

INVESTIGATING EXTRA SENSORY EXPERIENCES WITH CHILDREN ACROSS VARIOUS CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS IN THE UK

Donna M. Thomas, Kirsty Allan & Saima Sharif

University of Lancashire, UK

Grant 70/22

Background/rationale: To investigate children's extra sensory experiences and adults' conceptualisations of them within the context of culture, we conducted a two-year study in the UK with children from various cultural backgrounds. We also involved adults who care for children, either as parents or professionals, to identify how children's experiences are responded to and the impacts this may have on children. Results from the study aim to bridge the marginalised field of parapsychology with real-world service development for children and families from various cultural backgrounds.

Research questions: Research questions included: What types of extra sensory experiences do children from various cultural backgrounds report? What are any similarities/differences in how they represent their extra sensory experiences? How do adults who support children (parents and professionals) perceive children's extra sensory experiences?

Methods: Children and young people (age 4-18ys), parents and professionals who work with children were recruited through organisations. The study applied a mixed-methods approach to involve children, parents and professionals. We involved children through arts-based research methods within semi-structured interviews. Parents and professionals who work with children completed online questionnaires responding to open and closed questions.

Analysis: We applied a multi-method analytical framework used to treat the various data sets (narratives, art and statistics) produced through the study. Approaches included: IPA & Co-interpretation with children, sensory ethnography, thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. A statistical analysis was applied to the data collected through the online questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic data and for computing experience types in childhood, continuing experiences into adulthood, and how adults respond to children when they report extra-sensory experiences.

Results: The total number of children and young people who participated in the study was $n=120$. In total, $n=143$ adults took part in the study. The total number of children, young people and adults who participated in the study was $n=263$. The most frequently reported experiences among children and young people were hearing voices and sounds others cannot hear, strange entities and premonitions. Children described their engagements with strange entities as tactile encounters, with children being pushed, pulled or touched. Children from various cultural backgrounds reported similar experiences in sensory and simple ways (little cultural variation). A high number of parents and professionals reported a range of extra sensory experiences in childhood and claim that the children they support also report extra sensory experiences. Parents expressed mistrust towards organisations such as children's mental health services and schools with their child's experiences and felt that various cultural views are not considered. Most professionals demonstrated brain-based explanations for children's experiences.

Discussion: Results show parents and professionals suggesting the need for more research around children's extra sensory experiences to inform services that support children and families. Results from professionals demonstrate how children's extra sensory experiences are quickly, perhaps uncritically, explained as developmental or brain-based issues, products of trauma or childhood fantasy. Where for many younger and older children their experiences are neutral, normal and often transitory in nature, mixed adult conceptualisations of them could complicate their experiencing. More research is needed with children, young people and families to understand these dynamics better and their impacts on children's extra sensory experiences.

Keywords: Children, Culture, Extra-sensory, Parents, Professionals

Publication:

Thomas, D. M., Rycroft, E., Allan, K., & Sharif, S. (2026). New methodological directions for involving children in past life memories research. *Explore*, 22(1), 103283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103283>

E-mail contact: dthomas15@lancashire.ac.uk