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‘Experience’ is an elusive commonplace. Pinning down a comprehensive definition is difficult, yet it proliferates in contemporary mental health and academic writing. One of the most profound and challenging ways that it has come to prominence is through the term ‘expert by experience’ which seeks to blur traditional boundaries between formal training and the utility of having experienced particular systems, illnesses or events. As one article in social work notes, this term ‘makes a claim for a specialist knowledge base rooted in an individual’s experience of using services… the social worker needs to acknowledge and affirm the expertise of the other’ (Mclaughlin, 2009: 1111). For example, the Care Quality Commission - England’s regulator of social care – employs a number of ‘experts by experience’ who take part in inspections, the training of inspectors and participate in working groups (CQC 2017).

Technically, anything remembered, perceived, felt or encountered might qualify as ‘experience’. Lots of ink was spilled in philosophical analyses of the early-mid twentieth century on experience and its significance (thinking particularly here of the white male canon of Martin Heidegger, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and others). Yet, this kind of analysis – of what it is to ‘be in the world’ or what it is to ‘perceive’ – does not really touch on ‘experience’ as it is being mobilized in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Only certain kinds of things are habitually mobilized under that particular banner. Events remembered and bestowed with significance qualify as experience. These events function like a badge or marker for certain groups. Experience as a psychiatric inpatient, or as a sufferer from depression are the kinds of things that count. In recent years, this powerful category has been mobilized, not only by those who have experiences of mental health and social care services, but increasingly as part of academic work, especially in the history of medicine and history of psychiatry.

Many articles in this special issue involve insightful accounts of their authors’ experience(s), for various analytical and rhetorical ends. Sarah Chaney’s book on the history of self-harm, *Psyche on the Skin* (2017), is bookended by her experiences in a manner that enriches the argument, bringing issues into focus and situating her arguments with verve and immediacy. However, I wish to do something a little different, taking a step back and attempting two things. First, I want to ask how we got to a place where self-consciously bringing personal experiences to bear in academic work is even a question. For that, I’ll give one possible, potted history. Then I’ll ask: what are the consequences of this? What happens when we make ‘experience’ a touchstone of academic writing?

**How Did We Get Here?**
How has it become possible to debate at all whether we should mobilise ‘personal experience’ in academic work? Ian Hacking notes that ‘styles of reasoning create the possibility of truth or falsehood’ (1982: 56). Paul Rabinow, glossing this in the mid-1980s added that ‘a style of thinking’ is something that ‘established the conditions for entertaining a proposition as being capable of being taken as true or false in the first place’ (1986: 237). So, being a historian, I want to do a history of the ‘style of reasoning’ or style of thinking’ that allows us to ask the question of whether or not personal experiences have a place in academic work. Through which logics or justifications do we come to give assent or refusal to this question? (I take this approach partly because this ‘history of the question’ is more interesting than my personal answer to that question, which is simply ‘if you want to do it, then do it – if you don’t, then don’t feel like you should.’) I shall proceed under three broad headings – ‘thinking in cases’, ‘experience’ and ‘reflexivity’.

**Thinking in Cases: Dossiers, Biography & Psychoanalysis**

One of the ways to crack open what ‘experience’ might mean in the history of medicine and especially the history of psychiatry, is to analyse what a ‘clinical case’ is – as it isolates a patient and seeks to describe them in their individuality, whilst also connecting them up to much broader categories (as exemplars of this pathology, or that complication, for example.)

One place to start with this is in the late nineteenth century with psychoanalysis. Much of this section draws upon John Forrester’s brilliant paper ‘Thinking in cases’ (1996). Forrester sheds light on the kinds of thinking in psychoanalysis, what he calls ‘thinking in cases’. Although Forrester begins at psychoanalysis, he admits early on that ‘psychoanalysis is only one culmination of a much broader movement whereby the life yields up its secrets.’ He argues that bringing life systematically into focus (and this is *individual life*, that is *biography*) ‘appears to be closely linked with the very idea of the compilation of a dossier’ (Forrester, 1996: 11). He then explores Foucault’s justly famous account of ‘the examination’ in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault’s ambition is striking:

‘For a long time ordinary individuality - the everyday individuality of everybody – remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege... The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made this description a means of control and a method of domination’ (Foucault 1977: 191).

The individual, the biographical, materializes as part of a network of techniques (named ‘disciplinary’ by Foucault) that seek to know, to measure, to control. This is one of the sources of what we might call ‘systematic’ biography. But where does it become more relevant for bringing personal experience to academic work? Here psychoanalysis becomes important: not only is biography relevant, but the telling of one’s biography becomes relevant for its therapeutic potential.
Human beings become known and self-knowing through biography, and healed in the telling of their biography. Judith Butler argues that

‘some have argued that the normative goal of psychoanalysis is to permit the client to tell a single and coherent story about herself that will satisfy the wish to know herself’ (Butler, 2005: 51).

Not just one’s personal experience, but the telling of it, deploying it as coherent, for a particular therapeutic end is central in psychoanalysis. This therapeutic telling seems to figure quite strongly when bringing personal experience forward in academic work. Kaitlin Bell Barnett’s book Dosed is based around the experiences of a number of people who take anti-depressants. Barnett admits that she is influenced by ‘the fact that I have been taking various medications for anxiety and depression for over a decade’ (2012: xxiv). The book ends with the aspiration that it will encourage those who did grow up taking psychiatric drugs to share their ongoing experiences more openly’ (Barnett, 2012: 208). This therapeutic note is sounded most explicitly and reflectively by Sarah Chaney, who writes that

‘[t]he history of medicine has been a solution for me in the way medicine itself never was... Education empowers in a way that psychiatry, with its rigid frameworks and imposed stereotypes, will always struggle to’ (Chaney, 2017: 239).

The therapeutic effect of education and academic work is here explicitly contrasted with the efficacy of psychiatry. In the interests of non-hypocrisy, much as I seek distance from this kind of personal therapeutics-through-history in this present article, I have referred to it obliquely before (Millard, 2013: 145).

John Forrester goes on to say that: ‘psychoanalytic discourse... attempts to render that way of telling a life public, of making it scientific [through] the case-history’ (1996: 10). One of Forrester’s last writings concerns anthropologist, psychiatrist, and early advocate of Freud, W.H.R. Rivers. He notes that Rivers realized early on that in writing about psychoanalysis, ‘one expose[s] one’s life to the scientific public.’ (Forrester, 2014: 74). This focus on the personal is not confined to psychoanalysis. Rhodri Hayward has shown how a biographical approach is key in twentieth-century General Practice, bound up with psychological approaches. He notes that the founding 1900 issue of General Practitioner magazine cast the family doctor’s insight in terms of ‘biographical expertise’ and that ‘this historical familiarity’ between doctor and patient ‘was the basis for a new kind of psychological intimacy’ (Hayward, 2014: 33-34). Psychology and biography are intertwined here too.

So here we have the biographical, the public and the personal, which are also (not coincidentally) the three key areas at play when bringing personal experience to bear in academic work. This is one part of a possible map for ‘how we got here’ – the increasing biographical therapeutic and public registers
around biography. Public utterance now meshes with personal biographical insight in ways that only really take shape in the twentieth century.

*Experience and ‘History from Below’*

Now we arrive at the second strand of these roots of the whole question of the ‘mobilization of personal experience’: that is the knotty, elusive concept of ‘experience’ itself. What is this thing called ‘personal experience’? I’ve already argued that going down the philosophical route of discussing Heidegger and Merleau Ponty is something of a dead end – and this is not just a convenient justification due to my lack of exegetical confidence when dealing with these canonical figures of Western philosophy. We are tracing the roots of a particular tendency in history, and the history of psychiatry – not many of the academics we are dealing with draw upon the critical questioning of twentieth-century phenomenology. An influential reading of experience comes in much closer to home, in disciplinary terms, with Edward Thompson and his towering work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

In the preface to this foundational text of social history, Thompson begins to seriously revise the standard Marxist and materialist approaches to history. He argues that ‘class’ is not a structure or a category or a thing, it is ‘something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships’. Elaborating on this, he claims that

‘class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms’ (Thompson, 1963: 8-9).

Experience here is central (it is also deliberately male for Thompson). Importantly here, it is a raw material, through which class emerges. Class and class consciousness are no longer simply functions of relations to the means of production (the orthodox Marxist view), but are built through shared *experiences*, as filtered through culture. This concept of ‘experience’ is therefore central to the new social history, or ‘history from below’, with which Thomson is associated. It is this kind of ‘experience’ that forms one of the foundations of the current practice of mobilizing biographical and personal detail in academic, historical work. It is this reading of ‘experience’ – as the personal, cultural raw material of identity – that we are looking for.

Thompson becomes even more explicit about experience when taking on one of the most influential Marxists of his time, French philosopher Louis Althusser. In his celebrated essay ‘The Poverty of Theory’ (1978) Thompson argues that “Experience”... is breaking in and demanding that we reconstruct our categories’ (1978: 133). It appears as an agent for change when Thompson argues that: ‘there has been a pressure of real experience which has seemed to license the adoption of a particular language of social and political analysis, an ideological
predisposition towards one vocabulary or another’ (Thompson, 1978: 100). Experience here saturates everything, and goes right to the heart of Marxism:

‘experience is a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness: it is experience (often class experience) which gives a coloration to culture, to values, and to thought: it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities’ (Thompson, 1978: 137).

‘Experience’ as we understand it is a founding category of modern social history, and a central component of Thompsonian ‘history from below’.

Roy Porter takes this notion to the history of medicine. At the end of his much-cited article ‘The Patient’s View: Doing Medical History from Below’ he takes a disparaging shot at what he calls ‘the “medicalization” theories of Foucault and Illich’. Porter mirror’s Thompson in his distrust of large overarching systems of explanation, preferring to work at the individual or personal level. Tellingly, neither Porter nor Thompson see ‘experience’ as such a system or theory. Unsurprisingly, Porter cites Thompson approvingly and claims that ‘A people’s history of suffering might restore to the history of medicine its human face’ (1985: 194). This is patient experience, loud and clear. Elsewhere in the article Porter claims that ‘we need, for our various classes and communities, basic mappings of experience, their belief systems, images and symbols’ (Porter 1985: 186). Experience becomes central to the writing of history and to the history of medicine.

Porter’s call has been influential. To take just one example, Jonathan Andrews heeds Porter’s call in a way that links to Forrester’s analysis of cases. Andrews uses records at Gartnavel Royal Asylum, Glasgow, to provide a sensitive analysis of ‘how case notes and other asylum records become case histories... deployed for promotional and educative purposes, to generate public support and funding for the asylum’ (Andrews, 1998: 281). Alongside this sophisticated account of the use of case notes (and note again their explicit public function), he also argues that ‘case notes constitute an especially important and extensive resource. They may provide the surest basis we have for understanding the changing nature of the experience of insane asylums since 1800’ (Andrews, 1998: 255). Experience and cases are intertwined here.

In fact, those precise records at Gartnavel have been used more recently, in a way that shows links to psychoanalytic currents. Hazel Morrison (2017) delves into the practical and material ways in which patient experience and testimony is captured at this institution. She focuses upon the practices of Gartnavel’s superintendent David Kennedy Henderson. Henderson employed a stenographer to record patient speech verbatim during interviews with psychiatrists in the early twentieth century. This is precisely because – as Morrison shows – Henderson’s therapeutic method, influenced by such psychiatric luminaries as Adolf Meyer at Baltimore, valorized the experiences, language and testimony of the patient.
So from these tangled threads of social history, class experience and culture, back to public case histories and psychological influences, experience is again central. This can profitably be seen as feeding into late twentieth-century valorizations of the ‘experiences’ of service users, and their recasting into ‘experts by experience.’

As ‘experience’ becomes such a valued category, indeed a bedrock for the discipline, this opens up the possibility for the academic’s own experience to become relevant. If the object of one’s historical enquiry is the experience of others, it is not a huge step to consider one’s own experiences. (The set of prompts and influences that make that step more likely to be taken are considered below.)

We can see this in anthropologist Emily Martin’s book *Bipolar Expeditions* (2007) where she writes engagingly on the history and experience of bipolar disorder. She opens with the haunting lines: ‘I have done ethnographic projects before, but none has tapped into my personal experience as deeply as this one did’ (Martin, 2007: xv). She wants to understand bipolar disorder ‘in a broader cultural and historical context in order to shed light on the experience of having manic depression’ (Martin, 2007: xviii). Here are the familiar strands of personal experience, linked to an understanding of historical and cultural context. In fact, the academic work she is doing, the ‘history’ and ‘culture’, are reduced to tools to understand the ‘experience’ of having had manic depression. The personal experience is deployed here as an implied motive for writing the book. But it is not just that personal experience is used and mobilized here – the point of the book is to shed light on that experience (for the reader as well as the author, presumably). It is telling that Martin refers to ethnographic study, for this is the third plank of this account. It is ethnography and anthropology that provide a strong set of influences and prompts for authors to deploy their personal experiences. Psychoanalysis brings personal experience into the realm of the academic, the realm of serious, useable knowledge; ‘history from below’ casts experience as the object of historical scholarship and the basis of culture. Anthropology brings the author’s experience to the fore in a new way.

*Reflexivity: acknowledging author effects*

‘Reflexivity’ is not an easy word to define. Diving for the relative safety of the dictionary, there are three distinct but overlapping uses that fit. The term can be used to describe a method that takes account of the effect of the presence of the researcher on the phenomena being studied; it can be used for method that consciously calls attention to its own presence; a slightly older usage describes self-examination or introspection. The person doing the writing is front and centre. We can work with a definition that borrows from all three: acknowledging the author by bringing personal experience to bear. One of the most prominent ways in which this happens comes from anthropology. Anthropology enjoys a remarkable surge in prestige in the early twentieth century, practiced by W.H.R. Rivers, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Mary Douglas, and more.
Anthropological insight about the power of culture and environment in human life, still forms the basis of many social sciences, and in fact underwrites many of the claims of postmodern and poststructuralist thought (Millard, 2016; Millard, forthcoming). James Clifford’s introductory essay in the influential anthropological collection *Writing Culture* (1986a) addresses perhaps the most crucial methodological technique in anthropology: participant-observation. Clifford argues that since the early twentieth century in anthropology ‘the “method” of participant-observation has enacted a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity.’ He claims that the ‘ethnographer’s personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but [in the early part of the century] they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and “objective” distance’ (Clifford 1986a: 13).

Vincent Debaene has written an excellent book on French anthropology, translated into English in 2014 as *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature*. He notes a shift in anthropological method in the mid twentieth century. The anthropological project is transformed from collecting objects and writing positivist classifications, to the idea that ‘the anthropologist went to the field to immerse himself, to soak up another culture, to “live from the inside” the experience of the “native”’. This constitutes, according to Debaene, a ‘privileging of the personal, concrete and psychological aspects of field experiences’ (Debaene, 2014). Further, this section of the book can be found under the index entry: ‘fieldwork, as lived experience’ (PAGE?). The personal and lived experience are central, but this is not simply Thompson’s ‘history from below’ or Porter’s ‘patient’s view’ – it is not simply the experience of the ‘natives’ that is the issue here. The anthropologist’s self/personhood is implicated.

Clifford observes that since the 1960s anthropology has not been able to sustain the tension between the self-conscious participant observer, and the academic demands to adhere to the idioms of the physical sciences. He claims that this is shown by the emergence of ‘self-reflexive “fieldwork account” [which is] Various sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic’. In these accounts, ‘the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait’ (Clifford, 1986a: 14). In fact, Debaene’s whole book is set up on the tension between the anthropologists’ academic writing and the rising phenomenon of a more confessional, personal account of their voyages, something he calls ‘the ethnographer’s two books’.

Here we see another bridge – like the shift from ‘case notes’ to ‘case study’ described by Andrews – where the ethnographer’s personal experience takes a step closer to public relevance. At first this relevance is uncertain in anthropology, as these experiences are packaged and published in different ways to the conventional scholarly outputs. As Debaene observes, it is a ‘curious fact’ that a particular group of ethnographers, trained by Marcel Mauss in the 1920s and 1930s ‘wrote, upon their return, not only a scholarly study of the people they lived with but often a second book as well, a more “literary” work that did not adhere to the canonical forms of the scholarly monograph’ (Debaene 2014: 4). This is not a new observation – historian of anthropology George Stocking has
noted how ‘the “self-reflexive” autobiographical account of fieldwork experiences has emerged as a distinct ethnographic genre’ since the 1960s (Stocking, 1992: 13). The author’s self is deployed, first as an adjunct to scholarly work, and then as part of it. As Clifford writes in the 1980s ‘[t]he fieldworker, typically, starts from scratch, from a research experience, rather than from reading or transcribing’ (Clifford, 1986b: 117).

This is one of the ways in which ‘reflexivity’ comes to overlap even further with notions of ‘personal experience’ in this tradition. Recalling the three definitions of reflexivity above – taking account of the presence of the researcher, drawing attention to its own method, and introspection – the first and last are already implicated in using oneself and one’s personal experience. When the researcher is the method, the middle definition too becomes about the person of the researcher, because the method itself utilizes – indeed instrumentalises – the researcher’s self. As the anthropologists seeking to use themselves as tools, to immerse themselves, reflexivity – being open about one’s methods – becomes about acknowledging their selves.

There is one final link to this web of ‘cases’, ‘experience’ and ‘ethnography’. As Forrester notes, ‘psychoanalysis is only one culmination of a much broader movement whereby the life yields up its secrets’ (Forrester 1996: 11). Anthropology is another of those ways. Bernard S. Cohn, an anthropologist, writes a playful article detailing points of convergence and divergence between history and anthropology. He calls the former ‘Historyland’ and the latter ‘Anthropologyland’. What he has to say about the latter is revealing in light of Forrester’s later insight:

‘Events in Anthropologyland are converted into “cases,” a word of many evocations in English, not the least of which are wooden boxes, or the way lawyers and doctors organize the flow of individual instances by the application of some predetermined criteria by which they make meaningful to themselves incident and event. Action cannot be taken by lawyers or doctors until they have a “case,” a box into which to cram the events. The anthropologist’s analysis cannot proceed until the events are converted into “cases,” extended or otherwise’ (Cohn, 1980: 99).

So cases link psychoanalysis and anthropology, making the deployment of personal experience in academic work a possible, prominent option.

This account – encompassing psychoanalytic cases, history from below, and anthropology is unashamedly partial; there is plenty more to say here, many other roots to this tendency and other routes through these influences. The point here is not to attempt being comprehensive, but to be tolerably coherent. To take just a few other examples (for which there is sadly no space here) the rise of autobiography and its relation to history, use of diaries as historical sources, recent discussions of what have been called ‘ego-documents’. All these would be fruitful avenues to explore (see e.g. Paperno, 2004; Hellbeck, 2004; Aurell, 2006;
Wallach, 2006; Fullbrook and Rublak, 2010). To take an example from this list of works, Jaume Aurell seeks to use autobiographical texts as historiographical sources; he connects autobiographies written by historians to the histories that they write. He does this to 'examine to what extent the scholarly production of historians has been conditioned by personal experience' and he finds that, yes indeed, the 'ostensibly intellectual exercise' of writing an autobiography 'is actually more governed by personal experiences than previously believed' (Aurel, 2006: 426-7). We can see the mobilization of experience as a valued category of analysis – although this time not the author's own, but at one remove. This is not a new 'turn' – the shift to critical autobiography began around the 1970s. A collection of theoretical and critical texts published in 1980, is introduced thus:

‘autobiography – the story of a distinctive culture written in individual characters and from within – offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer... this is the special quality of autobiography... [it] renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and the vision of a people' (Olney, 1980: 13).

This rendering of 'experience' is precisely the kind that seeks to augment academic writing in mental health in the present. It is special, it is direct, it is unarguable and authentic. So the turn to supposedly critical autobiography is another strand that we could add to this growing list. But now we should recap the particular path that we have detailed. We began thinking in cases, drawing from Michel Foucault's dossiers and systematic biography, which becomes developed into a therapeutic instrument in psychoanalysis and general practice. Then the notion of experience becomes the foundation for a new kind of (social) history, the object of a new way of writing about the past. This has the potential to make one's own experiences come into focus as part of academic history. Finally, anthropology and the immersion of the anthropologist in another culture keeps the self central, with the idea of using oneself as a tool, self-consciously and reflexively.

The Consequences of Experience

So, what is the point of all this? What are the consequences of mobilizing personal experience in histories of mental health? In Giving an Account of Oneself Judith Butler argues that whenever one gives such an account, it always 'takes place in relation to an imposed set of norms... it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint.' Further, '[t]he subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms... There is... no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take' (Butler, 2005: 19, 17). One's self is always crafted with the resources available, within the contexts and conventions operation at the time. I have tried to expose part of these 'possible forms': three ways in which historical context bears down on the mobilization of biographical experience in academic work.
To sketch out the consequences, I want to lean on a fantastic essay by Joan Scott. All too often, Scott says, experience ‘serves as a way... of claiming knowledge that is unassailable’ (Scott, 1991: 797). This kind of deployment of ‘experience’ is the one used by Kay Redfield Jamieson, international clinical authority on manic-depressive illness, and also someone who identifies as a sufferer from that illness. Jamieson has claimed that that ‘I have become fundamentally and deeply skeptical that anyone who does not have this illness can truly understand it’ (Jamieson, 1995: 171). This is also precisely the kind of claim (noted above) made in the name of experience by Olney who treats it in a puzzlingly uncritical manner, as ‘peculiarly direct and faithful’ (1980: 13).

Rather than that closing down, I hope I have been practicing a history where experience, in Scott’s words: ‘is not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain’ (Scott, 1991: 797). Recently, Scott’s essay has been parsed brilliantly by Sarah Shortall, who brings together Edward Thompson’s notions of experience with those of the 1960s psychedelic counterculture. Shortall follows Scott in arguing that ‘each appeal to the rhetoric of experience involves a choice as to what is authentic and central to that experience and what is ancillary to it—a choice which can always be challenged by competing claims to experiential authenticity’ (Shortall, 2014: 204). So this is the politics of experience, which hopefully makes clearer why I am wary to deploy my own ‘experiences’.

Barbara Taylor claims that her memoir/history hybrid The Last Asylum is about ‘the work of turning the personal past into history’; she refers to herself as a primary source (Taylor, 2014: xv). Something similar is going on in Anne Cvetkovich’s book Depression: A Public Feeling: ‘If I wrote about depression in the third person without saying anything of my personal experience of it, it felt like a key source of my thinking was missing (Cvetkovich, 2012: 17). Here experience is emphasised as a ‘source’ and Cvetkovich also uses the language of personal ‘case history’ which again acts as a bridge between ‘personal experience’ and public, academic work. This is valuable, analytical work, but it does not – and cannot – do what I wish to do with history: to try and tease out how experiences emerge as experiences. I want to step away from this use of experience as source material and ask how we have arrived at a point where it is becoming more and more normal to do this.

The logics of Cvetkovich, Taylor, Barnett, and Martin begin to sound like discussions around therapeutic communities from the mid-20th century. Wilfred Bion and John Rickman publish a Lancet article in 1943, opening with the claim that ‘The therapy of individuals assembled in groups... sometimes it turns mainly on the catharsis of public confession’ (Bion and Rickman, 1943: 678). A review in the 1980s of curative factors in group psychotherapy argued that ‘it is the act of reflecting on a poignant emotional experience that [creates] a potent therapeutic “event”’ (Butler & Fuhriman, 1983: 134). I cannot ignore how this practice of publicizing one’s personal experiences is embedded in system saturated with this therapeutic, psychologized logic. This is not to attack people who interweave their experiences with their academic work, or to undercut them. I want instead to contextualize this practice, to show it up as an outcome of myriad historical influences, from psychoanalysis, anthropology, social history and critical
autobiography. Whilst this practice does sometimes slide into an appeal to inviolable authenticity (e.g. Jamieson, 1995), this does not have to be the case, as Chaney (2017) has shown.

Even though this mobilization of experience is partially enmeshed with the logic of therapeutic communities, the principal reason for wanting to step away from it is to be able to contextualize contemporary historical and social science work on mental health. This work cannot simply stand outside its subject, but through multiple channels (penology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, social history) is bound up with it. If we are to assess the value of ‘personal-experience-inflected scholarship on mental health’ we must first contextualize it. This work of contextualization is attempted in this article.

There is also politics at play here, of course. Poet Adrienne Rich’s remark comes to mind, that the tight formalism of her early poetry was ‘like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up bare-handed’ (Rich, 1993: 171). But as well as providing something of a shield, post-structuralist, Focualdian history is most important to me because it exposes the vast intellectual and practical ways in which our most private inner life, our most potent experiences are always already parsed, structured and interpreted in ways that we do not choose. It is again to Judith Butler and Joan Scott we turn to tease out the implications of this.

Making personal experience part of the foundation of academic accounts certainly qualifies as an inclusion, an addition: it is one that requires significant courage in a society where mental ill-health is still stigmatized. But it also leaves something out, and this is crucial. Butler is clear on this:

‘What is left out if we assume, as some do, that narrative gives us the life that is ours, or that life takes place in narrative form? The “I” who begins to tell its story can only tell it according to specific forms of life narration... If I give an account and I give it to you, then my narrative depends upon a structure of address. But if I can address you, I must first have already been addressed, brought into the structure of address as a possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it... the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived from a situation in which one finds oneself addressed by a language one never chose’ (Butler, 2005: 52-3).

When we deploy experience, we depend upon huge sprawling intellectual systems that make this action intelligible. This is what Butler calls ‘structures of address’. This ability to speak, to draw upon personal experience, to have agency, is not a simple assertion of power or individuality or influence. It is already only a possibility because it resides within structures of ideas that we have been tracing. Butler is clear on the fact that we are already embedded in these systems and should therefore take a look at them to see how they guide and shape what we are able to say. Joan Scott spells this out when talking about experience specifically. She writes that through
‘this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation... these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its [experience’s] discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it’ (Scott, 1991: 777).

So when analyse these ‘structures of address’, it is to find what they exclude, the assumptions that they are built on, the way that they naturalize difference. Jamieson’s idea that one has to have experienced manic depression in order to truly understand it is actually a striking assertion of the essential difference of all those who have experienced manic depression. It might not always be helpful to put such a strong barrier between humans. Yes, ‘experience’ can deliver a sense of agency, and a voice and a platform from which to speak, but it is a precarious one; it is built upon a commonsense appreciation of essential difference that can as easily ensnare as much as it seemingly liberates.

So I do not wish to mobilize personal experience when writing the history of mental health. I still seek to be reflexive, however. Roger Smith has written that for him reflexivity means that

‘it is always possible, in any reasoning or body of thought, to find presumptions which that reasoning or body of thought cannot itself justify... we can, ‘reflexively’, make these assumptions the focus of inquiry’ (Smith, 2005: 56)

This is what I want to do. Reflexivity can involve deploying one’s personal experience, but doesn’t have to, as noted with the dictionary definitions earlier. Reflexivity and personal experience are distinct things. More generally, I seek to chart the ways in which institutions, ideas and environments make ‘experience’ possible. I also want to show how experience emerges as a relevant option for academic work. Given that, what then is the point of deploying one’s own experience? The experience of living in a house is only tangentially relevant to an account of its architecture. These kinds of knowledge operate in different registers. Regardless, my history obviously implicates me as a situated, partisan, privileged, funded human.

Despite my position that personal experience is not always relevant, I do think that scholars should be explicit about their commitments when producing academic work. However, this must match up with the work being produced. I do not produce work from nowhere, and in fact I have tried to make explicit my role in building a history of the twentieth-century around self-harm as saturated in politics (the shift from consensus politics to neoliberalism). Materially and financially, my research has been sustained by a particular source of funding (from the Wellcome Trust). Thus it is not surprising that my account of the twentieth century asks us to unpick the idea that market forces and human
nature are part of the same thing, and does it though the charting of a prominent category in the history of psychiatry (Millard, 2015). My politics and my funding are there for all to see. But my experiences of mental ill health, or the various bodily practices or distress behaviours that may be in my past don’t fit with the kind of history I’m doing. I’m trying to unpick the institutions and practices that come together to forge and stabilize, and then transform, a particular behavioural pattern. Unpicking this situation, and pursuing this kind of history has nothing to do with any experiences of mental ill-health. I refuse to ground my expertise in that kind of experience. I prefer to investigate how we arrived in a place where we are able to debate 'experience' at all.

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