Mom. Mom is brave, and all ghosts are afraid of her. I love my mommy!
Maria:	Let's imagine I am with the kitty in the dark. Will he get scared in this case?
Stepan, 4 years:	No, he will not.
Maria:	How can I help him?
Stepan:	Because Mom is the most important person.

Maria:	I see. Are monsters afraid of the most important people?
Stepan:	. . . When you are with mom, nothing will be imagined.
Maria:	What's so good about mom?
Stepan:	Her heart is good, normal sized. When your mom is hugging [you], you do not see anything imaginary and fall asleep really fast.

As illustrated, children described their mothers as the best and most important people in the world, with glowing protective qualities that prevented anything bad from happening or even being imagined. In the presence of the children's mother, monsters burn, and ghosts disappear; the mothers belonged to the light, and her eyes burned monsters just as light did. On some level, some children in my sample viewed their caregivers and monsters as antagonists. Where caregivers nurture and protect, monsters scare and kill. Where caregivers are brave and smart, monsters are stupid and cowardly. Where caregivers live their lives during the light time and do normal human things, monsters are awake during the night, and their lives are antithetical to human life. Monsters and caregivers are opposites, like darkness and light.

For most children, other objects could also offer protection in the absence of caregivers, such as pets, friends, toys, and blankets. Children were not as unanimous in their assertion that those living and nonliving things could always help, in contrast to the universal protective power of caregivers. Furthermore, the qualities that blankets and toys offered for protection varied considerably depending on the child. Pets and friends

seemed to confer protection similar to that of parents. Blankets and toys served a different function. Some children mentioned blankets as either a way to create a makeshift shelter or as a cover for hiding. As with anything makeshift, many children recognized the protective limitations of blankets, and some specifically endowed their blankets with qualities to afford them greater protection.

Maria: What do you do to not be afraid of them [monsters]?

Olga, 5 years: I hide under my blanket.

Maria: Tell me, please, if you cover yourself with a blanket in the dark, will it help you get rid of vampires and monsters?

Konstantin, 4 years, 11 months: No, it will not.

Maria: What could help against vampires and monsters?

Konstantin: A sword.

Maria: Does a blanket help?

Mikhail, 4 years: No, it doesn't. The monster will find you there, anyway.

Maria: Even if you cover yourself completely?

Mikhail: It is better to hide in the wardrobe, toilet room, or on the balcony.

Maria: Can a blanket protect you from all your scary mice?

Pavel, 5 years:	The mice will simply gnaw it. They have diamond teeth and diamond armor.
Maria:	Even an old favorite blanket will be gnawed?
Pavel:	No, the favorite one will not be gnawed, because they know that it is your favorite.
Maria:	If you cover yourself with a blanket, will the monsters come?
Elena, 5 years:	Then the monsters will not come because it is still light.
Maria:	Is it really light under the blanket?
Elena:	No, it is dark there. But if you pitch up a tent and turn on a light bulb inside, then it will be light.

Children's explanations for why blankets offered them protection varied. Some could not offer any explanation, and others focused on how blankets made them more or less visible, could make darkness less visible, and could be supplemented with lights or people to make them even more protective.

Maria:	What about blankets?
Stepan, 4 years:	If you get under a blanket or completely cover yourself with it and cover your eyes, you will be safe.
Maria:	Why does it help?
Stepan:	Because nothing is visible under it.

Maria: How can you protect yourself from all these things in the dark?

Pelageia, 4 years, 5 months: The first thing I did was cover myself with a blanket so that I could not be seen.

Maria: Why is it not scary under it?

Irina, 5 years: Probably because it is not as dark there as at night.

Maria: . . . What's the difference between the darkness at night and the darkness under the blanket?

Irina: The darkness under the blanket is not scary because there you can grab your mother's phone and watch cartoons on it.

Maria: Is it scarier to watch scary cartoons in the darkness?

Natalia, 5 years: Yes, it is. I sometimes snuggle under the covers, even get inside the blanket where the duvet cover is. It is very white inside like snow.

Maria: Does the favorite warm blanket help you against monsters?

Ludmila, 4 years: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!

Maria: Why?

Ludmila: Because it is warm.

As with blankets, the protective power of toys varied for the children. Some considered toys helpful; others did not. A few children considered toys in need of their own protection, and other children considered toys to be actively dangerous in the dark. The children also held different beliefs about the qualities that toys needed to possess in order to be helpful in the dark. Some children admitted that they slept with stuffed toys, and a few said they needed to keep a toy sword next to their bed for protection. For toys that resembled living creatures—such as dolls, Transformers, or animals—the children reasoned that those toys bore enough similarity to their caregivers to be helpful. Pavel, 5 years old, for example, in response to my asking if toys helped with fear of the dark, said, "A flashlight helps. So does a light bulb and all toys that can glow. You can use them to fight off." Denis, 5 years, 4 months, responded similarly. When I asked Igor (5 years) if the Sasha puppet would still be afraid in the dark with a toy in hand, he answered, "No, because they will be together, and they will not be afraid." Other children provided greater elaboration:

Maria:	You're holding the toy tight. Does that help too?
Mikhail, 4 years:	Yes, it does.
Maria:	Why?
Mikhail:	It will scratch everyone.
Maria:	Do stuffed toys help in the dark?
Pelageia, 5 years:	Yes, this bear helps me a lot. (She then showed me her stuffed bear.)
Maria:	How big! Tell me how it helps you.

Pelageia: I just hug him and cover myself with a blanket.

Maria: Do you sleep with toys yourself?

Anton, 4 years: Yes, with soft ones. (He then brought his toys to me.)

Maria: Wow, what a cool dinosaur. How does it protect you in the dark?

Anton: Scares away bad dreams.

Maria: Got it. What else can happen in the dark?

Kira, 5 years: (She brought her toys to me.)

Maria: Is that the bear you sleep with?

Kira: Yes, it is.

Maria: Why do you sleep with stuffed toys? Is it less scary with them?

Kira: It gets not scary at all.

Some other children, however, argued that toys do not serve much protective function, especially when compared to that of caregivers. When I followed up with Anastasia (4 years) about why she thought her brave bear toy would not help the Sasha puppet in the dark, she told me the toy would eat the Sasha puppet. Aleksey, 4 years old, asserted that all nonglowing toys were ineffective at protecting from darkness. Other children provided greater elaboration:

Maria: Can your favorite toy help to get rid of the monsters?

Daria, 5 years: No, it can't.

Maria: Why?

Daria: Because it seems to me that it will not help. If it helps, then she will hear the noise and run away because she will be scared.

Maria: Do you sleep with any toys?

Lev, 4 years: Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Maria: But do they help when you sleep with them?

Lev: No, they do not.

Maria: Why do you sleep with them, then?

Lev: Because sometimes I want to have something soft around . . . (Then he brought a toy to me.)

Maria: What a beautiful unicorn you have. Does it help you in the dark?

Lev: No, it doesn't. I am the one who protects us.

The word "light" emerged as one of the six most popular words spoken by children in the interviews. For many of them, any source of light was protective:

Maria: If there is a Christmas tree in a room, will it be scary in the dark there?

Pavel, 5 years: No, it will not. There are strings of lights on it that illuminate everything around. . . .

Maria: . . . Do toys help you not to be scared in the dark?

Pavel: A flashlight helps, so does a light bulb and all toys that can glow.

Several children took the devices they used to communicate with me to show their New Year's trees and said they believed a tree's lights rendered rooms less scary at night.

Maria: Do you want to show me something else?

Vasilisa, 5 years: Christmas tree! (She and her mom went to a different room.)

Maria: Is it less scary with a Christmas tree in the dark?

Vasilisa: Yes! Because garlands are glowing on it. (She showed me different ornaments.)

Maria: OK. What else?

Olga, 5 years: When there is a New Year's tree in the dark, it becomes much better because the balls on it shine in the light of the moon.

Maria: Well, when something glows or shines in the dark, it becomes not as dark?

Olga: Yes, it does. It is like light.

Natalia, 5 years: Sometimes, I imagine when I play that there might be snakes under my bed. I immediately jump over to my bed. I also think sometimes that I have snakes

around my blanket. I've had dreams before that there were red ants around me. Because of this, I woke up and could no longer fall asleep. But now I fall asleep easily because we turn on the Christmas tree.

The children explained why sources of light helped in different ways, and for some, light by itself housed a property of goodness (see subsequent section on *Dealing with Fear of the Dark with Nice Qualities*). Their explanations ranged from contending that Santa visited only when light was available, and favorite toys became alive in the light to even one's starting to hurt absent a flashlight:

Maria:	Does the light create anything?
Pavel, 5 years:	It creates different games.
Maria:	Can it create something bad or good?
Pavel:	It creates only good things. Except, if you do not learn a poem, it says that Father Frost will not bring you presents.

Maria:	Where is the [feeling of] fun located in your body?
Dmitry, 4 years:	In the belly button. Because that is where the ball is.
Maria:	What is this ball for?
Dmitry:	It listens to the song and enjoys [it].
Maria:	What does this ball do in the dark?
Dmitry:	It turns the light on in my belly. . . .

Aleksey, 4 years: When you walk without a flashlight, the tummy may be a little afraid of the dark.

Some children asserted that light dissolves darkness and helps them to see better, as illustrated by Vasilisa 5 years who said that, when shining a light, “the dark gets a little less visible.”

Several of the children told me that light was dangerous for monsters and other inhabitants of darkness:

Maria: Is it scary only in the dark? How about in the light?

Anna, 5 years: When exposed to light, it [monster] burns up and turns into a heap of ash.

Elena, 5 years: All monsters, even the reflections, only come out at night. If you turn on all lights in the house, they will die so quickly that you will not have time to blink an eye.

Maria: Why do they [ghosts] appear only in the dark and not during the day?

Pavel, 5 years: Because ghosts are afraid of the light.

Maria: If you shine a flashlight on this big thing, what will happen to it?

Igor, 5 years: Well, it will think that the sun is going to rise soon and will run back into the forest.

Anastasia, 4 years: Wolves are scarier in the dark because they can bite.

Maria: Can they bite in the light?

Anastasia: No, in the light, they run away.

A few of the children also pointed to the importance of light for avoiding getting lost in the dark. On occasion, however, some children said there are scary features that are unknown and that glow in the dark.

When discussing protective factors against darkness, most children emphasized caretakers, blankets, and toys as well as objects that could produce light (flashlight, lightbulbs, nightlights, glowing toys) and even light in general. Mothers were routinely seen as incomparable protectors. Other living forms of protection mentioned included pets, relatives, and friends. Because the interviews occurred during the children's winter break, some of them referenced New Year's trees as an important protector. Toys and blankets could replace caregivers in certain situations; for some children, they were helpful, but for others they were not. Some children argued that qualities of these protective objects could strengthen their security properties, a topic more thoroughly addressed in the section *Dealing with fear of the dark with nice qualities.*

Dealing with Fear of the Dark with Action

Another protective theme to emerge in some of the children's interviews concerned actions that could be taken to ward off the danger of darkness. Being active in the dark and having an ability to change one's environment were essential in conquering

the fear. Even turning on a beautiful piece of music, fairy tale, or nature sounds were enough to make children's rooms safer places.

Maria:	What else [can help you in the dark]?
Vasilisa, 5 years:	To read a fairy tale at night.
Vera, 5 years:	Did you know that I came to like sleeping? Before, I just lay down in the bed and could not close my eyes, but now I lie down a little bit with my eyes closed. Mom or dad starts to play some fairy tale recording for me, and that is it. I am already asleep.
	. . .
Maria:	Do you like nice sounds in your room when you fall asleep? Fairy tales or something else?
Vera:	Yes, I like to listen to some nice songs before falling asleep too.
Elena, 5 years:	I fall asleep more easily listening to Chevostik (a popular internet site that has audio stories).
Maria:	How does a bedtime story help?
Elena:	By nothing. It just helps.

Aleksey, 4 years: When someone walks alone without parents [in the dark], it gets sad. You need to turn on a fairy tale or music.

Children explained the usefulness of listening to music or fairy tales by appealing to their effect on monsters and other inhabitants of the dark. Nice music is intrinsically harmful to these inhabitants, they believed:

Maria: If you turn on the music?

Stepan, 4 years: Then they [monsters] will dance all night long.

Maria: And they will not be scary anymore?

Stepan: No, they will not.

Maria: If you listen to a bedtime story in the room, will it get less scary?

Kira, 5 years: Yes, it will.

Maria: Why? . . .

Kira: [They] will not come. If you watch a good cartoon, then you will have a good dream.

Some of the children went further in their desire to defeat inhabitants of the dark, devising elaborate schemes to protect themselves. Others talked about running away, hiding, curling into a ball, or hugging the caregiver or a toy. All of these were different actions that one could perform to protect oneself.

Vera, 5 years: Basically, you can take a simple stick. If you hit them properly, the monster will burst like a bubble. Even

children will not think about them; they will disappear forever!

Maria: Very well. If you put such a stick next to the bed, will it protect you from monsters while you sleep?

Vera: Yes. The monster will think that this is some kind of trap and will not approach. A siren will work, and everyone wakes up. They come and check if a person is asleep or not, and there's a stick next to a bed, then they make such a face (shows a scared face) and run away.

Maria: How else can you protect yourself from it [monster]?

Igor, 5 years: You can put a net with a zipper near the door. When the monster gets caught there, you can quickly open the door, close this zipper, and the monster will hang out in this net all its life.

Maria: It is day outside here. If I curtain all the windows in the room with black-out curtains, it will get very dark in here. Will the kitty get scared?

Pavel, 5 years: No.

Maria: Why?

Pavel: Because then he will be protected by his Combalba.

Maria: What is that?

Pavel: This is . . . I came up with . . . It eats everything—hum. (He shows, how it eats everything.*)* . . .

Pavel: Yes, they could eat it. But the Combalba will eat all ghosts. It ate everyone already except for different good creatures. . . .

Maria: If you bring a Christmas tree into the room?

Stepan, 4 years: If you put it on the windowsill, they [monsters] will get scared. . . .

Maria: What else can we put on the window?

Stepan: Mom or dad, for example.

The children generated many ideas for how to protect themselves from inhabitants of the dark, ranging from manipulating weapons or objects that make loud sounds to calling for military (Dmitry, 4 years) and arranging a hunt (Lev, 4 years). Making their space nicer, such as turning on music or hugging a stuffed animal, also served a protective function for many of the children.

Dealing with Fear of the Dark with Nice Qualities

The children sought protection from darkness in objects, people, and action routines, but some of them also referred to certain qualities exhibited by these people, objects, or activities as inherently protective in their own right. Considerable variation emerged about the qualities children deemed protective, but all qualities had in common a

positive meaning they projected for children. Protective objects or action must be good to effectively impact the badness of darkness. “Favorite,” “good,” “new,” and “warm” were the words used most often by participants. Children explained in different ways why goodness was important, with the most common explanation being that creatures in the dark preferred bad things because nice things harmed them.

Maria:	If there is a Christmas tree in a room, will it still be scary in the dark?
Anna, 5 years:	Absolutely not.
Maria:	Why?
Anna:	Because it is good. We have an artificial one, and my grandmother has a live one. It smells so good!
Maria:	Which one helps better in the dark?
Anna:	A live one because it can be watered, and it can grow in your house.
Maria:	And what can a live Christmas tree do?
Anna:	Monsters just hate the pleasant smell, and a Christmas tree smells very good.

In that example, not just the good smell of the tree mattered for the participant but also the fact that the tree was a live one and could be watered. Most children considered trees being alive or manmade irrelevant to their inherent goodness, but for Ludmila, being alive gave the tree additional value.

Other examples of qualities that children deemed valuable for protection included the following:

Maria:	Why does a favorite blanket work better?
Ludmila, 4 years:	Because it is clean.
Maria:	Which toy best protects against the ghosts—new or old?
Anastasia, 4 years:	A new one. . . .
Maria:	Why?
Anastasia:	Because they are brave sometimes.
Maria:	Which toy cat will help you better—an old or a new one?
Elena, 5 years:	An old one.
Maria:	Why?
Elena:	Because it has already remained old, and it is needed, and the new one is different. Old is old.
Maria:	Which blanket is best to get rid of monsters—new new or old?
Sergei, 4 years:	A new one, of course.
Maria:	Why?
Sergei:	Because it is so beautiful and heavy.

Maria: Which toy helps better from nightmares—new or old?

Anton, 4 years: A new one.

Maria: Why?

Anton: Because it can eat up or scare away someone.

Such positive qualities—being nice, good, new, old, loved, sharp, strong, brave, soft, quiet, loud, bright—pervaded some children's interviews. For some children, being new mattered more for protection than being old, whereas for other children the reverse held. Some children considered loud sounds more protective, whereas others considered quiet sounds more protective. Irrespective of the specific quality, all of the children who spoke of such qualities appealed to the goodness of the quality as key to its protective value. Mother, being the main caregiver for most of my participants, served as a protective figure precisely because she reflected the quintessence of good qualities.

Inconsistencies

Despite children in my sample generally ascribing badness to darkness and goodness to light, a few children attributed these qualities in opposite fashion. Sometimes it could be easily explained. For instance, to help with the children's fears, parents sometimes seemed to suggest to their children that inhabitants of the dark were not as bad as the children might think they were. On other occasions, children seemed to endorse good qualities of darkness and bad qualities of light. Examples:

Maria: OK. You said you were afraid of criminals. When are they more dangerous—in the dark or the light?

Dmitry, 4 years: In the light.

Maria: Why?

Dmitry: Because they are evil.

Maria: Are they not evil in the dark?

Maria: But you said that they can make ‘ooooo’ sound, are they dangerous?

Daniil, 5 years: They are not dangerous. They can even be kind! They gave me a candy that night.

Maria: And how was the candy?

Daniil: It was tasty!

Daniil started to tell me that darkness was dangerous because ghosts inhabited it, a common refrain, but then he told me that ghosts could be nice. Later, during the conversation about the danger of darkness, he also offered to lure ghosts to his apartment with a flashlight through the window, an action inconsistent with the idea that inhabitants in darkness are dangerous and that one needs to protect oneself from them.

Though there were just a few examples like that, the majority of the children were consistent in attaching negative meaning to darkness and positive meaning to light.

Discussion

I designed this study to explore how a sample of 4- and 5-year-old Russian children who were themselves afraid of the dark made sense of the fear of darkness. To achieve this aim, I conducted 31 semistructured interviews; those interviews mostly followed the interests and ideas that the children volunteered, resulting in lengthy narratives dedicated to why they considered darkness scary and how they could protect themselves from the negative qualities of darkness. By examining these interviews using

reflexive TA, we constructed two overarching themes: (a) *What makes darkness scary?* and (b) *What makes darkness less scary?* The first overarching theme, which targeted how children made sense of being scared in the dark, subsumed three main themes: (a) *Darkness is scary because various entities inhabit it;* (b) *Something bad can happen in the dark;* and (c) *Darkness is scary because it is darkness*. The second overarching theme, which targeted how children made sense of what they could do about the scariness of darkness, also subsumed three main themes: *(a) Dealing with fear of the dark with people and objects;* (b) *Dealing with fear of the dark with action;* and (c) *Dealing with fear of the dark with nice qualities.* These themes can also be understood in terms of objects (alive and not alive)' happenings and qualities that make darkness scary' and objects (alive and not alive), happenings, and qualities that protect from the scariness of the darkness. Children in my sample were eager to talk about fear of the dark and to explain why darkness can be scary as well as how one can protect oneself from it. No previous research to our knowledge has examined how preschool children actually talk about and make sense of a fear of darkness. And no qualitative research in this regard has ever been conducted on Russian children specifically.

For the majority of children in my sample, darkness involved not merely the absence of light but had its own unique presence, replete with its own qualities of sound and smell. It seemed to constitute a tangible, palpable force, one capable of transforming the realities of daytime. In effect, darkness seemed to both render the unreal real and transform the real into something unnatural. Creatures borne of pure fantasy and imagination and recognized as such by many children in my sample seemed nonetheless to assume the status of reality under a cloak of darkness, as if

darkness gave these creatures the space to exist and to pose real threats to well-being. When children discussed these creatures of fantasy, they talked about them with an explicitness that signaled these creatures' legitimate dangerousness as if they actually existed, describing their looks and actions, their routines, and the places where they hid during the day. Furthermore, many children talked about natural properties of the everyday world becoming unnatural in the context of darkness, as if darkness could produce distortions in the fabric of reality. Real animals became more vicious, robbers became stronger and more malevolent, and toys could spring to life under the cover of darkness.

Children's Sense-Making About Darkness in the Context of Traditional Russian Folklore

The sense-making that Russian children in my sample employed in talking about fear of the dark dovetails in many respects with folkloric tradition. In Slavic mythology, for example, mythological characters and various evil spirits make their appearance in the world predominantly at night (Vinogradova, 2000). Viacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, in their seminal work *Славянские языковые моделирующие семиотические системы (древний период) [Slavic Language Modeling Semiotic Systems: Ancient Period]* (1965), noted that the dichotomies of light/darkness and day/night undergirded much of Slavic traditional mythology. According to their monograph, those dichotomies and the colors white and black relate to spiritual purity and impurity. Night and darkness constitute times of impurity when Polunoshnica (an evil midnight spirit) could exchange a child with an evil spirit who would look the same but act maliciously, reflected in prominent Slavic incantations

designed to protect children from becoming changelings. Consider, too, beliefs in *nuchniki* or *nichniki,* the spirits of night that inhabit impure soggy areas. Ideas that night is a time intimately connected with evil spirits are reflected in numerous traditional superstitions, signs, and interdictions conveyed by proverbs and sayings such as "*будь не к ночи помянуто" [Let's not mention it at night]* or "*утро вечера мудренее*" *[The morning is wiser than the night]*. Many Slavic ethnic groups still entertain the belief that the call of the rooster marks the boundary between night and day, and when a rooster crows, they would say "*свят дух по земле, дьявол сквозь земли"* (*Holy spirit across the earth devil through the earth*) (Ivanov & Toporov, 1965, pp. 118-120).

Another subtheme that children frequently espoused, and that bears relation to traditional Slavic beliefs, concerns the importance of protecting the boundaries of houses—especially those that are penetrable, such as doors and windows—from the evil forces that inhabit darkness. Albert Baiburin's monograph, *Жилище в обрядах и представлениях восточных славян [Residence in the Rites and Beliefs of the Eastern Slavs]* (1983), described what kinds of boundaries traditional Russian houses ("*izba*") had, with special attention paid to doors and windows:

> The peculiarity of the symbolism of doors and windows is apparently explained by the fact that the content attributed to them as boundary objects is complicated by their specific purpose: to ensure the permeability of boundaries. Such a paradoxical combination of qualities, which are opposite in their very essence, ensured their status as especially dangerous points of connection with the outside world and, accordingly, their special semantic tension (p. 135).

Doors and windows signified places of critical chthonic force concentration in traditional Slavic belief systems, and engaging in rituals designed to protect and purify these spots became especially important at night when evil spirits were abundant. At twilight, windows and doors had to be crossed to prevent spirits from entering, and in some areas during the winter, when nights were especially long, crosses would be painted on doors or laid out by the church candles. Sometimes, windows needed special protection during the night (e.g., they had to be closed and crossed) because ghouls or dead people could penetrate the house and choke to death the sleeping inhabitants, especially children (Baiburin, 1983).

Children in my sample did not seem explicitly familiar with these mythological beliefs—beliefs that are now spread only in more-remote traditional village communities—though familiarity with the practices borne of such beliefs may well have been available to them. They too wanted to protect their apartments and houses by, for example, asking to close doors while talking about darkness (Sergei, 4 years); hanging a net zipper next to the door to catch monsters (Igor, 5 years); and putting a Christmas tree, dog, or a parent on the windowsill (Stepan, 4 years). According to some of the children, doors and windows can become places of concentration at night for what, through the lens of traditional folklore, could be deemed chthonic powers ("In the dark sometimes I imagine that there are three terrible monsters sitting outside the door" [Elena, 5 years]; "they [monsters] will just break the window" [Daniil, 5 years]. In addition to doors and windows being more penetrable by evil forces in the dark, such forces could arrive through mirrors or from under walls (Olga, 5 years; Stepan, 4 years; Dmitry, 4 years; Elena, 5 years).

The subtheme of monsters coming through mirrors in my sample is similar to traditional Russian beliefs concerning mirrors being more penetrable for evil forces, expressed in the practice of covering all mirrors for 40 days after a death in the family because the recently deceased can either return as an evil spirit or take away other family members to their realm. This is a practice (and belief) with which I am intimately familiar, given that my family covered mirrors after deaths, and I have witnessed it numerous times in other families in Russia. Other rituals derive from the winter fortune-telling tradition. A young woman will go to a bathhouse with one or two mirrors and candles at night before Christmas. She will look through the tunnel that the two mirrors—and the candles placed in between them—create to see her future. This manner of fortune-telling was considered dangerous because people believed that the young woman might be either dragged to another realm through the mirror or that an evil spirit could emerge through the mirror and injure or kill the woman (Krinichnaia, 2004).

Children's Sense-Making About Darkness in the Context of Horror-Story Telling

Children's narrative content in my sample concerning monsters and other entities in the dark also dovetails with the kinds of horror stories that Russian school-age children often tell one another. On this level, results of my study correspond with anthropological and psycho-anthropological studies conducted on Russian school-age children's story-telling in different regions of the country, such as Marina P. Cherednikova's *"Голос детства из дальней дали . . ." (игра, магия, миф в детской культуре) ["The Voice of Childhood from far away . . ." (Play, Magic, Myth in the Child Culture)]* (2002); Maria V. Osorina's *Секретный мир детей в пространстве взрослых [The Secret World of*

Children in the Adult World] (2000); and Alexander F. Belousov's *Русский школьный фольклор [Russian School Folklore]* (1998). The main plot of such horror stories routinely revolves around how children get harmed by an evil force that can be embodied in different types of entities or beings. Such stories are also tightly connected to narratives of defeating the malicious force that helps children to overcome their fears (Belousov, 1998), comparable to how children in my study yearned to detail for me the ways in which they would protect themselves from the dangers of darkness.

As in traditional Russian children's horror stories, the malicious forces or entities that children in my sample mentioned in relation to fear of the dark posed not just harm but, at times, deadly harm. Belousov has argued that most of the forces depicted in horror stories are lethal for children (1998). Extant research suggests that children begin to conceptualize death in biologically specific terms toward the end of early childhood but that their nascent biological understanding of death still differs markedly from that of adults. Younger children and adults alike can experience sadness, anxiety, and fear over the separation inherent in death, but only around the age of 5 to 6 years do children begin to understand that death is inevitable and irreversible (Slaughter, 2005; see also Anthony, 1944; Kastenbaum, 1967; Koocher, 1973; Nagy, 1948; Speece & Brent, 1992). More-nuanced understanding of death's source, such as the breakdown of bodily functioning and knowledge about the causes of that ultimate breakdown, arrive even later in development (Slaughter, 2005; see also Koocher, 1973; Lazar & Torney-Purta, 1991; Orbach et al., 1985). The preschool period thus constitutes a transitional period in children's understanding of death as they move from seeing death as temporary, potentially reversible, and brought about by forces outside of the body to recognizing that

all living things will die, that death is irreversible, and that death constitutes a natural part of the life cycle (Slaughter, 2005). Conceptualizations of death as temporary, reversible, and as caused by outside malicious forces permeate children's horror stories (Belousov, 1998). Children in my sample talked about death in connection with the different entities appearing in the dark and considered monsters as scary in part because they kill in a different way, comparable to robbers, animals, and other fantastical beings that appear in the dark. Those children also mentioned death when describing different happenings that take place in the dark, i.e., darkness is scary because something deadly can happen to them in it. Such descriptions align with the idea of death as something brought about by outside forces, whether real or fantastical.

Children's Sense-Making About Darkness in the Context of Their Ability to Differentiate Fantasy from Reality

Children's ability to readily distinguish between fantasy and reality begins to emerge, on average, between the ages of 3 and 4, at a time when they develop rudimentary understanding of the workings of imagination—of people's capacity for thinking about entities that they not only have never encountered but that do not exist (e.g., Woolley & Wellman, 1993; Bourchier & Davis, 2000; Harris et al., 1991). Broad consensus in this literature supports the theory that when children become capable of creating something in their own fantasies, they then have a conceptual basis for differentiating such fantasies from reality, though how such a process might inform an understanding of what amount to culturally generated fantasies (as in the case of folklore) is less clear (Woolley & Nissel, 2020). Nonetheless, children's fantasy-reality differentiation in early childhood, as an emergent ability, can be compromised under

certain conditions, especially when the emotional valence of imagined entities becomes particularly salient (Bourchier & Davis, 2000; Harris et al., 1991). Zisenwine and her colleagues (2013) argued in their work that once a child's fantasies become emotionally charged, it is harder for the child to disregard them as mere fantasies (see also Woolley, 1997).

Children's sense-making in the context of my study speculatively points to darkness as a potential context in which children's ability to differentiate fantasy from reality undergoes compromise. Why this might be the case is open to different interpretative framings. Darkness may, for example, create a vicious cycle. First, children might experience initial fear in darkness from simply not being able to see well. Being in darkness might, in turn, encourage them to engage their surroundings more imaginatively, as they strain to make out what surrounds them, making darkness even more emotionally charged in the process. Under such conditions of emotional strain, distinguishing between fantasy and reality might prove more difficult, making darkness even scarier because on some level these children are no longer certain that these entities and images borne of their imagination are mere fantasy.

Alternatively, perhaps preschooler's distinguishing of fantasy from reality, though robustly evident across many contexts, is specific to circumstances of daytime. Perhaps these same children make sense of darkness as a condition in their lives where the otherwise clear divide between fantasy and reality can break down, where the normal "rules" of reality and imagination no longer apply.

Children's Sense-Making About Darkness in the Context of Psychological Theories about the Origins of Fear of the Dark

It is important to note that the purpose of my research concerns how children make sense of being afraid of the dark, not what causally generates children's fear of darkness. Children in my study, in all likelihood, made sense of fear of the dark by directly engaging darkness as an object of their fear, not by thematically "theorizing" about the antecedent processes involved in the fear's generation. The object of an emotion, in fact, need not and often does not coincide with its cause, as Hume (1739/1978) classically argued. Solomon (1980), in framing this classic distinction in emotion theory between cause and object, has elaborated that:

> Emotions, as intentional, are typically if not necessarily *reactions* to something that happens to us. Sometimes this cause is manifest in what the emotion is "about"; for example, I am angry about your hitting me; your hitting me is the event which caused me to become angry. But sometimes the cause for an emotion is *not* what the emotion is "about." The cause of my anger might be too little sleep and too much coffee. . . . The object of an emotion is simply "what the emotion is about," whether or not it is also the cause, whether or not it is even the case, and whether or not the subject himself knows it to be the object of his emotion (p. 256-257).

At a basic level, the distinction between cause and object is commonly manifest in the observation that, once established, the object of emotion often involves more than its initial cause, attaching itself, as a result, to objects independent of cause. My research did not speak, developmentally or otherwise, to what caused children to become fearful of darkness.

Nonetheless, children's sense-making about fear of the dark bears more than just a passing similarity to classic psychological theories designed to explain what causes fear of the dark to developmentally emerge. The theme of *Darkness is scary because various entities inhabit it* harkens to classic theorizing by Jersild and Holmes (1935a, b), Valentine (1930), and Bowlby (1973), all of whom regarded fear of imaginary creatures as a major source of fear of the dark. The subthemes in my sample of fear of being alone, being lost, or being hurt also play out in the works of Jersild & Holmes (1935a, b), Valentine (1930), and Bowlby (1973). Another explanation for why children develop a fear of the dark comes from the work of Sigmund Freud:

> "[Children] are afraid of the dark because in the dark they cannot see the person they love; and their fear is soothed if they can take hold of that person's hand in the dark. . . . For this explanation of the origin of infantile anxiety I have to thank a 3-year-old boy whom I once heard calling out of a dark room: 'Auntie, speak to me! I'm frightened because it's so dark.' His aunt answered him: 'What good would that do? You can't see me.' 'That doesn't matter,' replied the child, 'if anyone speaks, it gets light.' Thus, what he was afraid of was not the dark, but the absence of someone he loved; and he could feel sure of being soothed as soon as he had evidence of that person's presence" (Freud, 1905/1962).

Freud's explanation connects children's inability to see with the importance of caregivers and light. In my data corpus, the main caregiver (mother, in most cases) was the ultimate protector for children, and her absence constituted a source of anxiety just as her presence was occasionally compared with a source of light, such as when

children talked about the brightness of the mother's eyes and how they can burn evil creatures in the dark (e.g., Anna, 5 years old). Children in my sample also sometimes associated darkness with feelings of loneliness. All of that sense-making calls attention to the importance of attachment figures for preschoolers. Security of attachment, in which children use caregivers as a secure base of comfort and support from which to explore the world, positively correlates with a range of outcomes for children across all domains of functioning, including emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment; scholastic achievement; and peer-rated social status (e.g., Sroufe, 2005; see also Ainsworth et al., 2015, and Barlow et al., 2016). In the context of darkness, the connection with an attachment figure is severed. Children cannot see their caregiver well, and often their caregiver is not present, all of which can raise children's anxiety. Children may well try to cope with and ultimately eliminate such anxiety through entertaining various imaginative thoughts, such as by coming up with stories of how to defeat the maliciousness of darkness, or by engaging in specific actions upon their environment, such as replacing their attachment figures with toys or blankets or making their surroundings nice by turning on nice music, stories, or noises.

It is also worth noting that the themes of children's sense-making in my study deviate significantly from the psychodynamically informed theory of Alexander Zaharov (2000), conductor of the only major psychological study of fear development in Russian children. Namely, children in my study, as expected, did not make sense of fear of darkness through any kind of appeal to birth trauma or to the experience of babies in the womb and during delivery (Zaharov, 2000; Shelkovnikova, 2009).

.Clinical Implications

Childhood nyctophobia is a significant problem for many families with smaller children. Some 73.3% of children between the ages of 4 and 12 reported at least mild nighttime fears (Muris et al., 2001). Research has suggested that childhood fear of the dark is associated with sleep problems (Jenni et al., 2005; Kushnir & Sadeh, 2011); with co-sleeping with caregivers (Cortesi et al., 2008); with externalizing and internalizing problems (El Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2019; Jenni et al., 2005; Kushnir et al., 2014; Zisenwine et al., 2013); with anxiety disorders (Muris et al., 2001); and with other fears (Kushnir et al., 2014; Zisenwine et al., 2013).

Despite the growing body of clinical research on nighttime fears and children's phobic reactions to darkness, questions remain within both psychological and psychiatric literature about for whom and why certain treatments work (Gordon et al., 2007; see also Kopcsó et al., 2021). Few studies within the literature on developmentally typical forms of fear of the dark offer any real insight, etiologically or otherwise and outside of traditional conditioning arguments, into how developmentally atypical trajectories of fear of the dark, such as phobic reactions. And no studies to date have examined children's phenomenological lived experience of fear of the dark or on how children make sense of that experience, both of which may well be critical for determining efficacy and implementation of treatment for individual sufferers of childhood nyctophobia.

My study provided an initial step toward remedying the paucity of research on children's lived experience concerning fear of the dark, specifically with respect to how children experientially make sense of such fear. This study was unique in several respects. First, it was conducted remotely using Zoom with children from Russia by a

researcher located in the United States and, despite not involving an in-person interviewing context, yielded promising results. Second, 4- to 5-year-old children in the study were treated as meaningful respondents, and their narrations were analyzed using a bottom-up approach that minimized reliance on prior theoretical accounts for organizing an understanding of their sense-making. Third, we used a semantic or explicit form of reflexive TA to ground themes as closely as possible to what preschoolers themselves considered most salient in responding to what makes darkness scary. Respect for children's individualized sense-making was especially important to us at each step of the study.

My study, in turn, raised implications of possible clinical significance for the treatment of childhood nyctophobia. Children in my sample made sense of the scariness of darkness in a variety of ways. For some, darkness was scary because it affected their sight, which meant they believed they could get hurt in the dark. For others, their surroundings in darkness looked unusual and gave them the space for their imaginations to go wild, to imagine malicious, fantastical, or realistic inhabitants. For others, darkness was scary because their caregivers were either not present or barely visible, provoking anxiety over separation. And for many children, darkness was inherently bad and seemed to provide a portal for what otherwise did not exist to become real and pose real threats. This heterogeneity of sense-making may prove useful for determining what treatments can be more effective for treating nyctophobia, given that treatment efficacy likely depends on how individual children phenomenologically frame what makes darkness especially scary. Semistructured interviews, conducted with children who suffer from nyctophobia prior to treatment,

that specifically aim to understand what each child finds scary in the dark might well inform and improve the efficacy of individual treatment regimens. Children in my sample also largely agreed that darkness is a negative space compared to light-time. Adding positive qualities and associations to a dark room—e.g., making it smell good, turning on nice music, audio books, a glowing toy, spending fun time with the caregiver in the dark—may well help reduce children's apprehension about darkness and its negative qualities.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study stemmed from it being conducted through Zoom. Remote interviewing with any age group—but certainly with children as young as 4 and 5—is generally considered much less desirable than in-person interviewing and raises possible ecological validity concerns. In implementing the study, I was not entirely sure how children would behave under remote media circumstances. Though most of the children seemed to be comfortable enough with me in the interviewing context, the Zoom medium of interaction necessarily constrained some aspects of our dialogue and communication. For example, I often had relatively restricted access to my participants' body language. At times, the Zoom context was distracting for both me and my participants. Furthermore, some children became distracted by playing with turning their Zoom application or their computers on and off. The question of whether and to what extent this medium adversely affected child participants' interpersonal dynamics or the content of their interaction with me remains open to consideration, though from my perspective, most of the children seemed to be highly engaged during their interview sessions.

Another limitation concerned my asking leading questions during interviews. I endeavored to refrain from doing so, but it was difficult to completely avoid such questions while dynamically engaged in the actual conduct of an interview, especially given that I was dealing with young children who sometimes required more-structured lines of questioning to prompt conversation due to their shyness or more-limited discourse abilities. Most of the children showed themselves to be fully capable of providing significantly detailed responses to my open-ended first question, so in most cases, my more-structured, follow-up questions touched on what the children had already spontaneously articulated. We also focused, in abstracting general themes through our reflexive TA, on highlighting content that children volunteered specifically in response to open-ended questioning.

As a fledging examination of how preschoolers make sense of fear of darkness, this study was a small first step in giving voice to children's lived experience of being afraid of the dark. The themes generated from this study are necessarily specific to the population at hand, namely Russian 4- to 5-year-old children living in mostly affluent and educated families in big Russian urban centers. Follow-up work clearly needs to expand beyond this narrow population base to explore what kinds of variability in sense-making exist for preschoolers. The specific content of children's sense-making would necessarily vary widely across different populations of preschoolers, but the broad themes established in this study, such as "being afraid of something in the dark," may well be formally abstract enough to meaningfully embrace such variability in content across different populations. However, this is an empirical question requiring empirical investigation.

Examining greater geographic, ethnic, educational, and economic heterogeneity just within Russian populations would be an important next step to mapping out conditions of variability in children's sense-making, not to mention expanding the study of children's sense-making in relation to fear of the dark to other cultural and subcultural contexts. My study was also limited in not adequately speaking to developmental issues pertaining to children's sense-making. Research geared toward younger children within the period of early childhood as well as toward older children, moving from early childhood to middle childhood, would be essential for beginning to map out potential transformations in both the content and broader structure of children's sense-making about darkness. It also would be critical to complement this more-group-focused work with longitudinally intensive, small *n* studies of individual children, to allow for detailed contextualization of their lived experience and sense-making in terms of their unique developmental and family histories.

Given my background and training in folklore, I necessarily brought an anthropologically informed point of view to analysis of this study's data set. I considered this background a strength because it helped me to make sense of children's narrations within the broader contexts of Russian oral folk tradition. However, future work on how children make sense of fear of the dark would require other academic and cultural points of view being brought to bear to adequately map out the nature of children's meaning-making in this context. My study offered a critical first step in giving preschoolers a voice in what being afraid of the dark means to them.

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