

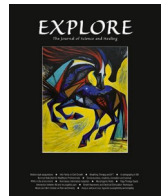
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# New methodological directions for involving children in past life memories research

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## ABSTRACT

Past life memories in children have been studied extensively through standard qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Research to date has produced valuable data to support how we understand children's past life memories. Children are the primary source for data collection in past life research, as the producers/facilitators of memories. Despite this, children tend to be researched *on* rather than *with*, through adult-centric approaches. In this article, we include a case study example of spontaneous past life and in-utero memories of a 6-year old child. The case study example is taken from a parent study, 'Investigating Extra Sensory Experiences of Children from Various Cultural Backgrounds'. Through the article, we demonstrate how using creative research methods and sensory ethnography can generate important knowledge from children about their own past life memories. We include results from the parent study that show past life memory data from children, parents and professionals. We propose involving children as active agents in past life memory research and argue for new directions in the field of PLM through creative and child-friendly research.

## Introduction

Past life memories in children have been studied extensively since the early sixties, through standard qualitative and quantitative methodologies.<sup>1–7</sup> Research into children and birthmarks,<sup>8</sup> life in-between lives,<sup>9</sup> in utero memories,<sup>10,11</sup> psychological profiling and verifying children's reports,<sup>12</sup> have generated valuable data to support how we understand children's past life memories. Children are the primary source of data collated within past life memory research (PLM), as the producers/facilitators<sup>1</sup> of memories of past lives. Despite this, children tend to be researched 'on' rather than 'with', through adult-centric approaches (interviews, questionnaires and measurement scales). Involving children as active agents in research through participatory and creative approaches differs from standard, traditional qualitative methods. As children can be capable agents in research, with an epistemological authority over their own experiences and memories,<sup>13,19</sup> Clavering and McLaughlin,<sup>14</sup> we argue that it is vitally important to effectively involve them in PLM research.

Non-traditional research methods (i.e., arts-based and play methods, sensory ethnography) are advancing fields such as qualitative research, childhood studies and social sciences - changing the parameters of who can be a knower (of the object of research) and what can be known (knowledge) - see Stanley and Wise.<sup>15</sup> Such approaches are already showing to effectively involve young children in adult-dominated fields such as parapsychology or consciousness studies (see<sup>13,16</sup> For example, recent studies on children's extra sensory experiences - such as their near-death experiences,<sup>17</sup> invisible companions, engaging with strange entities and hearing voices others cannot hear,<sup>18,19</sup> 2023) - show how creative research methods can induce more knowledge from children about their experiences<sup>19</sup>. For example, children in paediatric intensive care (PICU) have used small world play items and art materials to effectively share features of their near-death experiences (see.<sup>16,17</sup> These approaches show potential for involving children meaningfully in PLM research, while highlighting significant differences between adult-centric and child-friendly qualitative approaches. Meaningful research 'with' children can involve: a) a children's rights ethos

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<sup>1</sup> We write that children are 'producers/facilitators' of memories to highlight ontological debates around the brain as a producer of consciousness (subjective experiences, memories, self & subjectivity etc). As this debate remains unsettled, we use both terms.

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embedded into studies - such as the right to be heard; b) an active role or agency for children in the research - i.e. co-designing methods, choosing how to participate; facilitated to engage in effective ways; c) the recognition that children can be capable, *logical* and expert participants in research; d) the researcher's capacities to be reflexive, responsive and creative to adapt research methods to effectively engage children; and e) ethical rigour, ensuring children/parents give informed consent to participate.

Through the article, we argue for including children as agents, rather than subjects or objects in PLM research. We suggest that actively involving children in PLM research can generate knowledges and discourses that are often overlooked in favour of measurement and evidencing reports. Using a case example of spontaneous reporting of past life and in-utero memories from a 6 year old child in a recent study (see 'The Study'), we discuss methods for producing legitimate data from what children tell us. Through the article we argue for new methodological directions for enhancing the field of PLM through the effective involvement of children (see.<sup>20</sup> The aim is to widen the scope of qualitative enquiry with children in PLM research. Through the article, we highlight the benefits for children in terms of sharing and exploring their past life memories with researchers, peers and parents.

### Past life memories and research with children

Children's memories of lives lived before are recorded across history, with some of the earliest accounts dating back to the First century CE. Beliefs in transcendental realms, survival after physical death and previous lives, are prevalent in most religious/spiritual traditions worldwide.<sup>21</sup> While various cultures across the world have collected oral reports of children's past life memories, in western academia, Ian Stevenson pioneered this field of study in the early 1960s. Stevenson's work and that of subsequent researchers,<sup>2,3,7</sup> report extensive cross-cultural studies that document intersections between past life memories, sudden phobias, inexplicable knowledges and children's emotional responses to places and people. Studies show how younger children can demonstrate capabilities which far exceed their age-appropriate skills and functions in areas that are totally unrelated to their current cultural, socio-economic or religious background.<sup>6</sup> Researchers have also documented reports of children's memories of being in the womb and life between life memories;<sup>22</sup> Ohkada and Ikegawa, 2014). Much research into children's past life memories has focused on identifying common trends among cases and systematically evaluating various explanations for it.<sup>4</sup> Moraes et al.'s<sup>23</sup> systematic review of the PLM literature shows a predominance of qualitative research on children in all study designs, with the primary methods being interviews (73 %) and documental analysis (50 %). The review highlights important findings, including how 74 % of past life claims correspond with unusual behaviours of children - with 37 % of cases associated with birthmarks and birth defects. Just under half of PLM studies (41 %) demonstrate information concerning a supposed previous family. More recent studies in the field of PLM are valuably orientating towards understanding the impact of past life memories on children and their parents.<sup>1,4</sup>

Some scholars challenge research on past life memories in children, claiming children's memories as fantasies, parents' misinterpretations or cultural beliefs (see.<sup>24</sup> Tucker<sup>7</sup> suggests how these possibilities warrant serious consideration in cases which a previous personality was not found "either because the child's statements were not specific enough to produce an identification or because they did not seem to fit the life of any actual person who had died" (247). We would argue that the importance for evidencing children's claims through investigation should not diminish children's reports. Mixing adult-centric (traditional) with child-friendly (non-traditional) methodologies - and changing the parameters of what constitutes evidence - is vitally important. The focus on solving cases can provide rigorous evidence for children's past life memories and significantly contributes to validating the phenomena. But the 'unsolved' cases may also carry validity that can

be claimed through post-qualitative and more non-traditional methodologies which argue for, and privilege, the subjective.

While past life memory (PLM) studies are groundbreaking, children can inadvertently be positioned as passive subjects in research through the application of adult-centric methods, such as interviews, measurement scales, testing and validating information. When methods designed to gather objective information are used to describe children and their memories, the child becomes objectified, artificial and analysed.<sup>25</sup> Advancements in the field of qualitative research sees a moving away from traditional methods that can exclude a range of people, their expertise and their knowledges.<sup>26</sup> Critical engagement with a range of knowledges is necessary in research concerned with the mysteries of memories, subjective experiences and consciousness (author 1, 2023.<sup>27</sup> Qualitative research itself is not a monolithic process but has a plurality of approaches, methods and theories - within a "vibrant and contested field with many contradictions and different perspectives".<sup>28</sup>

Research with infants and young children is challenging, and researchers can often exclude them from studies due to their non-verbal status - or assumptions made about the capacities of younger children. Evidence for researching with pre-verbal and non-verbal children strongly suggests that children can, and do, participate and express their experiences through other modes of semiosis such as body language, movement and play (Vapensted et al., 2021). Art-based methods are used to explore the inner worlds of people, including their memories<sup>29</sup> - and have been used extensively to involve young children in research across fields such as childhood studies, health and social sciences. Similarly, play-based research methods have been used in research effectively with very young children (see.<sup>30</sup> Although PLM researchers have appealed to children's drawings to validate their reports (see,<sup>8</sup> using art as a methodological tool has been missed. Stevenson<sup>5</sup> found that out of 278 cases, 66 children (23 %) engaged in play "for which no family models were found" (556). Out of the children who demonstrated unusual play, 22 cases were solved through further investigation. While Stevenson paid attention to this important area of PLM in children, opportunities were missed to develop play into a valid research method with younger children.

Using inappropriate research methods with young children can sustain unethical power relations between adult researchers and child participants.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, children's rights to express their voice is recognised in international agreements, through the Rights of the Child.<sup>32</sup> A Children's rights orientation challenges adult researchers to be competent in their interactions with children rather than only focusing on the competencies of the child.<sup>33</sup> Involving infants and younger children without verbal capacities can be challenging and requires the researcher to be reflexive, responsive and open to experimenting with a range of creative methods. Researchers in fields such as childhood studies have worked substantially on developing multimodal methods (arts, play, theatre, cyber, etc.) for effectively involving children in research (see<sup>30</sup> While such methods offer affordances for children to participate and represent their experiences, challenges can arise for interpreting the data. Strategies for involving younger children in data interpretation includes researcher reflexivity<sup>13,34</sup> and co-interpretation with children.<sup>35</sup>

Applying these strategies with focused observation can support how children's reports and representations of their memories are understood. Elwick et al.<sup>36</sup> point to the dangers of subordinating infants' experiences into adult categories and understandings. Juhl<sup>37</sup> argues for more conceptual work around involving infants and young children in research, focusing on subjectivity, intersubjective understanding - and the socially situated nature of participation, experience and representation. New understandings about how infants and young children participate in common cultural exchange, meaning making and research, challenges narrow, legal and rationalistic endeavours.<sup>38</sup> Children's engagement in research should entail an ongoing participatory process that involves children's playful, interactive experiential authority that informs the data. Researching children's extra sensory experiences shows the ethical

imperative for involving children in research concerned with their own experiences, memories and views - whether positive or negative. The aim is to meet children where they already are (experiencing, remembering, representing, etc.), recognise their capabilities, be mindful of our own incapacities, while creating safe research environments.

Other studies have shown the benefits for children reporting their distressing anomalous experiences in research. For example, a study conducted in 2021 on children's anomalous experiences, shows how using arts-based and play research methods, effectively facilitated children to share and make meanings about negative, anomalous experiences.<sup>13,19</sup> When children co-review data on children's anomalous experiences, they recognise the commonality of these experiences for children. This information aides their continuous wellbeing.<sup>13</sup> Claims that children should not be involved in 'unusual' research sits within wider ethical debates on research with children, where adult gatekeepers can make decisions based on assumptions about children's capacities.<sup>39</sup> We continue to demonstrate through the article, the value of applying participatory and creative research approaches with children in PLM research.

## Methodology

The case study example is taken from a parent study conducted between 2023–2025 ("Investigating Extra Sensory Experiences of Children from Various Cultural Backgrounds" - see Author 1, 3 and 4, forthcoming). We include details of the study, methods and an overview of results related to past life memories.

## The study

The study, "Investigating the Extra Sensory Experiences of Children from Various Cultural Backgrounds in the UK", aimed to identify children's extra sensory experiences (those which go beyond the typical five sense sensorium, personhood, time and space). Other study objectives included: to identify and understand any cultural or religious influences which may shape children's experiences, and to identify how adults who care for children (parents, carers and professionals), conceptualise children's extra sensory experiences (see author 1, 3 and 4, forthcoming). Results from the study will inform parents and professionals with the aim to bridge the marginalised field of parapsychology with real world service development for children and families from various cultural backgrounds. As an ethnically diverse country, the UK's political multicultural sensitivities offer affordances for various groups to retain and practice their religions, beliefs and rituals within an integrationist, liberalist and multinationalism nexus.<sup>40</sup> The UK, therefore, is a good site for research with children from various cultural backgrounds.

## Procedure

We developed a recruitment strategy to engage children, young people, parents and professionals in the study. Organisations that work with families supported recruitment by contacting children, young people, parents and staff. We developed letters, flyers and child-friendly information sheets and asked organisations to distribute them to a representative sample of children, young people, parents and staff (in terms of ages and ethnicity). It is important to note that children were not pre-selected based on earlier reports of extra-sensory capabilities. The only criteria for selection we gave to organisations was demographic. This meant that the samples were unbiased. A total of 68 children and young people (ages 4–17 years) participated in research sessions and interviews. Adults who care for children (parents and

professionals) were invited to complete online (open and closed responses) questionnaires. A total of 69 parents and 74 professionals who work with children completed questionnaires (total  $n = 143$ ).<sup>2</sup> Figures for children across all the research groups and interviews, show 61 % White British children and young people, 14 % Roma Gypsy children and young people, 12 % South Pakistani children and young people, 6 % Black heritage children (Ghana and British) and 4 % mixed heritage children (White and Pakistani; White and Black). These figures however are proportionate to the overall population figures by ethnicity for the North of England (see author 1, 3 and 4 for details of adults). The study received full ethical approval from the BAHHS ethics board at the University of Central Lancashire. The study was funded by the Bial Foundation Grant 70/22. All children and adults gave informed consent/assent to take part in the study. The study received full ethical approval from the University of Lancashire's BAHSS ethics committee. Approval was granted on 19/12/2022 with the reference number BAHSS2 041

## Methods

### Research sessions children 4–10 years

Research sessions were conducted with children in schools, youth clubs and community spaces. The researchers used a carefully designed story tool with younger children that shared one type of extra sensory experience (a story about a child who had a premonition of getting a new puppy). The researchers then asked children if they had any similar experiences. The tool is necessary as children do not always understand what an unusual experience is (we use the word 'unusual' with children rather than 'extra sensory' to ensure understanding). For example, some children can perceive going on holiday as an unusual experience. Aside from one exemplary experience used in the research story, we did not present any other types of extra sensory experiences - unlike adults who were presented with a list of items (see section 'Adults Online Questionnaires') that asked them to select experiences they have/had. Children were invited to draw, paint, play or talk about their experiences. Researchers recorded research sessions using video and audio recordings.

### Research interviews (Children and young people)

From the research sessions and through pilot online questionnaires with young people (see 'Limitations'), we identified children and young people to take part in individual interviews with their families (for younger children). We identified several children who reported multiple experiences and contacted their parents to arrange interviews at home. The researchers started the interview from the experiences the child had reported during the research session. For younger children, their parents also took part in the interviews. This had both pros and cons. When interviewing younger children, parents can be essential for helping to explain their child's experiences or providing contextual information. Or at times, parents can take over interviews with children, layering their own concepts and meanings over the child's. Researchers navigated any parental interference by refocusing the interview back towards the child and demarcating between parents' views and what children reported.

### Adults who support children (Parents and professionals)

Using Qualtrics, we designed two online questionnaires, one for parents and one for professionals. We used the same questions but adapted them to suit parents ("your child") and professionals ("the child

<sup>2</sup> We only include the child's case example data in this article. See authors 1, 3 & 4, 2025 for full study details and data

you support”). The questionnaires were designed to gather information about adults’ childhood experiences, their children’s (or children they support) experiences, how they respond to children’s experiences and their opinions of services which support children (i.e., schools, mental health, etc.). We also asked adults how they perceive the nature of extrasensory experiences (what are they?). Adults were also asked to select experiences from a 23-item list and respond to open-ended questions.

### *Analysis*

We applied a multi-method analytical framework used to treat the various data sets (narratives, art, senses and movement and statistics) produced through the study. Approaches include:

#### *IPA and co-interpretation*

An important aim for the study was to access children’s own meanings about their extra sensory experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a qualitative approach used in health and similar fields, which aims to provide analytical accounts of participants lived experiences.<sup>41,42</sup> In IPA, the epistemological authority of participants (in our case children) over their lived experiences is prioritised through the phenomenological and hermeneutic commitments this approach makes.<sup>41</sup> One aim for IPA is to bracket off the participants’ interpretations from the researchers, without consideration for the researchers’ constitutive roles in the ways meanings are made and revealed.<sup>41</sup> The aim is to recognise the co-constructed and interconnected nature of meaning-making in interaction, to support how these challenges in IPA approaches are navigated. Reflexivity is a process that can support how researchers become critically aware of their agendas, motivations and power over and their own socio-cultural conditionings that can influence the research process.<sup>43</sup> We see reflexivity as a vital process that we employed during interviews with children to mitigate any misrepresentation of children’s reports. Co-interpreting reports with children is a form of ‘member-checking’ data<sup>44</sup> that extends beyond checking facts. Co-interpretation brings children into the data analysis as active agents.

#### *Sensory ethnography*

Sensory ethnography (SE) is an approach that engages with the senses and sensory experiences of people.<sup>45</sup> The senses are a form of knowing that produces valuable knowledges within research, analysis and representation.<sup>45</sup> For example, sensory ethnography can explore vision and touch as modes in which we engage with our feelings and the world, or can reveal relations between mind, body and world, such as understanding the lived experience behind neurological conditions.<sup>46</sup> Sensory ethnography is especially suited to research with younger children who use fewer concepts to explain their experiences. Children tend to focus on what they saw, felt, touched, tasted and smelt. We used an SE approach to explore and co-examine children’s embodied and playful representations of their extra sensory experiences. Children focused on their senses (feelings, hearing, seeing, touching etc.) when sharing their experiences, offering a rich and alive dimension to them. In research sessions and interviews, we observed children’s movement that represented their experiences and explored (with children) their sensory descriptions of them, at times, mimicking their movements to ensure correct interpretations.

#### *Analysing art data*

Arts-based research methods have been used successfully with children in research to explore their views, opinions and experiences, fusing the creative and imaginative possibilities of the arts with social science.<sup>47</sup> Alternative forms of expression are used in arts-based research such as film, sculpture, dance, poetry and theatre, often combined with

more traditional research methods.<sup>47</sup> Arts-based research can facilitate research into extra sensory experiences and altered states of consciousness,<sup>48,49</sup> or when children represent life-changing experiences such as severe illness and near-death (author 1 and other, 2023).<sup>50</sup> Douglas and Carless<sup>51</sup> argue for the value of art-based research in psychological contexts, showing three distinct waves of engagement – ‘interdependent engagement with people and place, aesthetic engagement with sense-making processes and emotional engagement with and of audiences’ (156). In research sessions and interviews, some children selected to draw or paint their experiences. Some children preferred to talk about their experiences while playing with Lego or other toys. The researchers asked questions about children’s art and play creating exploratory dialogue around their experiences. After co-interpretation with children, the researchers considered the themes of images, against themes identified through children’s reports (see section ‘Thematic Analysis’).

#### *Thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis is a widely used analytical approach in qualitative research. We used Braun and Clarke’s<sup>52</sup> applied thematic analysis by identifying, organising, analysing and reporting patterns within the data. To identify patterns across the data sets, we used a manual colour coding system that afforded detailed attention to the data and categorisation of parts of narratives, semantic fields (words with associated meanings) and any interesting deviations within the data (data items which did not fit with the emerging thematic patterns). We framed the thematic analysis by colour coding our central objectives, filtering the data into headings such as ‘types of experiences’ and ‘meanings assigned to experiences by child/by adult/by ethnicity/by religious and/or spiritual beliefs’. Colour coding afforded equal attention to be given to data items across each data set (narratives, images, statistics) – and identified interesting aspects in the data items that formed the basis of repeated patterns across the entire data set. We recognise this as a less participatory and democratic analytical practice, and it is important to note that thematic analysis was based on results from co-interpretation with children in research sessions and interviews.

#### *Statistical analysis*

We used Qualtrics to manage the study data and generate descriptive results from the questionnaires. As a cloud-based software platform, Qualtrics allows users to create surveys, collect responses, and analyse data. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices). Descriptive statistics were furthermore computed for experience types in childhood, continuing experiences into adulthood, and how adults respond to children when they report extra-sensory experiences. We extracted qualitative data, such as views about extra sensory experiences by professionals and any ‘other’ categories that asked for additional information on questions. We assessed valuations parents made about extra sensory experiences as well as valuations made by parents on service use and extra sensory experiences, and as made by professionals on service provision and extra sensory experiences. Descriptive statistical analyses were made separately for parents and professionals, and adults and children/young people. For young people, we collated demographic data (as above), experience types (provided by questionnaire), qualitative data lifted from Qualtrics on meanings children give to their experiences, who they share experiences with, why/why not, and opinions about what these experiences are.

#### *Limitations*

While researchers try to ensure approaches are participatory through reflexivity and child-friendly research methods, there is always the potential for asymmetrical power relations between adult researchers and

child participants. There is further potential for tensions between how children make sense of their experiences and how adults represent them. While we attempted to engage an equitable representation of children from various cultural backgrounds, this was challenging due to a range of factors (recruitment challenges through organisations, some parents not permitting children to take part etc.). A further limitation for our study is the under-representation of older children and young people aged 11–18 years. We initially designed a pilot online questionnaire for older children and young people using Qualtrics. This was a mixed-method questionnaire that asked young people to select the experiences they had from a list of 23 items identified from past studies with children (see, <sup>13</sup> 2022, 2023a, 2023b – see. <sup>53</sup> When reviewing the pilot results, we identified how many young people were forced to complete the questionnaire by teachers. Forced participation is unethical research practice, and we excluded any questionnaires where young people had stated that they were ‘told by their teacher they must fill it in’. Three young people agreed to take part in individual interviews, and we synthesised ethically appropriate questionnaire data (open-ended responses- small narratives from four completed questionnaires) with data from the research sessions and interviews (see author 1, 3 and 4, forthcoming for detailed results).

Study results past life memories

The full results from the study are detailed in author 1, 3 and 4 (forthcoming). The full study results show children to report a range of extra sensory experiences (Out of body experiences, engaging with strange entities, premonitions etc.). Any results that show children and adults to report past life memories are detailed in Table 1 below:

Only two children in the parent study spontaneously reported past life memories, while 17 % of parents state that their own child has reported a past life memory. While parents did not state the age of their child at the time of reporting, these results may indicate that children younger than 4 years (the youngest age included in our sample was 4

years) may report more memories than older children. This may also align with the literature that suggests memories fade as children become older.<sup>2</sup> Results from the pilot questionnaires and interviews with older children and young people show no reports of past life memories (among 11–18 year olds). A lower percentage of professionals (6 %) than parents (17 %) state that a child they support has reported past life memories, suggesting parents may hear more about children’s past life memories than professionals. Notably, no parents reported their child sharing memories of being born or in-utero yet 13 % of professionals stated that children they support have reported memories of being born or in utero.

While only a small number of children spontaneously reported past life memories, 16 % of parents and 10 % of professionals claim they had past life memories in their own childhood. 20 % of parents report having memories of being in-utero or being born in their own childhood with only 1 % or professionals reporting these memories (being in-utero or being born). Research with adults shows how some features of their childhood past life memories persist into adult.<sup>54</sup> Retained memories into adulthood centre around persons they knew in their previous lives and the circumstances which led to their deaths.<sup>54</sup>

Research by Pehlivanova et al.,<sup>4</sup> show adults who have reported apparent past life memories as children to lead normal, productive lives, having higher educational attainment compared to the general population.

Case study example: in and out of utero and past life memories that spontaneously emerged through creative research approaches

We first met Jenna (age 6 years) in a research session conducted in a school. Jenna was one of fifteen children ages 4–8 years who participated in the session. Following an informal interview with Jenna’s family (mother and grandmother), we collected contextual information about Jenna’s home and family life. Jenna is bi-racial heritage (Pakistani and White) and lives with her mother, older sister and stepfather. Jenna’s older sister has been diagnosed with autism while Jenna has no diagnosis of Autism nor any other medical conditions. There is a history of mental illness in Jenna’s family that includes schizophrenia. At the time of pregnancy with Jenna, her mother experienced domestic violence that also affected Jenna’s older sister. This was a high risk pregnancy involving intrauterine growth restriction (developing slowly), with reports that Jenna’s mother was hit in the stomach (by Jenna’s biological father) while carrying Jenna. At the time of the pregnancy, the family followed Islam.

After using the story tool with children (see ‘Methods’), we invited children to select an activity that would best represent any unusual experiences they wanted to share. Children selected toys, paints, Play Doh and Lego, recreating their experiences through play, with researchers engaging and documenting details of any experiences reported. Jenna selected a toy doctors kit that contained a set of plastic medical tools (stethoscope, blood pressure monitors etc.). Jenna approached one of the researchers and began to conduct a medical examination that focused on the researcher’s abdomen. Curious, the researcher engaged in Jenna’s pretend medical inspection. The researcher asked Jenna if her stomach “was okay?”, thanks to the medical attention it had received from Jenna. After Jenna confirmed the researcher’s stomach was not okay, she began to share her memories of dying and being inside her own mother’s “tummy”. The researcher asked Jenna if they could explore this more, perhaps through drawing some pictures. Jenna agreed and began to share a memory of being “a lady”, reporting minimal details of a house on a hill. As Jenna described being “a lady”, her hands moved down her body, as if straightening the skirts of a long dress. Jenna describes falling down the stairs and dying.

Extract 1: past life and in-utero memories that emerge through play

C: Child (age 6 years); R: Researcher

Table 1  
Past life memory results from parent study.

|               | Current Past Life Memories                                                                   | Past life memories from Childhood                                                                                                            | Children who report past life memories to adults                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Children      | 1 child reported being in utero<br>2 children (ages 4 & 6 years) reported past life memories | N/A                                                                                                                                          | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Parents       | No parents reported current past life memories                                               | 20 % of parents in childhood had memories of being in-utero and being born<br>16 % of parents in childhood had past life memories            | 17 % of parents stated that their child had reported a past life memory<br>1 parent during an interview reported past life memories in her eldest child (who was not present in the interview)<br>No parents stated that their own child had reported memories of being born or in-utero |
| Professionals | No professionals reported current past life memories                                         | 1 % of professionals in childhood had memories of being in-utero and being born<br>10 % of professionals in childhood had past life memories | 6 % of professionals report that a child has shared a past life memory with them<br>13 % of professionals state that a child has reported memories of being born and in-utero                                                                                                            |

R: What are you playing?  
 C: I'm a doctor I'm going to check you now [child begins to carry out pretend medical checks on the researcher]  
 R: Okay ...am I okay or do I need to keep on seeing the doctor?  
 C: Yes [child pressed medical equipment against researchers tummy]  
 R: Is my tummy okay?  
 C: erm no no its not  
 R: Ah okay...while you're checking my tummy, can you tell me about any unusual experiences you might have had, you know, like the one from our story at the start?  
 C: [continues to conduct a medical examination on the researcher]  
 R: I think you've made me feel better now thank you, you're a very good doctor  
 C: Well, I died before, and it was before I was inside my mummy's tummy  
 R: well, that's very interesting do you think you can tell me some more about that?  
 C: it was because I fell down the stairs in my old house but not my other old house it was the one I lived in before I was inside my mummy's tummy  
 R: Oh, I see...can you tell me what happened, shall we draw while we talk?  
 C: Yes [the researcher gets out paper and coloured pens]  
 R: so, you said that you fell down the stairs, can you tell me more? Where was your house?  
 C: my house was on a hill and there were no other houses there just mine.  
 R: what did you look like?  
 C: I was a lady [moves hands down her body as though straightening a long dress]  
 R: Ah okay....so what happened?  
 C: one day I was coming down my stairs and I tripped; I fell to the bottom, and I died  
 R: I see...then what happened  
 C: I was inside my mummy's tummy  
 R: Do you remember being inside your mummy's tummy  
 C: yes [runs off to play with other children]  
 Jenna became distracted (or bored) and ran off to play with other children (children can easily become distracted in research group sessions). We decided to follow up with Jenna to try and identify more details about her past life memories and contacted Jenna's parent to arrange a second interview at Jenna's home (with a different researcher). The researcher started the interview by reminding Jenna about what she had reported in the research session.

#### Extract 2: second interview with Jenna

R: So those interesting memories then that you were telling [researcher name] about, what did they mean to you? What do you think about them?  
 C: 'Um, okay.'  
 R: What did they mean to you? Were they important to you?  
 C: 'Um, not really. Um, not really'  
 [At this point, the researcher takes out art resources and spends time drawing and talking about other things, bringing the interview back to Jenna's reported memories]  
 R: So, you said you remember being in your mummy's tummy, what did you see?  
 C: I saw a lot of other interesting things  
 R: Can you describe them?  
 C: I think, yeh...I don't know how  
 R: What can you describe?  
 C: I remember when I kicked my mummy  
 R: you remember when you kicked your mummy? When you were inside your mummy?  
 C: yeh

R: what did you do?  
 C: [the child begins to jump around kicking, imitating the movements when inside her mother's tummy]  
 R: Why are you kicking?  
 C: I want to get out of here....yeh I remember that  
 R: That's amazing....so you remember kicking your mummy?  
 C: Yeh I remember when I jumped on my mummy when I was in her tummy. It was this  
 [child begins to jump and kick again]  
 R: Wow  
 C: And I did handstands  
 R: Inside your mummy's tummy?  
 C: yeh and my leg went all the way up to the top....and then I came out  
 R: so, what happened then (?)  
 C: they cut my mummy's tummy and then I came out  
 R: So, you remember being born?  
 C: yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

#### Extract 3: slinky

R: What else did you see when you were in mummy's tummy?  
 C: I saw all sorts  
 R: Is that what you're drawing now?  
 C: it's my toy  
 R: a toy that you saw in your mummy's tummy (?)  
 C: yeah, it wasn't that colour, and I can't remember the name of it ... but it was called a slinky  
 R: So, this was something you could see before you were born?  
 C: yeah  
 R: was it something you could touch?  
 C: yeah  
 R: What did it feel like?  
 C: It was like a wiggly worm  
 [child rolls into a foetal position and rocks]  
 Jenna later describes seeing her older sister while being in her mother's tummy. The researcher explored this with Jenna:

#### Extract 4: seeing external events while in utero

R: One of the other things you said, I think, if I got this right, I think you said that when you were in Mummy's tummy, you could see your sister (?) So how did you know this was your sister (?)  
 C: Because I could see them on the camera.  
 R: On the camera (?)  
 C: Because I went for a scan so, I so I saw my sister and I kicked my mummy and then I waved.  
 R: So, you kicked your mummy inside her tummy, is that right (?)  
 And then you waved to your sister (?)  
 C: Yes

#### Results and discussion

In extract (1), Jenna is playing with a toy doctor's kit, self-selected from a range of research activities in the classroom. Jenna is focused on the researcher's tummy, checking it and trying to fix it. The tummy area is significant for the memories that Jenna goes on to share about being in utero and before, and had further significant meanings that emerged (domestic abuse involving Jenna's mother being hit in the stomach). According to Jenna's Grandmother, Jenna was unaware that her mother had been abused in this way. Ohkado and Ikegawa (2014) identified four types of children's memories: i) birth memories, (ii) womb memories, (iii), life-between-life or pre-life memories; and (iv) past life memories. According to Ohkado and Ikegawa (2014), a child having one type is likely to possess the other types. Jenna presented with three types – womb memories, birth memories and past life memories.

Extract 1 shows Jenna representing her memories of being in utero through play, which are potentially traumatic. Lucam et al.<sup>55</sup> highlight the clinical implications for children who may experience trauma through their unusual memories. The researcher moves into Jenna's play world, becoming a participant, while maintaining an awareness of the research process, and when to explore Jenna's experiences further (Can you tell me about any unusual experiences....?). Jenna feels comfortable with the researcher's roles of playing, observing and listening – and in a matter-of-fact manner – reports her memories of dying before she was inside her mother's tummy. The researcher validates Jenna's important space for sharing, reassuring Jenna that this is valuable information ("that's very interesting"). Jenna reports dying in a previous life (old house) describing what seems to be an accident (falling down the stairs). Tucker<sup>7</sup> notes how most children describe ordinary past lives except for the extraordinary death event, with 70 % of children's past life deaths reported as unnatural. While studies of children claiming to have past-life memories have revealed that some of these children also claim to remember the "bardo," or life-between-life state,<sup>10</sup> Jenna does not report any in-between state, rather she moves directly to being in her mother's womb.

#### *Children's legitimising strategies for past life memories*

Unlike standard past life memory (PLM) research, the aim is not to validate the child's memories through further investigation (i.e., pursue more details about location, names, check against documents etc.). While to show evidence through investigation is extremely valuable for the field of PLM, the focus here is to legitimate the subjective knowledge of the child through a range of multi-modal representations – relational to the child's experiences and wider context (parents' experiences, history etc.). Extract 2 demonstrates how children like Jenna, can represent past life memories in a matter-of-fact manner (despite the potential for traumatic memories in utero). For Jenna, there is the claim that there is nothing extraordinary or unusual about her memories of a past life. Furthermore, it may imply that Jenna has no ulterior motive for sharing memories of a past life with family and friends (i.e., for attention, to feel special, etc.). What could be revealed from the absence of explicit meaning-making from Jenna about her memories is the 'isness' of them. There is an awareness by older children and adults that reporting unusual experiences can leave people in a difficult position, open to ridicule and their stories disbelieved.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, people can use legitimating strategies in their reporting such as 'extreme case formulations' (never, always, everyone, etc.) to guard against negative responses (see.<sup>56</sup> Where adults and young people may use linguistic strategies to validate the reality of their experiences, younger children may not. Notably, a double hermeneutic<sup>57</sup> is at play seen in the value/interpretation placed on Jenna's memories by the researchers, and the lack of importance Jenna assigns to her memories. The tensions, frictions and competing values between children and researchers,<sup>57</sup> are observed and noted by the researchers.

Children can report experiences through non-linear narrative constructions, appeals to the senses and embodied communication. In extract 3, the researcher invites Jenna to tell them more about her memory of being inside her mother's tummy. Jenna's narrative starts with an 'abstract'<sup>58</sup> orientating her story to the past (I remember) – but brings the experience into the present by acting out the experience of kicking her mother's tummy from the inside (and through cartwheels mimicking the action of turning around inside her mother's tummy). Jenna evaluates her situation using present tense markers ("I want to get out of here") situating Jenna as being present in her mother's tummy rather than reporting a past memory. Jenna also reported memories of

being born. When reporting memories of being born, Jenna sang in baby phonemes and reclined while kicking her legs (mimicking the movements of a baby and then rolled into a foetal position).

Ironside and Wooffitt<sup>59</sup> highlight how any attention on the child's body in everyday life in past reincarnation research is absent. The importance for the body, movement and sensory representation is highlighted through Jenna's interviews. Jenna relives her experience through the body (and movement) which can be important data in PLM research with children. Although Jenna does not try to legitimate her report through verbal narratives, *showing* the researcher what happened may be an attempt to validate her own experience. Emotions can inform transactional validity reached through triangulation<sup>60</sup> between what children report and their intense emotions.<sup>19</sup> Emotional expression as an epistemological principle is highlighted by Tucker<sup>7</sup> where children can show great emotional intensity one moment, followed by ordinary play a few minutes later. Tucker<sup>7</sup> notes how children seem to need to be in a certain frame of mind to access past life memories. Applying creative research processes with children may support this frame of mind.<sup>61</sup>

#### *Multimodal representations*

In extract 1, Jenna mimics straightening a long dress as she describes her memories of falling down the stairs to her death. In extract (2) Jenna uses her body to mimic the movements of herself as a foetus in her mother's womb to help explain her memories. The researcher uses sensory research questions, guiding Jenna towards her sensory experiences, such as touching and seeing (the researcher also asks Jenna about smell and sound – Jenna later reveals that she could hear strange music while in the womb). Jenna reports interesting experiences such as seeing her older sister as a young girl, possibly on a camera, identified as relating to a scan procedure. While Jenna could know about her mother and sister watching her on a scan (for example through stories from her mother), of interest, is how Jenna reports playing with a 'slinky' while in her mother's womb. While Jenna does not explicitly claim this to be the umbilical cord, other sensory details such as the feeling of the slinky (like a worm) and the colours used to describe it (blue, pink, red) may indicate it to be the umbilical cord. Grof<sup>62</sup> argues that the intrauterine experience is rich in images and psychological patterns that can impact adults across the life course. These experiences in the womb form constellations, emotionally charged systems that have been documented through research with adults.<sup>62</sup> Considering the external circumstances surrounding Jenna's birth (domestic abuse, developmental issues), the space of the creative research session afforded Jenna's memories of being in her mother's womb to emerge in more detail (such as playing with a slinky or seeing her older sister).

Terms and ideas which go beyond the scope of the child (umbilical cord, caesarean section) are typically represented through abstract associations with things that they know (slinky toys) and what they experience in a sensory way (colours, smells, touch). Using sensory ethnography with children in PLM research can support how we grasp the most profound type of knowledge which is not spoke of at all and therefore inaccessible to observation and interview (Bloch, 1998 in.<sup>45</sup> Jenna uses art to report the experience of playing with "the slinky". Figs. 1 and 2 show how the process of drawing helped Jenna to remember more details about it. In Fig. 1, Jenna only represents the shape but then starts to remember colours (Fig. 2). Using creative research methods may enhance a state of flow in children, inducing more details about their experiences and memories.<sup>63</sup>



**Fig. 1.** Starting the process of drawing the 'slinky' in her mother's womb.



**Fig. 2.** More details emerge, Jenna adds the colours blue and pink, potentially representing the umbilical cord.

## Conclusion

This area of PLM research is embryonic and under further development by author 2 (forthcoming) through doctoral research study that will examine whether child-centred research methods can enhance the field of PLM. Where traditional qualitative and quantitative research is typically underpinned by a logical empiricism, privileging specific types of knowledges (numbers, statistics, objectivity, etc.), child-friendly methods can generate valuable data from the experiences and perspectives of children. Despite the rigorous and valuable data produced through PLM research, there is still a schism between important findings and informing services that support children and families (Health, education, social work etc.). Data collected to date by PLM researchers show the clinical significance of their results which most clinicians and

professionals who support children are unaware of. Expanding the methodological repertoire to include participatory and non-traditional methods in PLM research may help to bridge this important field (PLM research) with policy and service development. This is especially important for children experiencing distress or long-term trauma because of their memories.

It goes beyond the scope of our paper to tackle the ontological debates about reincarnation. However, it is worth noting how children can contribute to the ontic questions about past lives, through their spontaneous, matter-of-fact reporting styles that demonstrate an emotional validity and a sensory rigour over their memories. Children, through their direct experiencing, and ways of representing their worlds, can challenge physicalist and/or materialist ideas about what it means to be human. They are a relevant and important research population for investigating areas such as past life memories, survival of consciousness and the nature of reality. The case study example shows the value of applying approaches such as co-interpretation, art and play-based research methods and sensory ethnography. Ethical considerations are vital when involving children in past life research, and ensuring children have provided informed consent, researchers retain their anonymity and reposition children as active agents is warranted. Making sure children's rights are protected and recognising the capacities for children to be actively involved in the research can lead to fruitful results and important data that can support other types of data (i.e., measurement scales; document analysis, etc.). Finally, effectively involving the experts themselves – children – may teach us something new about past life memories.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Donna M. Thomas:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elaine Rycroft:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Kirsty Allan:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Saima Sharif:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

## Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflict of interests to declare.

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