

Playing in the Field: Exploring the nature and emergence of extra sensory experiences *with* children

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Abstract: Children can report experiences such as Imaginary Companions, OBEs, exceptional dreams, mediumship abilities, peak experiences, hearing voices and having visions. They experience these phenomena and so-called non-ordinary realities in both formal and informal contexts such as homes, natural spaces, hospitals and schools. A multi-disciplinary approach –narrative talk, art and play– is necessary when examining children’s extra sensory experiences. Preliminary findings from a program of research *with* children are examined in this article to consider, a) types of experiences children report; b) children’s activities and extra sensory experiences; and c) medical factors which may influence their extra sensory experiences. The article details methodology, findings, and considerations for further research with children and legitimizes reports made by children as data which carries an epistemic authority over their subjective living experiences.

Keywords: Children, extra sensory experiences, experiential authority, methodology, mental health

Background

Children’s extra sensory experiences are common (Tanous & Donnelly, 1980; Peterson, 2000), and, carry a potential for wellbeing when children are supported well (Tanous & Donnelly, 1980; Thomas, 2021). Children report experiences such as OBEs (Tart, 1998; Alvarado, 1992), mediumship abilities (Bieschel et al, 2015; Roxburgh & Roe, 2014); peak experiences, (Hoffman, 1998) hearing voices, and having visions (Cardena & Alvarado, 2014). They experience these phenomena and so-called “non-ordinary realities” (Hunter, 2015), in both formal and informal contexts such as homes, natural spaces, hospitals and schools (Anderson & White, 1958, 1969; Blackmore, 1980, 1984; Drewes, Drucker & Rubin, 1977; Rhine, 1953, 1961, 1962, 1965; Thomas, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Children’s extra sensory experiences are similar to adult experiences, and are often referred to as paranormal (Drinkwater et al, 2013) or anomalous (Cardena et al, 2014) and can also be diagnosed as delusions, hallucinations and psychotic-like, in clinical epidemiology (Laurens et al, 2007, 2012; Thompson et al, 2015). It is preferred, when researching with children, to use the term “extra sensory experience”, as an appeal to more naturalistic explanations of children’s experiences.

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The inference is made that extra sensory experiences may emerge frequently and naturally during childhood, in response to activities (play, creativity) and to either positive or negative circumstances – traumatic events, natural contexts, physical illness – (Thomas, 2021, 2022a, 2023). Extra sensory research involving children often challenges blanket definitions, that are mainly informed through the dominant physicalist paradigm. In Thomas 2022b, 2023, the case is made for theorizing children's extra sensory experiences within an "analytical idealism" model, which sees consciousness as primary (Kastrup, 2018, 2019). We only know the world through experience, whether mundane or exceptional (Thomas, 2023) – where experiences may be the *natural* self-excitations of a consciousness at large – in the same way that fundamental particles are the natural excitations of a quantum field (Kastrup, 2018, 2019). Though extra sensory experiences may be the natural excitations/experiences of human beings, they are frequently obfuscated, medicalised, or ridiculed in modern western culture (Castro et al, 2014) which carries hegemony over how their experiences are measured and medicalized (Thomas, 2022a, 2023).

Other scholars also argue for natural explanations of paranormal phenomena (Hunter, 2015; Shel-drake, 2002; Carr, 2015; Ehrenwald, 1971, 1972). For example, Jan Ehrenwald (1971, 1972) studied telepathic relationships between mothers and babies, suggesting that infants communicate using extra sensory perception for survival and other needs. Erenwhald (1971) suggests how younger children will naturally extend their cognitive capacities, to compensate for any absent cognitive or motor functions. In Erenwhald's (1971) view, PK could be the reversal of motor functions, and premonitions the reversal of memory functioning (Erhenwhald, 1971).

Researching children's extra sensory experiences using non-traditional methodologies, can challenge the contemporary clinical practice of diagnosing children's experiences before exploring them *with* children (Thomas, 2022a; 2022b). Fields such as child psychiatry, child mental health - and often, parapsychology - study children's extra sensory experiences using rigid scientific experimentation (Thomas, 2022a). A review of parapsychology literature between 1949 and 2020 is showing how children were involved mainly in experimental studies (Thomas, forthcoming, 2023) and demonstrates a stark absence of contemporary studies which explore children's extra sensory experiences outside closed clinical contexts. This has serious implications for children's health and wellbeing, when clinical definitions heavily influence child-focused services, such as health, social work and education.

Children's extra sensory experiences outside clinical contexts are similar to those of adult populations including the prevalence of anomalous experiences in non-clinical groups, (Pechey & Halligan, 2012); grief and exceptional experiences, (Evenden et al, 2013); mediumship abilities, (Beischel et al, 2015, 2019); mystical experiences, (Taylor, 2012); and telepathy, (Krippner, 2016). Yet there is a paucity of academic study in which children's extra sensory experiences have been explored *with* children (Thomas, 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2023) and those few studies have had little influence in policy involving child mental health or education (Roxburgh & Roe, 2014; Castro et al, 2014). The program of research included in this article is a first attempt to address these issues.

The article examines the nature and emergence of children's extra sensory experiences in everyday contexts. Extra sensory research with children requires creative methods that can enable children to

report their experiences through narrative talk, art and play (Thomas, 2021, 2022a, 2023). Preliminary findings consider, a) types of experiences children report; b) children's activities involving extra sensory experiences; and c) children's medical conditions related to extra sensory experiences as well as the methodology, findings, and considerations for further research. A case is made for the legitimacy of children's reporting, as data which carries an epistemological authority over their subjective living experiences (Thomas, 2022a; 2022b; Rhine, 1953, 1961, 1962, 1965; Drewes, 2002).

Living Experience as Valid Data

For children to be meaningfully involved in scientific research, a case must be made for the validity of knowledge often considered as merely "anecdotal" or subjective. Louisa Rhine (1953, 1962, 1965), valued subjective data, generating a narrative dataset from over 30,000 letters sent to her by everyday individuals (Drewes, 2002). Rhine's motivation for collecting subjective experiences was not to prove the existence of psi, but to explore how subjective living experience, could inform experimental studies as data (Drewes, 2002). Among the adult letters submitted to Rhine between 1961 and 1977, there were 216 acceptable cases from children aged 10-18 years. Children's precognitive content was around trivial, everyday events, which stood in marked contrast to adult data produced by Schouten (1982). Louisa Rhine recognized the experiential authority of the letter-writers and their motivation for writing in statements such as "I hope this will help you in your research" (Rhine, 1961, p. 20).

Living experience as a research concept emerged from the political writing of Hannah Arendt (1971). Arendt (1971) claims theory can only ever arise "out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guidepost by which to take its bearings" (36) or that everyday knowledge generated from living experience, carries an epistemological authority over the matter under investigation. Children (in the case of the article) are producers of an "unreachable knowledge" about their experiences (Arendt, 1971). Living experience carries an epistemic force, knowledge that can only truly be accessed by the experiencer. Authority of knowledge is maintained by producing a style of reasoning particular to that living experience, often through tools such as storytelling, songs and myth (Noorani, 2010).

Devaluing qualitative or participatory methodologies in scientific research is linked to concepts of subjectivity and objectivity (Thomas, 2022a). Traditional science privileges the objective through a positivism lens which predominates in science, assuming facts about a single, apprehensible reality that can be measured (Healey & Perry, 2000). Subjectivity is often viewed as merely an expression of personal opinions, lacking scientific validity. Kuhn (1971) questions whether scientific experimentation can ever be truly objective since objectivity assumes a world which can be measured, where rational methods of science are designed to eliminate prejudice and bias. The idea of objective truth may be "no more than and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what's going on" (Trawick, 1992, 2). When subjectivity itself is examined (Thomas, 2022b), intersubjectivity or intra-subjectivity are highlighted in how humans and their experiences are inseparable from other humans and the world (Barad, 2007).

Rigor and validity are central criticisms against participatory or qualitative methodologies. This is

especially problematic in disciplines such as parapsychology which value replicability, rigor and testing of hypotheses – practices commonly expected in scientific methodology. Traditional scientific criteria, such as measurement and replicability, are not overly applicable to living experience data (anecdote, art, narratives), becoming less significant when researching children’s experiences (Thomas, 2022a). Triangulation is enhanced through a process of transactional validity (Caretta & Perez, 2019, p.360), where data is co-interpreted with participants (Thomas, 2022a). The researcher must make sense of what has been observed in a way that communicates understanding through interpretation. Kincheloe & McLaren (2011) argue how all research becomes an act of interpretation, including so-called objective methodologies. Transpersonal reflexivity (Thomas, 2020, 2022b), as a methodological tool, can support observation of the researcher’s apriori assumptions, agendas and personal subjectivity – especially if the researcher is directly acquainted with the experiences under investigation (Thomas, 2022b).

Participatory research prioritizes subjective experience as an approach that can appeal to, or depart from, traditional qualitative research and its inherent logical positivism (Lather & St Pierre, 2013). Extra sensory experiences attract stronger criticisms against subjectivity because they are considered impossible from a physicalist worldview. Children’s extra sensory experiences that are reported through the article, are viewed as subjectively genuine. Their objective reality sits within a larger ontological debate which remains “wide open without a scientific approach” (Luke, 2022). The notion of non-physical independent autonomous entities is problematized through the dominant physicalist paradigm. The super-psi hypothesis (Braude, 2002) argues that the receiver of psi information may either generate or receive information from a living source (Luke, 2022). However, one test for validity in qualitative research is whether a subjective experience is shared by others. Luke (2022) highlights early shamanic encounters which show similarities between independent reports concerning the characteristics of entities “especially those encountered naively and without cultural context from which characteristics of the entity could be derived”. Several studies have shown similar links between children’s geometrical art and symbols across different cultural cosmologies (Thomas, 2023) - and children from different locations, ages and cultural backgrounds can report seeing similar entities such as shadow people, large spiders, and dogs with red eyes. Qualitative accounts of similar phenomena across different cultural contexts may evoke interesting questions around the objective reality of some extra sensory experiences.

Our Unusual Experiences Research Program

The *Our Unusual Experiences Program* (2018 – ongoing) is a series of small participatory and qualitative research studies with children. The aims and objectives of the research program are:

- To identify any extra sensory experiences of children outside clinical contexts.
- To explore children’s meanings and insights in relation to their extra sensory experiences.
- To identify any wider factors which may catalyse or influence extrasensory experiences in children.
- Experiment with different participatory research methods, and testing their effectiveness involving children in extra sensory/paranormal/consciousness research.

Children are involved in the program, either as co-researchers or participants, depending on the nature of the study. For example, a group of hospital experienced children co-designed a study which explores children's extra sensory experiences in intensive care (Thomas & O Connor, 2023). Table 1 sets out examples of studies across the research program:

Table 1

Smaller Studies in Our Unusual Experiences Research Programme

	No. Participants	Ages y	Description
Who am I 1? 2019 * (A1) BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022	18	4-18	Aim: To explore nature of self and extra sensory experiences with children. Methods: Loosely structured research script; individual interviews 10 children; in-pandemic online questionnaires using Qualtrics software (32 respondents – Thomas, 2021); narrative inquiry; art and play methods
Who am I 2? Being Connected 2020 * (A2) BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022	18	3-18	Aim: To explore subtle connections with children aged 4-18 years, such as being stared at, telepathy, empathic connections. Methods: Loosely structured individual interviews with 10 children, offline and online interviews; on-line questionnaire (18 respondents) using Qualtrics software.
International Questionnaire 2021 BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022	50	7-18	Aim: To identify extra sensory experiences of children across different countries Methods: Online qualitative questionnaire using Qualtrics software; poor response rate and incomplete responses
#ourunusualexperiences 2021 ongoing BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022	300	2-18	Aim: To experiment with cyber ethnography as a methodology for exploring extra sensory experiences with children; to identify types of experiences reported by children and young people; to explore relationship between online environments and children's extra sensory experiences Method: observational methods; retrieval of small online stories by children, young people and caregivers (findings in Thomas, forthcoming)
Research Groups 2022 * (b) BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022	40	4-11	Aim: To identify extra sensory experiences across different age groups; to test participatory methods with children (children evaluated methods) Methods: 4 Focus groups organized into ages (i.e 4-5y); Play items, art, storytelling, song writing

Children in Intensive Care 2022 – 2023 (Co-PI with Dr Graeme OConnor) IRAS/NHS Ethics Approved 2022	10	4-16	Aim: To identify and explore with children experiences following cardiac arrest. Experiences often referred to as delusions or hallucinations, which carry features of NDEs, OBEs and visions; to test use of participatory methods in clinical contexts Methods: Recruitment on ICU stepdown wards; individual interviews; bedside research creation stations; guided by research script; small world play; art methods and storytelling; videovoice and photovoice (findings in Thomas & OConnor, forthcoming)
Extra sensory Experiences & Culture, 2023-25 (with Dr David Luke) BAHSS UCLan Ethics Approved 2022, Funded by Fundação Bial	200 children 200 parents/carers and professionals	4-18 +adults	Aim: To explore children's extra sensory experiences across different ethnic and cultural contexts; to identify children's meanings and insights; to identify adult caregivers and professional adults' perceptions about children's experiences; to compare children's with adults perceptions of experiences Method: Large scale participatory and qualitative study with children and adults (primary caregivers and professionals); participatory methods with children; questionnaires with adults

For the purposes of the article, three small studies A1/A2 & B (marked by an asterisk in the table) are used to demonstrate the methodology for involving children in parapsychology research, types of children's extra sensory experiences, and contextual factors which may catalyze or influence children's experiences.

Ethics

The studies were granted full ethical approval through the BAHSS ethical committee at the University of Central Lancashire. Parental/guardian consent was required for all children under 18 years of age. Informed consents from children and parents/guardians were obtained through the provision of child-friendly information sheets. Talk around information sheets were used with younger children. Rolling consent meant that children could stop interviews or participation in research groups at any point. Participant-identifiable information was collected and stored separately from research data. Research tools (play items, art materials) were toxic free and age appropriate. Risk assessments were carried out by the researcher and the host organization. Risk assessments included working in isolation and COVID-19 regulations. Signposting to relevant services and liaisons with safeguarding officers were organized in case children required it (to date, additional support has not been necessary). Participants were given one week to decide whether they wished to take part in the research. Arrangements were in place for children who did not speak or understand English, or who were hearing-impaired and required communication through sign language. All resources were age appropriate.

Participants and Procedure

Individual Interviews

A two-part study was conducted between 2018-2020 (A1/A2, see Table 1). A1 explored unusual experiences with children and identified further areas for study. A2 (2020) was co-designed with participants from A1 and focused on extra sensory experiences such as telepathy, premonitions and scop-aesthesia (A sense of being stared at – Cooper, 2021; Sheldrake, 2002). Participants in A1 were invited to take part in the study if they had any *unusual* experiences. Flyers were distributed through partner organizations (local community groups, schools), online platforms and in physical outdoor spaces such as parks. Participants in A2 were invited to take part through a second flyer, distributed using the same process as A1. Children were invited to contact the researcher if they had experienced ‘being connected’ in unusual ways, such as telepathy with animals or people.

A1/A2 involved 16 participants aged 4-17 years ($m = 11.12$) in individual interviews. Participants in A1 engaged in two interviews each. Participants in A2 engaged in one individual interview each. In total, 24 interviews were conducted across A1/A2. Interviews during A1 were conducted in children’s homes (x 10 ages 4-17 years), outside in natural spaces (x 2, 9 years) and online (4 x 16-17 years). Interviews during A2 took place in 2020 during the pandemic and were conducted online (8 x 7-17 years). Two pilot online questionnaires, used to support studies A1/A2 during the pandemic restrictions, received low response rates and no statistically significant data. Narrative responses received from 12 participants who used the online questionnaires are integrated into findings in Table 2 (see “Findings” section).

Research Groups

Study b was conducted with children aged 4-11 years ($m = 8.25$) at a primary school in the UK. Information sheets were distributed to children across three classes at the school, with an invitation to take part in a research session (focus group). A total of 40 children participated in three focus groups (group 1 = 4-6 years x 10 participants; group 2 = 8-9 years x 15 participants; group 3 = 10-11 years x 15 participants). The aim for the study was to identify any unusual experiences they had; assess how they shared experiences with their peers; and to test participatory research methodologies involving children. A research script was used to facilitate research sessions (duration 1 hr 30 minutes).

Methodological considerations show how children share more details about their experiences when interviewed individually, in informal contexts (homes, outside), compared to focus groups in formal settings. Drucker, Drewes & Rubin (1977) also found children performed better in ESP-related testing in their own homes rather than formal contexts such as schools. What may affect children’s reporting of extra sensory experiences in school are; rules and conventions of the context (school), power relations between adults and children, and some children’s fears around sharing experiences with peers (stereotyping – Thomas, 2023). Issues like these can be addressed when researching in formal contexts such as schools. For example, the researcher can create a more informal and comfortable research space for children (circles, cushions, blankets etc). Conventions such as hand-raising to speak or referring to

adults formally (such as using ‘Miss’ or ‘Doctor’) can be removed. Inviting children to co-create research through selection of research materials and co-interpretation with adults, can improve the process. Home interviews with young children appear to work well when parents/carers are supportive. Children selected whether their parent was present during the interview. If parents were present, they engaged in tasks or chores, keeping a safe distance but available if the child needed them to be involved.

Methods & Analysis

IPA & Narrative Analysis: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA – Larkins et al, 2012) was conducted with children using verbal and visual representations of their extra sensory experiences. IPA is gaining popularity in healthcare, offering affordances to facilitate and understand the complexity of phenomena; that offers ‘exciting possibilities for informing clinical practice’ (Larkins et al, 2012, p.5). Participatory IPA ensures children are involved in research design and the researcher’s interpretations are co-examined with the participants (Thomas, 2022a, 2022b). Data from participants’ narratives was coded and a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was applied across all data sets, and cross-analysed to generate sub-themes (Thomas, 2021).

Art & Semiotic Analysis

Art can afford opportunities for children to represent experiences which cannot be conveyed through usual linguistic or narrative conventions (Thomas, 2021; 2022a; 2022b) due to children’s verbal and literacy capacities, or the nature of the experiences that can transcend the form and function of narrative talk (Thomas, 2023). Children can represent their unexplained experiences through squiggles, spirals and geometric patterns (see Thomas, 2022a), or art can be realistic in intent, representing what they see in comparison to the real world (Schulte, 2021). Co-interpretation of visual data with children is necessary to obtain children’s meanings and reduce any assumptions or biases in the adult researcher’s interpretation (Thomas, 2022a, 2023). A selection of art materials was made easily accessible to children during interviews and research groups. When reporting experiences, children often reach a point in their narrative when they can no longer storify their experiences. At this point, the researcher can direct the child to the art materials. Once the child was engaged in art, the researcher noted that children accessed more information around their experiences (Thomas, 2022a). Where a creative space unfolds, children can access wisdom, intuition, and reflexive meaning-making around what they have experienced (Thomas, 2021, 2022a).

Play and Observational Analysis

Play research facilitates children to enact their experiences through objects which represent figures, world objects (houses, cars etc) or the natural environment (Wright, 2010). Play research with younger children is showing to be highly effective, enabling very young or medically impaired children to report their experiences (Thomas & O Connor, 2023). Research tools for play methods include play-mobile sets (park, space, home, school scenes with figures and objects), Lego, toy cars, figures (including superhero figures), dress up play, Play-doh; and natural artifacts such as twigs, sticks and pinecones. Play will be focused on a research question such as: ‘you told me about your experience of seeing a strange animal in your bedroom, can we play that using...’. If children are researching in pairs, they may play the

experience together. At times, the child may ask the researcher to be involved, directing where certain figures or play objects need to be. This presents good opportunities for the researcher to ask further questions around the child's experiences. Ethnographic observation (McKenchie, 2000) is used, recording how children play, their body language and experiences which emerge through play. Talking points are recorded that can be used with the child once play has ended. Play research is also video recorded to enable the researcher to capture process and data.

Findings

Table 2

Synthesis of Findings Across Studies A1/A2 & B

	Medical Diagnosis (epilepsy, narcolepsy, autism)	No-medical conditions. diagnosis	Transition and Change	Activities and environments
Aged 3-7 years	Visions, premonitions, vortexes, sounds; telepathy: exceptional dreams (engaging with deceased people); NDE's, premonitions	Visions, premonitions; lucid dreams; sounds; telepathy; exceptional dreams (engaging with deceased people, NDE's)	Hospital, family breakdown, starting school, death of loved one, moving home	Play, sleep/rest, nature
Aged 8-12 years	Visions; OBE's, telepathy, healing; seeing auras and orbs; mediumship; NDE, voice-hearing	Visions; OBE's; telepathy; exceptional and lucid dreams; healing; seeing auras and orbs; mediumship; scopaesthesia, voice-hearing	Puberty, hospital, family breakdown; death of loved ones; moving home; transition to high school	Video gaming, play, rest/sleep; playing outside
Aged 13-15 years	Mediumship, exceptional and lucid dreams, premonitions; mystical experience	Mediumship; exceptional and lucid dreams; premonitions, mystical experiences; scopaesthesia; healing others	Puberty, relationships, hospital; death of loved ones	Video gaming, social media, sleep, nature
Aged 16-18 years	Peak/mystical experiences; visions; voice-hearing; OBE's; lucid dreams and shared dreams	Peak/mystical experiences; visions; voice-hearing; OBE's; lucid dreams; shared dreams; scopaesthesia	Hospital, death of loved ones, romantic relationships	Nature, psychedelics, video-gaming

Examples from Children

Children report a range of extra sensory experiences (see Table 2). Visions of strange animals and human-like entities are reported mainly by younger children (4-11 years). Older children (aged 12-18 years) can reflect on their experiences as a younger child, describing similar phenomena. Children describe seeing entities, engaging with entities, or hearing and responding to voices.

‘I was watching TV with my mum, and I saw a man standing behind the settee, my mum couldn’t see him”

Aston, Aged 9 years, UK, group session 2

Aston’s report was recorded in the group sessions (group 2, age 8-9 years) and is similar to reports shared by other children in the studies.



Fig 4: Joe aged 10 years, UK, “Strange people in my bedroom”, interview A1

Children report seeing human and non-human-like entities, animals such as spiders or black dogs with red eyes, orbital shapes, spirals and geometrical patterns. Adults report similar phenomena when taking psychedelics (see Luke, 2022), during crisis (see Parra, 2007) and in meditation states (see Vieten et al, 2018). Some children report extra sensory events, and describe interactions with unseen entities:

‘I can see them with my physical eyes
(dead people) I can speak to them and
hear their response’

Aaliyah aged 12 years, USA (online questionnaire A2)

It's like, when I got older I started to realize that these voices actually had messages for other people in my family'

Claire, aged 17 years, UK (interview, A1)

At times, interactions with non-physical entities – like Aaliyah's or Claire's – can involve messages for other people such as close family members which are sometimes validated by other family members when children feel safe enough to disclose their experiences (see Thomas, 2021). Aaliyah's, and other children's experiences, may be defined as psychotic-like experiences (PLEs) – subclinical hallucinations, and delusions which tend to establish a diagnosis of psychosis, with an emphasis on the child's experience of reality (Laurens et al, 2007, 2012; – see 'Discussion'). Some children report that they are taken to see a doctor because of their experiences, other children will remain silent about their experiences for fear of medicalization (Thomas, 2021).

Indicators of psychotic-like experiences are hallucinations (visual and auditory, delusions, spied on, persecution, thoughts read, reference, control, grandiosity and other unspecified delusions) and experiences of thought interference (thought-broadcasting, insertion and withdrawal – Thompson et al, 2015). It is difficult to claim that all experiences are mental disorders, just as it is equally difficult to claim all experiences as psi. Boundaries between psychopathology and parapsychology are extremely blurred. Some studies report individuals who have extra sensory experiences score more highly on psychological disorder assessments while other studies report diagnosed individuals as having strong convictions around their supernatural experiences (Bentall, 2000). Children can appropriate medical definitions for their experiences through cultural conditioning (Thomas, 2021) and can also be influenced by supernatural narratives of popular culture (Thomas, 2023). These influences can create tension in children especially when they feel extra sensory experiences are a natural aspect of being human (Thomas 2022b, 2023). These tensions highlight the necessity to examine children's own meanings generated from their lived experiences (rather than adult already-theorized material).

Parapsychology studies involving adult mediums have reports involving childhood experiences (Roxburgh & Roe, 2014; Beischel et al, 2019). Roxburgh & Roe (2014) interviewed ten adult mediums and found that all participants, except one, described anomalous experiences in childhood (visions, voice-hearing etc.) as influential in their later becoming a medium. Distress and psychological impairment are gross measurements to indicate whether an experience is psychic or a mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, in Roxburgh & Roe, 2014). Distress may be a result of experiences perceived as impossible, or understood as mental illness through dominant, mainstream views. When children are aware that others have similar experiences, and other explanations are available, distress is reduced (Thomas, 2021). Children intuit and assign a reality to their experiences and, at times, an autonomy to entities they engage with (Thomas, 2021, 2023). At times, other people can validate children's experiences, for example, through receiving information through the child from deceased relatives (that the child could not have known) or finding missing objects following children's premonitions (Thomas, 2021, 2023).

Children's activities and extra sensory experiences

Children report extra sensory experiences when involved in activities such as natural play, resting, singing and video game play (Thomas, 2023).

"I can hear voices when I'm playing and sometimes noises like bangs and knocks, my mum and nani can't hear that. Sometimes when I'm playing, I hear a voice saying my name"

Hamed, aged 9 years, UK

"This has happened lots of times but when I'm playing on my Xbox I hear weird noises, even tapping on my window. I also can see like a figure"

Josh, aged 9 years, UK

Hamed states that he hears a voice calling his name often when he is playing. This can be in natural play (outside, with objects etc.) or in video game play. Several children reported hearing strange bangs and knocks and seeing shadowy figures when they have been playing on their gaming system for a lengthy amount of time. Children can distinguish very well between fantasy and reality and can search for logical explanations before settling on their own meanings (see Thomas, 2022a). Play and other activities children pursue may correlate with types of extra sensory experiences:

"I was at my singing lesson recording and when I sing, I belt it out (sing loudly) and it makes me *light-headed*, and this time I was light-headed because I was belting it out and I looked over at my singing teacher and I saw a weird woman just standing behind him. She had this long purple dress on"

Mia, aged 11 years, UK, Research Group 3

In Mia's report, there is a connection between her state of light-headedness when she sings, and her experience of seeing a woman in a purple dress, who her teacher cannot see. Mia stated how she will often have unusual experiences when she sings. Singing has long been associated with trance or altered states of consciousness. Singing and music "are paramount in the rituals of every known religion... and is expected to have a range of effects and functions that directly contribute to the efficaciousness or the ritual" (Wald-Furman et al, 2020). In Wahbeh et al (2021), adults are shown to use "gateway tools" such as meditation and prayer to access states of consciousness conducive to extra sensory experiences. For children, creative activities such as play and singing may also act as gateway tools.

Winnicott (1896-1971) saw play as a liminal transitional state, a space occupied by transitional objects such as toys, where boundaries between the inside and outside collapse (Moyles, 1991). Play can be found across early religious scripture, synonymous with joy or in the presence of the divine (see Melchert & Proffitt, 1998). Children often spin around in play, which Caillois (1961) refers to as the *ilinx*

or whirlpool state – a trance state, “to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind... surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure or shock which destroys reality with a sovereign brusqueness.” (p.109). Gackenbach (2006) found a correlation between video game playing with lucid and exceptional dreams. Associations between enhanced cognitive skills and video game play has been well documented (see Eichenbaum et al, 2014). Gackenbach (2006) suggests video gaming to be an amplifier, like meditation or prayer, that can catalyze “higher levels of consciousness”. Examining relationships between children’s states of consciousness and extra sensory experiences may support explanations around their nature and emergence (Thomas, 2023).

Children with Diagnosed Medical Conditions

Children both with and without medical conditions report similar extra sensory experiences. In studies A1/A2 & B, several children had medically diagnosed conditions such as cerebral palsy, narcolepsy with cataplexy, autism, Pans/pandas and epilepsy. One child had a previous diagnosis of clinical depression. There is currently no comparative data which suggests children with medical conditions report a higher frequency of extra sensory experiences. Yet, early indications from the narrative data suggests children with biological medical conditions involving neural impairments (such as epilepsy and cerebral palsy) or inflammation (Pans/pandas), may experience a higher frequency of extra sensory experiencing. The quality of experience may differ, too, for children with medical conditions. Dialogue and mediumship experiences were reported more by children with medical conditions than those children without medical conditions.

“I cannot speak to people, but I can speak with spirits”

Elias 9 years, with Autism, Sweden, Online Questionnaire A2

Elias is diagnosed with autism and is non-verbal yet reports speaking (telepathically) with disembodied entities.

Children with and without medical conditions reported knowing what their friends and primary caregivers were thinking. Reports of telepathy between children, close friends and primary caregivers were identified across all studies. The online questionnaires, when combined, showed 60% of children aged 4-18 years (from only a small sample of 14 respondents aged 6-17 years) reported knowing what family and friends were thinking. A high incidence of children aged 12-15 years reported a sense of being stared at only to turn around and find someone *is* staring at them (A2). One participant reported having the same sense of being stared at when alone in her room, sensing a point in the room where she felt the presence of the starrer.

Children in hospital can have extra sensory experiences similar with OBEs (Alvarado, 1992) and NDEs (Parnia et al, 2022).

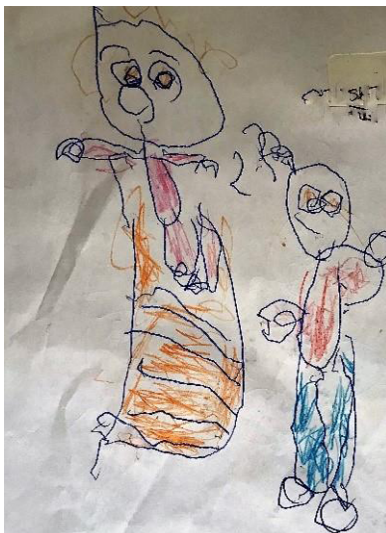


Fig 5: Out of body experience in hospital, Aisha aged 14, cerebral palsy-experienced

“It felt strange, like lightness, like what it must be like to walk with my feet if I could. I started to feel myself being pulled back to my body, I guess the word would be spirit”

Aisha aged 14 years, cerebral palsy-experienced, UK

Aisha’s experience was a special event, where she experienced her “spirit” enabling her to move around her hospital room - an experience that Aisha could not usually have due to her severely restricted mobility. OBE’s and NDEs are reported by children and adults with or without pre-existing medical conditions, during life threatening or hospitalised events (Greyson, 2021; Van Lommel et al, 2017).

Associations between experiencing extra sensory events and biological impairments are found in past ESP studies, raising interesting questions around the mind/body problem (see Dossey, 2009). Randall (1972) conducted ESP testing with boys in school. The overall statistics were not significant, however several participants had significant ESP results. A questionnaire found that each participant who scored significantly above mean experienced Hay fever, a type of allergic inflammation. Research with mediums by Bieschel et al (2019) identify how compared to non-mediums, more mediums have a least one autoimmune disease, more health issues, water retention, gastrointestinal issues, headaches, asthma and food intolerances. These are similar health issues reported by children across studies (see Thomas, 2021, 2023).

Discussion

Examining children’s activities, conditions, and contexts in relation to their extra sensory experiences, raises further inquiry around their nature and emergence (Thomas, 2023). Extra- sensory experiences may be a large aspect of the childhood journey. Creative activities children naturally engage in, such as play and singing, could catalyze states of consciousness conducive for extra sensory experi-

ences (Thomas, 2023). Roe (2009) proposes that difficulties in evidencing altered states of consciousness (ASCs) may be overcome through focusing on spontaneous extra sensory cases, catalyzed through everyday activities regularly experienced by people, such as dreams and mundane tasks. Cooper (2021) argues how experimental controls used to identify senses of being stared at, may lack ecological validity, since “staring detection seems to thrive in the chaos and spontaneity of real-world settings” (p. 164). Extra sensory experiences of children, as natural excitations of childhood, may be intensified through their playful and creative activities (Thomas, 2023). Methodologies which engage children in natural settings and real-world contexts are warranted.

Connections between children with medical conditions which cause impairment in brain regions or inflammation in the body (epilepsy, narcolepsy, cerebral palsy, Pans/pandas), requires further study. For example, cerebral palsy describes activity limitation and a diversity of neural impairments that are attributed to disturbances that occurred in the fetal or infant brain (see Hadders-Algra, 2014). Experience may be more conscious-rich or extra sensory when there is a reduction in brain activity caused by impairment or inflammation. Studies published in 2012 by Carhart-Harris et al, measured the neural correlates of the psychedelic state as determined by fMRI studies with psilocybin. The results were surprising. Psilocybin caused decreased activity and connectivity in the brain’s key connector hubs, enabling a state of *unconstrained cognition* or rich conscious experiences (see Carhart-Harris et al, 2012). Alison Gopnik (2020) suggests psychedelic studies which show a deactivation in the pre-frontal cortex systems (see Carhart et al, 2012), can mirror young children’s brains, in terms of plasticity, flexibility and design for experience. Gopnik (2020) argues that consciousness becomes narrowed with age, with adults “knowing more but seeing less”. If reduction in brain activity can activate unconstrained cognition, it may follow that any children with conditions which affect neural activity, might have a higher incidence of extra sensory experiencing (Thomas, 2023).

Extra sensory experiences can either catalyze suffering when phenomena are not understood, or emerge as an aspect of crisis, similar with adult spiritual emergencies (Grof & Grof, 2017; Thomas, 2023). Further investigations involving children are needed in these areas because their insights can challenge how adults theorize their experiences. Psychosis has been a controversial topic for children throughout the history of the field of child psychiatry because of the conundrum of diagnostic clarity (Courvoisier et al, 2022). The ambiguity surrounding the nature of PLEs, is viewed as a result of “different assessment tools, concepts, and mixed findings concerning prevalence and persistence” (see Hinterbuchinger & Mossaheb, 2021, p. 12). The circular problem for ambiguity in explaining PLEs is reflective of the larger issues in mental health fields, which use reductionist explanations for human experiences. Conditions like schizophrenia and psychosis are significantly challenged by scholars across the fields of psychology, sociology and critical psychiatry (see Wong, 2014).

Clinical Studies show PLEs to be common across childhood and adult populations (see Kalman et al, 2019; Laurens et al, 2012; Kelleher & Cannon, 2011), those “hallucinatory experiences and delusional ideations [that] can occur in the general population without being distressful or impairing to a clinically significant degree” (Oh et al, 2021). Louisa Rhine (1961, 1965) collected 30,000 letters from individuals who seemed hesitant and apologetic about “an explicable thing should have happened to them” (Rhine, 1961, p.20). Experiences were spontaneous, emerging in the everyday, in the form of

premonitions, telepathy and clairvoyance (Rhine, 1961; Drewes, 2002). Studies like Rhine's letters, when set against clinical PLEs, raises the difficult and longstanding question around extra sensory experiences as 'psychosis or psi'. This question becomes more pressing when children are in crisis, at the behest of diagnosis, psychiatric and pharmaceutical treatment of children's mental health that has grown rapidly since the 1970's. Parapsychology could play a significant role in how children's extra sensory experiences are better understood.

Research with children outside clinical contexts, shows a range of extra sensory phenomena, that are both positive and negative (Thomas, 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2023). Where clinical discourse defines experiences as hallucinations or delusions, children argue for encounters with beings or different realities (Thomas, 2021, 2022a). For scientific disciplines such as parapsychology, delusions may be understood more as 'visions', for example, challenging the neuropsychological model that does not advance an understanding of hallucinations (Radin & Rebman, 1996). Adult primary caregivers can shape how children respond to their extra sensory experiences – in both positive and negative ways – depending on how adults themselves view extra sensory experiences (Thomas, 2021). Children can be skeptical about their own experiences (Thomas, 2022a), and see opportunities for fraudulent acts to impress adults-in-authority (Krippner, 1990), or can exhibit an emotional validity, an epistemic principle in the production of scientific knowledge (Stanley & Wise, 2013; Thomas, 2022a).

The scarcity of research involving children's extra sensory experiences in fields such as parapsychology renders children to the domain of clinical research (Thomas, 2021, 2022a). Extra sensory experiences "do not merit sociological attention because people who report them are delusional, attention seeking, fraudulent, or liable to misinterpret everyday events and experiences so as to imbue them with a magical character" (Castro et al, 2014). A multidisciplinary approach may be needed for examining children's extra sensory experiences, with a focus on developing methodologies that are inclusive for everyday people, their knowledge, and lived experiences.

What children's extra sensory experiences show is the need for further studies which consider the authority of the child and other contextual factors which may intersect with experience. Children's extra sensory experiences also challenge clinical definitions while raising awareness, for fields such as parapsychology, to include children using relevant methodologies (Thomas, 2021, 2022a). Participatory research with children can either complement experimental studies or be the main approach for experiences that cannot be measured through experimental procedures. Children's experiences and intuitions raise further questions concerning the physicalist scientific paradigm, from which experimental research is often premised (Thomas, 2022b, 2023).

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Abstracts in Other Languages

Jugando en el Campo: Explorando la naturaleza y el surgimiento de experiencias extrasensoriales en niños

Resumen: Los niños pueden reportar experiencias como Amigos o Compañeros Imaginarios, Experiencias Extracorpóreas, sueños excepcionales, habilidades de mediumnidad, experiencias cumbre, escuchar voces y tener visiones. Experimentan estos fenómenos y las denominadas realidades no ordinarias en contextos formales e informales, como hogares, espacios naturales, hospitales y escuelas. Es necesario un enfoque multidisciplinario (ej. comunicación narrativa, arte y juego, etc.) al examinar las experiencias extrasensoriales de los niños. En este artículo se examinan los hallazgos preliminares de

un programa de investigación con niños para considerar, a) los tipos de experiencias que reportan los niños; b) sus actividades y experiencias extrasensoriales; y c) los factores médicos que pueden influir en sus experiencias extrasensoriales. El artículo detalla la metodología, los hallazgos y las consideraciones para futuras investigaciones con niños, y legitima los informes realizados por los niños como datos que tienen una autoridad epistémica sobre sus experiencias de vida subjetivas.

Palabras clave: Niños, experiencias extrasensoriales, autoridad experiencial, metodología, salud mental

Jouer avec le champ : explorer la nature et l'émergence des expériences extra-sensorielles avec les enfants

Résumé: Les enfants peuvent relater des expériences telles que des compagnons imaginaires, des expériences de hors corps, des rêves exceptionnels, des capacités médiumniques, des expériences paroxystiques, de l'entente de voix et des visions. Ils vivent ces phénomènes et de soi-disant réalités non-ordinaires à la fois dans des contextes formels et informels, c'est-à-dire chez eux, dans les espaces naturels, les hôpitaux et les écoles. Une approche multidisciplinaire – récit narratif, art et jeu – est nécessaire pour examiner les expériences extra-sensorielles des enfants. Les premiers résultats d'un programme de recherche avec les enfants sont examinés dans cet article, afin d'identifier : a) les types d'expérience que les enfants relatent ; b) les activités des enfants et les expériences extra-sensorielles ; et c) les facteurs médicaux qui peuvent influencer leurs expériences extra-sensorielles. Cet article détaille la méthodologie, les résultats et les considérations pour des recherches futures avec des enfants, tout en légitimant les témoignages des enfants en tant que données porteuses d'une autorité épistémique quant à leurs propres expériences de vie subjectives.

Mots-clefs : Enfants, expériences extra-sensorielles, autorité expérientielle, méthodologie, santé mentale

Spielen im Feld: Erforschung der Art und Entstehung von außersinnlichen Erfahrungen mit Kindern

Zusammenfassung: Kinder können von Erfahrungen wie imaginären Freunden, außerkörperlichen Erfahrungen (AKEs), außergewöhnlichen Träumen, medialen Fähigkeiten, Gipfelerlebnissen, Stimmenhören und Visionen berichten. Sie erleben diese Phänomene und sogenannten nicht-alltäglichen Realitäten sowohl in formellen als auch in informellen Kontexten wie Wohnungen, Naturräumen, Krank-

enhäusern und Schulen. Ein multidisziplinärer Ansatz – erzählendes Gespräch, Kunst und Spiel – ist notwendig, um die außersinnlichen Erfahrungen von Kindern zu untersuchen. In diesem Artikel werden die vorläufigen Ergebnisse eines Forschungsprogramms *mit* Kindern vorgestellt, um a) die Arten von Erfahrungen, über die Kinder berichten, b) die Aktivitäten der Kinder und ihre außersinnlichen Erfahrungen und c) die medizinischen Faktoren, die ihre außersinnlichen Erfahrungen beeinflussen können, einer Betrachtung zu unterziehen. Der Artikel beschreibt Methodik, Ergebnisse und Überlegungen für weitere Forschungen mit Kindern und legitimiert Kinderberichte als Daten von Kindern, die eine epistemische Autorität über ihre subjektiven Lebenserfahrungen haben.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Kinder, außersinnliche Wahrnehmungen, erfahrungsbezogene Autorität, Methodologie, geistige Gesundheit