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Research Article

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Postmaterial Participatory Research: Exploring the nature of self with children

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Abstract: In this article, I argue for the value of participatory methodologies, in research with children, which aims to privilege their epistemologies and living experiences in relation to the nature of self. Researching self with children raises questions about the mainstream materialist paradigm which holds hegemony over most academic disciplines – and, importantly, over the life worlds of everyday people. Children's experiences of self, others and the world challenge the dominant materialist paradigm, requiring investigation into other metaphysical models of reality, that may have more explanatory power than materialism. I address this by appealing to a body of scholarship referred to as 'postmaterialist'. Reauthoring our nature as human beings carries an increasing importance and urgency in the face of current ecological, economical and health crises. I argue that any research, which seeks to facilitate social transformation through everyday people, needs to begin by asking ontological questions about the nature of the self - the subject of experience who holds and reports epistemological authority over their subjective experiences.

Keywords: Children; Self; Subjectivity; Consciousness; Participatory Research; Postmaterialist; Transformation

1 Introduction

> "On a dark and rainy night in September 1988, a young girl, trapped inside the burning wreckage of a car, began to die. As the car began to ricochet, turning over, with the force of a whirling dervish, the young girl became paralyzed, constrained by a consuming terror. As her stunned body slammed against hard plastic and glass window, she knew she was about to die. Terror was swiftly replaced by a deep peace that cannot be imagined or described. It held, caressed and dissolved the young girl as she grew, expanding to the length and breadth of the universe. No longer a young girl, she held the wisdom of ten thousand scholars and the stillness of a snow -covered meadow, untouched by human footprints. A collage of images imprinted across her field of awareness, scenes and memories that extended across the fifteen years of her short life. The young girl didn't know if the movie lasted minutes, hours, days or a millennium. Time did not exist here. All she knew was the deepest chasm of love that she felt for friends, enemies, her dysfunctional family, boys who had rejected her, the police who had chased her and the teachers who had belittled and berated her. These beings now dissolving across a divine screen of perception, that lovingly held each version of this young girl. Then, in a swift split second, the whole universe once again became the young girl. A girl in pain and fear, her legs twisted with the bent metal of the front seat, and her face broken and bleeding. As the young girl was dragged from the burning wreckage, through the shards of broken window, the car exploded."
>
> Aged 15 years

As an adult researcher who examines the nature of self and *unexplained* experiences with children (Thomas, 2021; 2022a; 2022b), I often hear stories like the one included above. Partly linguistic, sometimes non-verbal, always spatial, children's stories about self can involve experiences in which their being becomes known to them as *existence itself*. When the usual identity of *child* is dissolved, children can experience an expanded sense of beingness that is not so far removed from the dimension of the everyday (Albhari, 2019). Such experiences are recognised as self-transcendent, in the plethora of literature that deals with adults (Taylor, 2012; Lindström et al, 2022). Research into self-transcendent experiences in children and young people is sparse, their absence in studies potentially fuelled by ideas about pre-egoic children as incapable, irrational or artificial (Piaget, 1922/2002), or older children as disordered or symptomatic (Laurens et al, 2008, 2012; Kelleher & Cannon, 2011). Such assumptions tend to be rooted in Piagetian ideas, which have been reduced to cognitive developmental models in contemporary society, positioning children as not yet fully human,

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as they move along a trajectory to realise the rationality of adulthood (Murris, 2013).

What follows are the implications for children's involvement in research, which raises questions around how well we understand the nature of child (Oswell, 2016; Murris, 2013). The experience I've used to introduce the article belongs to my 15-year-old self. If a researcher is directly acquainted with the experiences she wants to research, a clear admission and a rigorous reflexivity is required (Thomas, 2020). I hope to show how this may be achieved in research with children, while setting out post-materialist participatory methodologies for researching self with children. Self-transcendent experiences may be misleading. Often, we research a self that is *lost* in these processes, rather than a self which may be there *prior* to self-dissolution (Thomas, 2023). In this way, research with children offers affordances to explore self or subjectivity prior to ego-development, narrative selves or the individual with a precise centre and location (Thomas, 2020).

The aim of the article is to argue for the value of participatory methodologies in research *with* children, which aims to privilege their knowledges/epistemologies and living experiences in relation to the nature of self. Researching self with children raises questions about the mainstream materialist paradigm which holds hegemony (Kastrup, 2016) over most academic disciplines, including phenomenological and qualitative research (Lather & St Pierre, 2013), - and importantly, over the life worlds of everyday people. Children's experiences of self, others and the world challenge the dominant materialist paradigm, which provides the rationale for why I pay attention to other models of reality that may offer more explanatory power than materialism (Albhari, 2019; Shani & Keppler, 2015; Kastrup, 2018, 2019). I do this by appealing to a body of scholarship referred to as 'postmaterialist'.

Within a materialist paradigm, the self is often viewed as a person, an individual biological entity. From this perspective, people and their experiences are research objects, fixed entities that can be measured and explained. Reauthoring our nature as human beings carries an increasing importance and urgency in the face of current ecological, economical and health crises. (Willis, 2011). Any research that seeks to facilitate social transformation through everyday people needs to begin by asking ontological questions about the nature of the self - the subject of experience who reports, reflects and carries epistemological authority over their subjective experiences (Thomas, 2020).

2 Theorising and Researching the Self

It's valuable to consider how self is often theorised and understood across scientific and philosophical scholarship, before turning towards children's living experiences and ways of doing research (Thomas, 2023). The motivation is to show how *self* is yet to be reconciled across the literature. This offers affordances for children to be included in ongoing adult debates, theorising and model-making (Harris, 2021; Zahavi, 2011; Strawson, 1999). This brief excursion into the 'Festival of misunderstandings' (Strawson, 1999) about self, may show how 'the hard problem of subjectivity' (Goff & Moran, 2021) renders definitions of self as integral to ideas about the nature of consciousness. Self plays a troublesome role for philosophers who aim to resolve philosophical problems, such as subject-combination (Harris, 2021) or the decomposition problem (Shani & Keppler, 2015). Philosophers must try to explain how smaller selves, like you and I, exist. If for example, a philosopher takes a position known as 'panpsychism' (Goff & Moran, 2021), they may insist that consciousness emerges from, or constitutes, the smallest physical properties such as atoms and particles. They would then need to explain how small subjects/consciousness would combine (subject-combination) to make a larger subject (you and I). If you were an Idealist or a proponent of Cosmopsychism, your problem would be reversed. Meaning, an Idealist may propose reality to be ultimately consciousness, or one large subject (Kastrup, 2018; Shani & Keppler, 2015). In this way, the philosopher would need to explain how one subject could decompose into many (Kastrup, 2018 for an extended discussion of decomposition and dissociative identity disorder).

Some scholars would argue self to be illusory, yet as Zahavi (2011) recognises, it's problematic to get rid of a self before we understand what it entails. Self tends to be studied in neuroscience (Seth, 2021), psychology (Pajares & Sckunk, 2002), social science (Giddens, 2020) and philosophical contexts (Zahavi, 2011; Strawson, 1999) – each field or discipline offering different definitions and motivations for locating a self/no-self. Self can be theorised as an epiphenomenon of complex brain processes or as purely textual (Dennet, 2014). Self tends to be textual in social research, its deconstruction affording potentials to unmask the forces that, in a Foucauldian sense, entangle discourses that circumscribe and constrain who we are (Foucault, 1984). As Nietzsche argues, self is often mistaken in the unconscious act of 'a specifically linguistic,

figurative habit of immemorial standing' (cited in Spivak, 1974).

Ontological concerns with self, empiricism and fundamental reality are often held within the province of philosophy. St Pierre (2008) calls social researchers to ontological concerns, by noting how "philosophers don't go out into natural settings in the field and do messy human subjects research" (p.111). Nor do social researchers often attend to philosophy that is concerned with the very nature of the social entities being investigated (Deironito, 2014). Social research can make explicit a demarcation between the epistemic and the real (social life and the natural world). In this way, ontology may not be a primary motivation for social researchers, even when natural laws continue to be felt within the lifeworld (Habermas, 1996). Troubling the self requires discussions around teleology, universality or particularity of the self – with a gap between concepts and actual experiences of the self (Hofman, 2016).

Philosophers such as Galen Strawson and Dan Zahavi argue for the importance of phenomenology in any research concerned with self - saying this should come before any metaphysics of self (Strawson, 1998). Phenomenological considerations should be prioritised, 'since an important and non-negligible feature of consciousness is the way in which it is experienced by the subject' (Zahavi & Parnas, 1998, p.687). The more we explore self 'whether with people or through the literature, it becomes apparent that there is no linear, unitary history' (Hofman, 2016). It remains, as William James observed, a 'puzzling puzzle' (1890).

3 Researching with Children

Any social research with people tends to equate personal narratives with self. Researching with children presents an opportunity to circumvent this assumption, and position self as the that which is to be researched (Thomas, 2020). Research *with* children also raises issues within traditional research approaches, and reconfigures methodologies, experts and subjects (Dan et al, 2019). Recent challenges to materialist-orientated research with people can be seen in disciplines such as childhood studies (Velicu & Giannis, 2020; Rooney & Rawlinson, 2016; Thomas, 2020). Like the transformative research agenda that addresses issues of power and inequality (Widianingsih & Merten, 2021), a growing body of work advances qualitative research, through participatory and post qualitative methodologies (Dan et al, 2019; St Pierre, 2008; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). Participatory research aims to emancipate and transform people from objects of research, into active agents who co-create research agendas and contribute to social transformation. Participatory research shows further potentials for transforming how self and human experience is understood– including experiences that cannot be explained through conventional science (Wahbeh et al, 2022; Thomas, 2021,2022b).

Participatory research with children emerged in the early nineties in response to article 12 of the child's 'right to be heard', developing alongside sociological paradigm shifts leading to children being acknowledged as competent social actors (Dixon et al, 2019). There are different approaches for participatory research with children, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), co-production (Norton, 2021) and peer research (Marcu, 2016). PAR is grounded in shared production of knowledge and the empowerment of subordinated communities (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Starting from the issues of children in participatory approaches requires the engagement of children in early research design, challenging preconceived, often institutional top-down agendas. The agendas or worldview that we are continuously exposed to, and live by, is the materialist model of the world, which shapes and dominates how we perceive self and experience. Participatory research offers affordances to address ontological enquiry, alongside privileging living experience (Thomas, 2022b).

Recent developments in participatory research have seen interdisciplinary and non-traditional research methods used with children. Art has become a valuable research medium for involving children without voice, and pre-verbal children (Stafford, 2017; Grey et al, 2011). Research with children can present a challenge to traditional qualitative practice informed by an epistemology of logical positivism (Lather & St Pierre, 2013). Participatory research with children requires an *ethical reflexivity* (Warin, 2013) and highlights the need for spaces for participation (Mannion, 2007). Most participatory research, despite its emancipatory agenda, starts from a materialist view of human beings and reality. There are two substances, mind and matter - and two positions, subject and object. As Walton (2014) notes, subjectivity "in this context is generally interpreted to be the expression of the thoughts and feelings of the individuals concerned [...] it is not sufficient to just recognise the subjectivity involved in any research [...] if we are to gain more knowledge about its nature, there needs to be an exploration of the source of subjective experiences" (p.25). An exploration of this sort entails deeper enquiry into the nature of the experiencer (including the researcher) and of the storyteller. Method-

ologies need to be capable of capturing experiences of children, which often transcend usual conventions of personhood, time, space and language (Thomas, 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

4 Example Study and Methods: Researching Self with Children

I had previously (over a number of years) listened to children's stories about their *unusual* experiences. As a child experiencer, I had an ear for them. A more pressing concern was hearing reports from children about how their experiences were being misunderstood by well-meaning adults (Thomas, 2021, 2022b). Often, children's experiences are re-conceptualised by adults as features of illness or disorder (Thomas, 2021, 2022b). I sought advice from children and young people to find out whether this would be meaningful research for children. I asked them about ways of researching with children and recorded their suggestions. The *Who am I* study (2019-2020) emerged, using a mixed methods approach *with* children, making this study a good exemplar for showing participatory research methods. The findings from the study initiated discussion around the nature of self and proposed a challenge to the dominant, materialist paradigm.

4.1 Participants and Recruitment

A flyer advertising the project was distributed online through social media networks. The flyer asked: '*Are you interested in exploring what 'I' or 'me' is?* And *'have you had any 'unusual' experiences that you would like to share*?' A paper copy was left in outdoor spaces where children and young people go (such as parks). In addition to this, a letter was distributed to children and parents/carers through a local primary school. The project was conducted in the North of England, in a small urban area. All participants joined through their own volition, because '*there is nowhere that we can talk about these kinds of experiences*' (participant, aged 17 years).

In total, eighteen children aged between 4-17 years participated in the study. Age differences within this group were considered; other demographic variables were not statistically significant across the small cohort (Thomas, 2021). Some children had medical conditions such as epilepsy and narcolepsy; other children had no pre-existing medical conditions (an equitable representation across participants). The aims of the study enabled children to share any 'unexplained' experiences – or experiences which go beyond our usual definitions of personhood, time and space – such as peak experiences (Hoffman, 1998), out-of-body experiences (OBEs –Tart, 1988), visions (Parra, 2007), hearing voices and sounds and premonitions (Dossey, 2008; Cardeña & Alverado, 2014). An important aspect of the study was to explore how children experienced and generated meanings about the 'I' of experience or self – and how experience and self may correspond.

4.2 Methods

Children shaped the aim and design of the study through dialogue and in 'research moments', which Elwick & Green (2020) term as *moments of wonder*, when there are interruptions in the flow of things – "when something catches the attention and makes us think again, and anew" (p.338). This required the researcher to drop any preconceived notions of knower and known that often frame traditional approaches (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). Stories are important in research with people. They can reveal how we make sense of the world, validate our points of view, maintain relationships and shape our identities (Thomas, 2020). In social research, narrative accounts of experience are valuable data, with storytelling being a consistent feature of everyday talk (Norrick, 2000). In the study, children began by telling stories about their families, friends and other aspects of their everyday lives. When it came to exploring their *unusual* experiences (e.g., OBEs, visions, premonitions, peak or mystical), other modes of semiosis were required. Art was especially valuable for conveying unexplained experiences, and the 'Take a Selfie' method proved essential for children who wanted to explore the self (especially children who had experienced some form of self-transcendence).

5 Art

Skukauskaite et al (2021) posit art as a research method for providing "new lenses for seeing and thinking [that] disrupts norms of knowledge construction and representation and often lead to deeper understandings of self, others and the ontological and epistemological assumptions shaping research processes and representations" (p.2). Eisner (2008) notes the importance of art methodology for capturing experience that transcends language. Art and visual representation became a necessary method

for exploring self and anomalous experiences with children and young people, for example.

The picture in Fig 1 is a representation of self, by a young person, following a peak experience in nature. The geometrical lines represent this young person's experience of self as '*connected to everything...I am everything*'. Abstract images, such as shapes or lines, create challenges for the researcher in the act of (co) interpretation. As well as co-interpreting images with children, it is valuable to consider the significance of these types of images within the broader literature. For example, geometrical patterns like the one produced by the young person (Fig 1) have been discovered in caves or embellished in natural artefacts such as red ochre, with their function and meaning highly debated (Hodgson, 2019; Luke, 2010). Some scholars suggest patterns are linked to early visual cortex systems (Hodgson, 2019). Others propose "that the non-figurative images are in fact universal representations...once perceived by our shamanic ancestors during altered states of consciousness" (Luke, 2010, p.8). Carl Jung identified the mandala – another type of geometrical image – as a visual representation of the archetypal self (1969). Cardeña (2020) makes connections between self-representation, art and anomalous experiences. Cardeña (2020) notes how the subjective can be represented in objective ways, where themes such as "hypergeometry were integrated by scientists and artists alike" (p.206), to represent an underlying reality prior to space/time. Children were offered a selection of art materials to represent self and their experiences, such as paints, natural artefacts such as leaves and branches, pencils and so on. Children made choices about the research methods they engaged with and the research tools they used.



'I saw at one point patterns in my
experience, like mandalas or geometric patterns
like woven together...it was me'
Participant, aged 14 years, peak experience in nature

Figure 1: Geometrical shapes 'this is the me'

6 Take a Selfie

Children who reported transcending a usual sense of personhood, either though peak experiences or other types of experiences (i.e. OBEs), were invited to participate in the Take a Selfie research activity. This is a research method similar to self-enquiry practices that explore the question '*Who am I*?', traditionally associated with Eastern Philosophical traditions (Barua, 2015). More recently, self-enquiry has been used in western non-dual circles and teaching (Spira, 2017), as a means for exploring self and promoting wellbeing. The concept of the 'Selfie' is taken from the cultural phenomenon of using digital technology to capture images of the self. While "selfies have been observed in relation to narcissism and self-promoting behaviours" (Choi & Bhem-Morowitz, 2018, p.346), using the concept to facilitate a deeper enquiry into the nature of self and unexplained experiences, has been useful with children in the pilot study. Five older children (aged 10-17 years) engaged in the Take a Selfie activity (see 'Findings' section).

7 Transpersonal Reflexivity

What comes to the fore when researching with children, is the researcher and the researched – the subject and the object. In the fight to research *with* rather than *on* children, researchers must observe what shows up as the *self* in research practice. Where the tradition of phys-

Take a Selfie

1. Imagine that your attention or awareness is a camera lens. This could be like a phone camera or a normal camera
2. Now, start to adjust your focus – like the lens of a camera. Let's practice on the table. Zoom your attention onto the table – then pull your attention away – what happens to the table
   (Encourage the participant to explain/represent their experience of the table – and of their awareness)
3. Now we are going to use our cameras to look at things inside. The table is 'outside' but inside there might be objects that we can zoom in on.
4. Ok, turn your camera round to inside you. Use an inner object to practice on – a thought, a feeling or a sensation (body). Zoom your attention onto the object, now zoom out. What happens to the object?
   (*Encourage* the participant to explain/represent their experiences of inner objects)
5. Let's talk about that focus or attention that zooms in and out of objects. What or who is that?

Figure 2: The Take a Selfie Research Activity

icalist science argues for the case of objectivity, qualitative researchers recognise the subjective and *intrasubjective* (Barad, 2007) imbued in any practice that concerns human beings. Disciplines that celebrate the objective, such as physics, are recognising the role the observer may play in scientific study (Radin 2008). The observer may need to engage in a second attention epistemology (Sorli & Kauffman, 2018; Lattuada, 2016) to *observe the observer* within, to reach a *higher ontological status* (Sorli & Kauffman, 2018) in scientific experimentation. This is similar in many ways to research *with* children, in avoiding the pitfalls of interpreting children's ways of being and experiences through the conditioned lenses of adulthood. I wanted to ensure (to the best that I could) that my own self-transcendent experience as a child did not intrude on children's interpretations.

Researcher self-awareness is referred to as *reflexivity*, a methodological tool that "can provide researchers and practitioners with new insights and increased self-awareness" (Alley et al, 2015, p.428). As a researcher exploring with children and young people their self and subjectivity, I considered it appropriate that I also *take a selfie*. This required a deeper reflexive practice that moved beyond both the "usual introspective focus of reflection [and] the wider social and political context" (Alley et al, 2015, p. 428). Taking a selfie from the researcher perspective meant appealing to a *transpersonal reflexivity* (Thomas, 2020) – in that introspection is not performed by an unquestioned Cartesian-subject. Indeed, it is the Cartesian-subject itself that is under scrutiny through an act that addresses the assumption of personhood and separate agential subjects and objects (Thomas, 2020). Lattuada (2016) refers to this status as a *second attention* epistemological stance, which allows for observation of thoughts, ideas and narratives that condition and can influence the scientist's relationship with the data.

A second attention epistemic position disidentifies with the objects of consciousness which coalesce to shape a conceptual sense of self. Albhari (2019) posits second attention as "witness consciousness...reflexive insofar as it is self-revealing, intransitive insofar as it implicitly reveals itself not as a discrete sensory or mental object, but rather more basically as subjectivity" (p.15). The first epistemic attention, or conceptual self, creates a subject/object relationship in the production of knowledge, while a second attention collapses this distinction. In this way, boundaries between knower/known collapse, only to be reintroduced in the needed process of knowledge production (Barad, 2007). This deeper reflexivity transcends the personal, disentangling from inner stories that shape, position and sustain assumptions about others and the world (Thomas, 2020).

8 Findings: Children and Self

Researching the nature of self with children demonstrated three experiences of self. It's important to note how older children, who have moved through a process of ego-development, can reflect meta-cognitively on a process of self-dissolution. For younger children, self was explored in other ways. I have organised the findings into older children and younger children. I first explain the three senses of self, synthesised from children's representations across all ages.

8.2.1 Three Senses of Self

When I first met with children, I asked if they '*would tell me something about their self*'. This was a question that functions in two ways: It eases children into the interview as part of developing researcher and co-researcher (the child) relationship; and it allows for attention to be paid to how we may respond to this question in a default (unquestioned) manner. Initially, children would share stories about their everyday lives. Older children's personal narratives were highly conceptual and *interdiscursive* (Fairclough, 2013), shaped by discourses from other fields such as health, social media and education (Thomas, 2021). Younger children added another dimension to their personal narratives, that included dreams and abstract feelings, such as love. Younger children also included phenomena from the mythical realms (such as unicorns), mixing *self-related states of consciousness* (Chalmers, 1995) with conceptual references to social identities (names, ages, schools). This experience of self was viewed (by the researcher and children) as a *story self* (conceptual self). A sense of self that was experienced as individual and having agency.

When children began to share *unusual* experiences, a shift in how self is experienced was noted. Children's narrative accounts became spatial, rather than linear. Their experiences transcended language, and art materials were offered as a means to help children represent them. Their sense of self merged into others, for example, when experiencing telepathy (see fig 3). We referred to this as the transpersonal self. When children attempted to describe peak or self-transcendent experiences, or following Take a Selfie activities, they could not convey their experience

of self through language. Children's best descriptions of *self* included: *'I don't know but I just know it is the real me'; 'I'm space*'. Children felt this was the locus of experience, in the sense that this was the self or subject that experienced all other senses of self (conceptual and transpersonal), and different kinds of experiences. We referred to this experience of self as the 'Knowing I', which appeared to be a shared field of subjectivity (Shani & Keppler, 2018; Kastrup, 2018).

8.2.1.1 Younger Children

Younger children shared ideas about who they are. These ideas from younger children tend to be based on their experiences, and an intuition about the nature of life. Keleman (2004) argues how children are *intuitive theists*, logically disposed to think of natural phenomena as resulting from non-human design. Children demonstrate teleological assumptions from an early age, even when adults apply physical explanations (Baillargeon, 1993; Gelman & Kremer, 1991). When younger children shared their 'unusual experiences' (visions, hearing sounds, premonitions etc.), of what happened to them, I asked them about the 'me' that experiences these things. Below is an example from a child who is eight years.

Joe was a little boy with an interesting story. Since an early age, Joe had shared memories of past lives and offered philosophical insights about the nature of reality as '*like a dream*'. Joe had been experiencing empathic tendencies (telepathy, feeling another's emotions etc.) and had been struggling in social situations. I asked Joe, '*what does 'me' mean to you*?'. The picture in fig 2 is Joe's response. The image represents two versions of *self:* one that Joe describes as a space suit, and the other as a body of energy. Joe included a large eye on the energy version of himself, with no other facial features. When I enquired as what this was, Joe wrote that '*it is the eye of the soul*' that can see everything. Younger children described their self through metaphorical constructions such as, '*we are all like raindrops that are part of the sea*', or '*we are like the universe*'. Some younger children stayed with their story self but included dreams and feelings such as love and happiness, as part of who they were. Younger children appeared to naturally identify with a transpersonal self, rather than a story (conceptual) self.



Figure 3: The 'eye' of the soul, aged 8 years

8.2.1.2 Older Children

The experiences that older children (10-17 years) had encountered seemed to disrupt the boundaries of their conceptual selves. Self and experience were noted as tightly correlated, with long silences by children, recognised as an epistemic bridge between different experiences of self. Silence is not often attended to in social research (Mazzei, 2007; Lewis, 2020; Spyrou, 2016), and in the case of children, their experiences, at times, constituted the unthinkable and unspeakable. As Wittgenstein warned, "there is indeed the inexpressible whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (cited in Zembylas, 2004, p.194). Plato is reported not to have written anything that about which he is serious because his most profound knowledge consists of his soul's silent vision of ultimate, transcendent reality, which is ineffable (Rhodes, 2003). Silence in this way is emphasised as a state far more complex than the absence of voice or a socio-cultural reaction. It points to the idea that something exists beyond voice, and before the story self. Silence as an *epistemic bridge* was noted to occur more in older children when trying to describe the 'knowing I':

> 'I don't know [silence]....I just know it's the real me'
> 'It's just [silence].... a knowing'
> 'It feels [silence]... like the natural me'
> '[silence].....I.....don't know'

The 'knowing I' was identified by older children either through reflecting on their own experiences (notably peak and/or transcendent), or in post-reflective discussions following the Take a Selfie Activity. Callum, aged 14 years, offers a valuable example of an older child (teenager) who experienced self-transcendence in nature, and again as part of the Take a Selfie activity:

> 'Then I zoomed out and I thought no it wasn't thought it was like a feeling but not like something inside of me there's no thoughts(silence) it's like going under the cover like that is your ego and its underneath it it's like looking inside what I am...feels peaceful, like energy I focused into what I am'
>
> Callum, aged 14 years

Callum's *self* extended beyond both the story self and the transpersonal self, an extension shared by all participants who took part in the Take a Selfie method. 'The Knowing I' could not be conveyed through language; only attempts could be made to reflect on it after. Albhari (2019) refers to this state as witness consciousness, that is diaphanous because rather than being just another object to be found in consciousness, it is the field of awareness itself. Val, aged 14 years had a similar self-transcendence experience following years of childhood trauma. In the Take a Selfie activity, Val described his self as '*like the sky*'. Yasmine, aged 17 years when we met, described her self-transcendence experience aged 14 years, following a suicide attempt and hospital admission. While in hospital, Yasmine had an overwhelming sense of gratitude that catalysed a deep *knowing* about her*self* as an intrinsic aspect of the universe. Older children use metaphorical constructions to describe a self they define as '*the real me*', such as '*going under the cover*' or '*it's under the bubble*', with covers and bubbles referring to their story or conceptual selves.

Izabel tried to explain how she experiences self as '*me and other people*'. Izabel could not describe her experience through words, and used pencils to draw her experience (fig 3). The picture shows how Izabel experiences other people's emotions and bodily sensations (such as pains). The third character in the middle is also Izabel, as she senses *self* as both her friend and her*self*. It seems younger and older children reveal a self that extends beyond materialist definitions. This requires an examination of which metaphysical propositions could better explain children's living experiences.

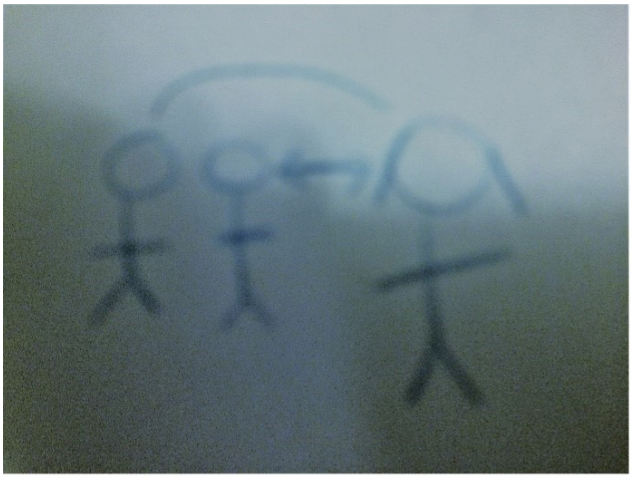


Figure 4: Izabel, Aged 16 years: Empathic relationships and intra-subjectivity

9 Discussion

In the small study reported here, children show how certain experiences of self, such as an individual with a precise centre, a perspective and location, are illusory (Harris, 2021) – in the sense that they are experiences, rather than subjects. Children's *experiences of self* (the conceptual self) were represented as different and diverse by children. For example, children expressed differences in names, ages, experiences and beliefs about the world. When children identified their conceptual sense of self as an experience (rather than the experiencer), they uncovered a deeper sense of self which they referred to as 'the real me' or 'the real I'. This 'real' self carried qualities of peace and knowing, experienced by children, despite their differences on the conceptual level of self. This experience of self that children *attempted to report* could be explained as a shared subject that is the "pure dative of experience, namely that to which things are given or disclosed" (Kastrup, 2018, p.140) – the experiencer.

In privileging children's epistemologies and experiences in the pursuit of knowledge, we can assume there is still much work to be done around *the hard problem of subjectivity* (Goff, 2021). When trying to account for children's experiences, a valuable exercise would be to engage in a process of elimination – meaning, which metaphysical models of consciousness and theories of self/no-self and subjectivity, correspond with the living experiences of children. Accounts of self as a product of complex and/or predictive brain processes (Dennet, 2014; Seth, 2021), do not correspond with how children seem to experience self, nor do they account for theories about the nature of children across fields such as childhood studies (Murris, 2003; Keleman, 2004). Experiences of self as non-local, shared and outside traditional models of space and time, make traditional physicalist and material models questionable. The development of philosophical models that position consciousness as primary (Albhari, 2019; Kastrup, 2018, 2019; Shani & Keppler) could afford explanatory potentials for reframing how we consider children and their ways of being. More importantly, children's experiences could contribute towards the ongoing

development on scholarship concerned with the nature of self and consciousness (Thomas, 2023).

Children's experience of self appears to correspond with postmaterialist accounts of reality and the nature of subjectivity (the experiencer). Shani & Keppler (2018) propose that the subjectivity of created selves depends on the subjectivity of the field. In this way, consciousness as the ontic ultimate reality realises a limit state of subjectivity or a pure subject. Where relative subjects (story/conceptual selves) experience the world in a conditioned way, the "pure subject…is devoid of individual conscious perspective…free from the constraints of creaturely perspective and from the dual partitioning the latter imposes upon experience" (Shani & Keppler, p.369). How a pure, aperspectival field can possess a subjective dimension is explained by Shani & Keppler in this way:

> In the absence of perspective there remains Ipseity, or selfhood as such: a conscious presence devoid of form and objects yet ready to assume ordinary qualitative tones and to serve as the apprehending recipients of objects if the right conditions for the emergence of an individual conscious perspective materialize.
>
> (Shani & Keppler, 2018, p.369)

The Ipseity that is there, *before* and *after* relative selves are *developed and lost*, belongs to the field, rather than a seemingly individual subject. To explain how everything is an expression of consciousness as the ontic primitive, Shani (2015) suggests the physical as an exterior complement to subject realities with appearances being phenomenal in nature. This is a redefinition of matter, that entails the physical world as an extrinsic appearance of a "mind-at-large" (see Kastrup, 2018 for an extended discussion of consciousness, subjects and decomposition). Therefore, the physical world is representative of the mental transpersonal contents of an ontic subject, that we experience from a third person point of view.

From Kastrup's (2018) perspective, sentience and core-subjectivity are inextricable. The story subject, the self that is experienced through introspection, memory, stories, individuality, a precise centre and location, is itself an experience of an ontic subject. A relative self is seen as a private qualitative field (Kastrup, 2018), localised from the field of subjectivity. In this way, children's experiences of telepathy, premonitions, out of body experiences and non-local identities, could be logically explained, especially where boundaries between private qualitative fields may be porous (Thomas, 2022b). Postmaterialist ideas of the world (Albahari, 2019; Kastrup, 2018; Shani & Keppler, 2018) not only correspond with children's experiences, but also offer a meaningful framework from which to understand children's ways of being.

10 Postmaterial Participatory Research

We can start to reframe research practice as Postmaterial Participatory, utilising transpersonal reflexivity and self-enquiry practices, in the production of knowledge about self, consciousness and living experience. In recognising the separation of subjects and objects to be illusory, all research becomes by nature participatory – as researchers and co-researchers bring in the "the near and here, but also the far away and long ago" (Wheeler nd). Postmaterial participatory research should include experiences that reach beyond usual notions of personhood and the domain of the everyday. This involves utilising interdisciplinary research methods from the fields of art, for example, affording opportunities for the unthinkable and unsayable to be expressed – and to inform the production of policy and development of practice.

Usually in qualitative or participatory research, the valuable data are stories; that is linguistic narratives which conceptualise experience (Thomas, 2020). We often ascribe an epistemological authority to the people who tell their stories, claiming their expertise is based on their conceptualisations of their being and doing. The *knowing* that children described in their self-enquiry research seemed to be inextricable from the *Ipseity* (Shani & Keppler, 2018) they experienced. Knowing was ontic, rather than epistemic. There is an ontological difference between our psychological knowing of phenomena and our direct, non-conceptual knowing of being (Bauer, 2020) - where ipseity may be the most original and fundamental form for constituting the self (Zahavi & Parnas, 1998). This has implications for how expertise and knowledge are considered in traditional participatory research and asks for attention to be paid to the self that is claiming ownership of the experience (Thomas, 2020). In the same way, the researcher must attend to their own claims, biases and personhood in research practice. What does become clear in researching self *with* children, is the important role they could play in informing wider scientific and philosophical postmaterialist scholarship. As beings in their-own-right, and in their becomings as our next generation, children have an important role to play in transforming our world.

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