Experience is central to cultural studies. It is a key category of analysis within the field, and has been drawn on as concrete material for many of the issues which cultural studies has pursued. It has also become a recognised dimension of research practice itself. Its value has nevertheless been contested, both as a form of research data and as an analytical concept. This was particularly the case during the ascendancy of poststructuralism in cultural studies, but more broadly how it should be used as a resource and what place it has as evidence are questions that have generated considerable debate. The purpose of this chapter is not to retrace the various perspectives on such debate or deal generally with the history of ideas about the category of experience.\(^1\) Although experience is generally accorded a positive value, the senses it has and the perspectives applied to it are multiple, so much so that any rehearsal of its general range and of attacks upon its conceptual credentials, even within cultural studies, would require extensive discussion and elaboration.\(^2\) My intention here is more modest in scope, and this is to add further impetus to the renewal of interest in the category of experience that has arisen over the past ten years or so, both within cultural studies and across adjacent fields of study.

The chapter has three main aims. First, it tries to explain why attending to experience remains an important task for cultural studies. This certainly involves grappling with the problems and difficulties it raises, and while some of these will be covered, the primary emphasis in what follows is on re-establishing the methodological significance of attending to experience for the general project of cultural studies. Second, it examines the implications for research methodology of the fact that while experience is common to both researcher and researched, the specific experiences we have are always in some degree different and individual to us, as are the ways we derive meaning and significance from experience or draw on our experience to contest other
cultural definitions put upon experience, particularly by those in positions of power, authority and control. The tensions and conflicts over what is made of experience in our understandings of the social world are what make it an important category for cultural studies. Third, the chapter tries to clear the ground for deploying various methods in researching people's experience of the social world. It does this by mapping the conceptual properties of experience in terms of various dualities operative within the category, such as proximity and distance, cultural process and outcome, situated and mediated participation, and the balance between speaking and listening. While these are all significant, above all else I approach experience as an intermediary category coming between ways of being and ways of knowing. Examining experience in these ways is not simply an exercise in theorisation, though it is partly that. More importantly, it is a matter of setting out certain mutually constitutive relations within the category so that the research methods discussed later in the book can be more effectively put into use and managed. I hope in doing this to show why, as a protean, refractory phenomenon, experience is so culturally multifarious and, as an analytical category, so wonderfully awkward.

One of the distinguishing features of cultural studies is its focus on the subjective dimension of social relations, on how particular social arrangements and configurations are lived and made sense of, so highlighting the complex intersections between public culture and private subjectivity and the transformative potentials that may arise there. These are crucial for our sense of who we are or might become, and experience - not only what is undergone but also how this is articulated, understood, drawn on and shared with others - is, or so I shall claim, vital to our changing identities and changing conceptions of the social worlds we live in. Chris Kearney (2003: 42) has recently observed that 'any consideration of the way individuals engage in the process of recreating their identities by continually reflecting upon their lived experience, is largely missing from current research'. To regard this process as learning directly about self and the social world through experience is clearly superficial and inadequate, suggesting a unilinear movement and unitary subject, and allowing little scope for dealing with contradictions between experiences, between experience and cultural forms, or between experience and identity. This conception of experience is the result of the underlying humanist model of explanation on which it is based. It does not mean that experience itself has thereby to be dismissed, but it does mean it should be reconceived. My argument is that, subject to such reconception, engaging in the kind of consideration Kearney refers to should remain a major component of cultural studies research, and should be more in evidence than is currently the case. That is why this book begins with a chapter on experience.

DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY

The first point to make is that experience is never pure or transparent. If experience is to be used to provide evidence and gain insight into everyday cultures, and if ideas about it are to inform research practice and modes of analysis within cultural studies, what is gathered in the name of experience cannot simply be presented as raw data, or regarded as offering a direct expression of people's participation in different cultural fields. We talk of 'lived' experience, but experience always involves interpretation of what happens in life, of what makes our perceptions, feelings, and actions meaningful. This depends on how they come into expression and are conceptualised, organised and given temporal identity, or, in other words, how experience is given the quality of narrative.

There have been times in the development of the field when it has seemed appropriate to make space for otherwise silent or marginalised voices to be heard, and to present the narratives of their experience directly in their own words. This has accompanied greater recognition of the need to deploy research methods in a more participant-centred way, and to develop relations between researchers and researched on a subject/subject basis rather than attempting to adopt a position of spurious detachment from an isolated object of research, as with the natural science model of research. Such an approach raises the question of the researcher's involvement, for this is obviously directed in certain ways and depends on some degree of theoretical understanding of whatever is being researched, whether this is experience of gender, social class, ethnicity or whatever. What counts is awareness of how this understanding shapes the research and how it should be open to being reshaped by the findings of the research.

The process of research is one of dialogue, but this does not mean that cultural studies researchers should assume that knowledge simply derives from experience (the position of empiricism) or that experience simply validates what is said (the position of self-authenticating standpoint theories).3 Respecting what is said by research subjects is one side of the deal. The other is balancing this with a critical regard for what any kind of evidence might mean and how this evidence relates to the structural location of the research subject. Experience can certainly be regarded as evidence of distinctive forms of social life and integral to everyday encounters and relations, but understanding how it is so is never straightforward.

Experience is always to be interrogated. It has to be approached carefully and critically because it is not simply equivalent to what happens to us. Experience is just as much about what we make out of what happens to us, and for many that is where its value really lies. There are of course experiences we choose to have, for whatever reason, and experiences that are imposed on us, sometimes against our will or because they are or seem unavoidable. There are
also experiences on which we have reflected deeply and which we have absorbed into our self-knowledge, and others we hardly think about at all, of which we are only tacitly aware as we go about our day-to-day lives. Our lives are a peculiar compound of various forms of experience, which is partly why defining experience is so difficult. Experience seems to embrace so much while also providing basic material for the examined life. There can be no absolute definition of the category, which means we have to think of it in both general and specific terms as we use it to develop knowledge about our lives and the lives of other people, in other places and circumstances, other periods and historical formations. We may be glad that we have not shared some of the experiences of other people – the experience of endemic poverty, forced migration or racist oppression, for example – but we can learn from how they have been endured, handled, assimilated, resisted. It is not just a question of trying to relate the experience of others to what we may distill from our own, but also of recognising how self-legitimizing narrative schemas are vital in the formation of social and cultural identities, enabling the process of discriminating and evaluating across experiences, and providing a means of countering being spoken for or stereotypically ‘othered’.

Cultural analysis adds to this the difficult task of bringing what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983: 8) calls experience-near concepts into illuminating connection with the experience-distant concepts which ‘theorists have fashioned in order to capture the general features of social life’. He counsels against trying ‘to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants’, for you cannot magically assume the position and perspective from within which their own lives are lived. Rather, the trick ‘is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to’.

Geertz’s distinction between what is experientially proximate and distant is an extension of the distinction between first-hand and second-hand experience, and the different kinds of concept and account accompanying them, with ‘fear’ and ‘phobia’ being examples of concepts that are relatively experience-near and experience-far. This is another way of talking about the two-sides-to-a-deal issue, for cultural analysis needs to move back and forth between what informants say and do and what can be made of all that, for otherwise you stand in danger of becoming either ‘awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular, or ‘stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon’ (Geertz 1983: 57).

Ann Gray (1997: 95) has characterised the problem of failing to move between these two sides in cultural studies as exaggerating either ‘the ideologically constructed subject’ or ‘the active and creative human agent’. The ethnographer who has spent too long on the street of corner may emphasise the latter, whereas the theorist who has spent too long blinking under a desk lamp may emphasise the former. Both have need of another kind of trick, which is to bring both agency and ideology into continual view of each other rather than swinging between the two poles they represent. That is no easy task, but if acted-upon experience is never brought to bear on ideological structures, or long-term structural determinants are never seen in terms of everyday social practices, we end up in the dead-end canyon of impossible dualisms. Structures determine what we do but are also inhabited and ways are chosen among them. Agency should be emphasised but not exaggerated, which means that we should weigh studies of active audiences, reflexive consumers and everyday creativity against questions of control over the resources and operations involved in cultural production and access to different cultural practices and different forms of cultural consumption.

Attending to experience is necessary but never enough in itself, whether this is our own experience or those of others, or whether the experience is relatively contemporary or (involving another kind of distance) related to previous historical formations. Each of these bring their own difficulties, and while we may personally value our own experiences most, attending to them is neither easier nor of a higher order than engaging with experience beyond the ambit of our own lives and circumstances.

ESSENTIALISM AND EXPERIENCE

By implication at least, first-hand experience is elevated above others when it is viewed in an essentialist way and taken to be unimpeachably self-validating. Essentialism conveys the sense that for any particular social category, for example that of gender or ethnicity, there is an underlying essence defining the ‘real’ or ‘true’ nature of the category’s experience. This is the case for Robert Bly (1991) who has argued that men possess a naturally wild, but now denied or repressed, masculine essence, but most instances of essentialist thinking are nothing like as notable. Generally less strenuously and extensively discussed, everyday manifestations of racial or gender essentialism are legion, whether it is black people being referred to as ‘naturally’ rhythmic, or women as ‘naturally’ nurturing, caring and cooperative. Such claims take us close to stereotyping since for any specific group they identify a set of fixed, unchanging characteristics that define the group and therefore the core or essential experience of the group. For women, the counter-case is summarised in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous adage that ‘one is not born, but becomes a woman’ (1984: 295). There is in other words nothing ‘natural’ about womanhood or manhood, and becoming a man or woman is always a cultural process, historically specific and historically variant.

That is perhaps the position you would expect to be taken in cultural studies, but for feminists working in the field it is not necessarily so straightforward. How do you argue against, say, violent pornography or the stereotypical
positioning of women in popular music without invoking men, women and women’s collective experience in essentialist terms? This difficulty has led some to pursue a case for ‘strategic essentialism’ as a way of avoiding the essentialist/anti-essentialist dichotomy, but the grounds for its superiority over other forms of essentialism remain contested. There are a number of different critical positions within feminism on questions of experience and essentialism, as there are on the category of experience itself, especially in relation to such key variables as gender and sexual orientation, or others which intersect with gender, such as ethnicity, social class and age group. These differences are indicative of the problems involved in representation, which arise because of the gap between knowledge and experience. Essentialism offers the false hope of reconciling them. So when problems of representation relate to the absence or marginalisation of a particular group’s experience in representation, either historically or in contemporary forms of popular culture, there is a strong temptation to present the ‘voices’ of that experience as if what is said is self-evidently ‘true’ or ‘authentic’. This is understandable as a means of warding off the threat of being spoken of by others or of others speaking on behalf of you when this is accomplished in ways detrimental to your own values and interests, whether these are to do with sexuality, the experience of being racialised or whatever. Yet to think of experience as necessarily providing an alibi for knowledge is one of the illusions of relativism.

Cultural studies has proved appealing to some members of oppressed or marginalised groups because it allows a space for the articulation of their experience where this is not available in more conventional or established academic disciplines. This can seem empowering, but its value does not cancel out the need to be self-reflexive about that experience, or to automatically act as a guard against reifying ‘self’ above the struggle for reflexivity. Nor does it mean that questions about the historical specificity and cultural representativeness of experience do not need addressing. The historical recovery of previously neglected experience or the assertive differentiation of experience between distinct social groups and categories carries the danger of historical and cultural populism and can lead researchers back into the snare of essentialism, strategic or otherwise. This tendency in cultural studies and related fields, especially when directed against the ‘distortions and occlusions’ in the representation of marginalised or oppressed groups, has been polemically dismissed by Stefan Collini (1999: 259–60) as vote-catching ‘grievance studies’. This ignores the real grievances and the gains that are involved in opening up subaltern experiences to analysis and scholarship, but it does point up certain weaknesses. Privileging category-based experience may not only lead back into essentialism but also neglect the intersections of gender, ethnicity and social class, and so confine questions of identity and representation to whatever is held to be specific to the self-legitimated experience. It also begs the question of how we can understand each other’s experience, regardless of how ‘we’ is defined in any cross-category situation.

SITUATED AND MEDIATED EXPERIENCE

This question will always be present. Though it needs to be properly addressed in any investigation and analysis of the experiences of particular social groups, the difficulties it creates do not negate the value of attending to the experience of hitherto neglected, concealed, or misrepresented groups outside of the social mainstream. The main reason for this is the contribution it can make to cultural democratisation. One example of this is working-class writing. Historically, the endeavours of working-class people to engage in literary forms of writing were in stark contrast to those from privileged class backgrounds. They had to overcome rudimentary levels of schooling and seek to educate themselves, wrenching whatever little spare time for study or writing they could from long hours at workbench or sink, coalface or loom, clerical office or cash-till. They drew directly from the reservoir of their own experience, for it was commonly felt that this was where the well springs of their creative art would lie, with form and technique being secondary considerations. They had intimate experience of their social world of everyday life and labour, inhabiting it with an insider’s web of intricate knowledge. Through writing they were trying to make their world more widely known as well as making more sense of it for themselves. The significance of such writing is to be found not only in what was written but also in the act of writing, for that is where their effort to democratise the arts lay, in their ‘shared sense of entitlement to participate in cultural activities’ (Hilliard 2006: 6). In any example like this, there may be a temptation to idealise their battle against prejudice, condescension or snobbery, to romanticise the struggle of those striving against the odds to give expression to their experience, or to essentialise such experience. We should be alert to these pitfalls, but they only arise in the first place out of sympathy with subaltern experiences, and concern to engage with and articulate them. This concern cannot simply be dismissed as the populist amplification of grievance, for what is at stake is aligning the study of culture with the cause of cultural democratisation.

This impulse remains all-important in differentiating cultural studies from disciplines attending only to officially accredited artforms. In this respect experience acts as a methodological touchstone in sounding an insistence on the significance of listening to others and attending to what is relatively distinctive in their way of knowing their immediate social world, for it is only by doing this that we can glean any sense of what is involved in their subjectivities, self-formation, life histories and participation in social and cultural identities.
There is of course nothing preventing cultural studies from studying forms of 'high' culture as well as popular culture, but what is crucial is how we understand the bearings which any expressive cultural form has on socially and historically specific experience and how this articulates with broader determinate structures of social life. While cultural studies is in some respects close to other forms of social enquiry, its special point of interest is with how particular social worlds are experienced, and how the diverse stuff of that experience is subjectively felt and articulated by those who live it, and not by any others, neither sociologists nor historians nor whoever else may be involved in the enquiry in any particular case. It is the subjective dimension of lived social worlds that experience occupies, and it is this which is central to the concerns of cultural studies. Theory provides us with a map to help us understand how social worlds are configured, but unless we attend to experience we will not be able to follow the map into the living landscape to which it relates.

Considering the diverse stuff of experience brings us back to the distinction between first-hand and second-hand experience, involving that which occurs to us in an immediate and relatively direct way and that which occurs at a distance, in some unfamiliar elsewhere. It is not a hard-and-fast distinction. In our increasingly mediated world much of what we experience comes to us from a source that is not local or proximate to our material existence or particular cultural corpus of knowledge. Such media as cinema, radio, television and the internet involve contact with far-off peoples and places. There may be moments when such contact affects us in an immediate and direct way, making it difficult to dissociate from events that are tangible and here-and-now. While we do draw lines between situated and mediated experience, our lives are a complex mixture of both, as we watch the evening news on TV and talk to our children, or visit an online interactive website before strolling down to our local pub. It is easy to exaggerate modernity's usurpation of place by space and more particularly the dissolution of locally based experience by communication technologies, so overlooking how people have long travelled imaginatively to other times and places via biblical tales, folk songs and stories, or more recently via novels, verse and various theatrical entertainments. Staying at home and going places is not exclusive to the experience of television. The mixture of situated and mediated experience today is a matter of scale as well as diversity, and for many this has steadily grown in both respects throughout the past century, with what is experienced symbolically becoming increasingly entwined with what is experienced through our own sensory perception. New communication technologies do not suddenly burst on the scene and alter our spatial and temporal modalities of experience overnight. Even virtual reality was prefigured in the mid-nineteenth century by early visual media like the stereoscope, the experience of which was described by Oliver Wendell Holmes (1861: 14-15) as creating 'a dream-like exaltation of the faculties, a kind of clairvoyance, in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another like disembodied spirits'.

The relationship between situated and mediated experience is interactive. This means that in making experience a focus of enquiry and attending to how the social world is experienced on its everyday ground, we have to recognise that the media are an intrinsic, regularly experienced feature of that ground, influencing how people see the local world around them and interpret events on their own doorstep, as well as their views of cultural difference and their sense of global interconnectedness. The disembedding processes associated with communications technologies are also subject to processes of situated assimilation, and we need to attend to the ways in which various groups and communities relate what they consume to the contexts of their ongoing day-to-day lives, entwining symbolic encounters with face-to-face interactions and re-embedding mediated experiences in mundane affairs. How these processes work in relation to each other is always contingent upon the particular social worlds in which people live, both materially and symbolically. This is not simply to be celebrated as cultural pluralism, for it involves the politics of location and how location produces conflicting versions of experience. Certain definitions of experience have power over other definitions, as for instance in the way they may universalise what is socially and historically particular to, say, the self-presentation of white men or Western women. Dealing critically with the discursive construction of experience has then to counter the tendency in cross-cultural analysis towards a homogenising 'psychologization of complex and contradictory historical and cultural realities' which flattens difference into some putative sameness of experience, a move challenged by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1987: 39) in relation to first-world feminism: 'The experience of being a woman can create an illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class, and age at various historical moments that is of strategic significance'.

POSITION AND PERSPECTIVE

Adopting the emphasis Mohanty places on historical moments seems to me one of the best ways of avoiding the trap of speaking for others in the guise of bland sociological universals, for it creates the need to build up a thickly textured account of how social structures and processes are lived through the welter of everyday experience at a particular historical juncture. The analytical focus in such work can range from autobiographical self-reflection to ethnographic-style accounts of the lived cultural participation of particular groups or categories of people. Both can involve questions about personal and collective experience, and the relations between researcher and researched, but whatever
the focus we need always to distinguish between speaking for others and making space for heterogeneous ‘voices’ which, among other things, ask the questions: whose accounts count, and why? The broad seas of experience continually lay siege to island fortresses guarding exclusive claims as to what is sociologically, historically, and politically significant.

Attending to experience in cultural studies research, as in any other field of the human sciences, involves gathering material about other social lives and other cultural mappings of the social world. Any speaking of self or from the perspective given to us by our own locations and cultural mappings has to be balanced by listening to others and investigating the matrix of experience from which they speak of themselves. While it is important to remember that as a researcher you are an experiencing subject yourself, research is not simply about the validation of your own experience and what you may have drawn from it. Here Ann Gray (1997: 90) is right to argue that ‘the extent to which the intellectual is prepared to investigate his/her positionality is what is at stake for a genuinely reflexive and radical use of the category of “experience”’, but also right immediately to go on from this to argue for the need to explore struggles for meaning (not just our own) in the construction of social and cultural identities (not just our own), whether this is through listening to people in conversational interviews, building up life stories though oral history techniques or drawing on existing biographical writings. Attending to experience then involves gathering and interrogating representations and expressions of ‘direct personal participation in or observation of events; accumulated knowledge of the world in particular sets of circumstances; what it is like to live in these circumstances and the personal feelings and emotions which are engendered’ (ibid.). To this we need to add that closely examining the narrative accounts people give of their on-the-ground experience does not mean that these have to accepted wholesale, or regarded as self-evidently authentic, but it does mean working with the recognition that our lives are storied, that we impose a narrative structure on the disparate and contingent features of our experience in order to make its scenes and figures acquire coherence, and that experience is only understood in the discursive forms in which it achieves expression. Experience is not opposed to those forms but realised within them, while practical knowledge of language and discourse comes from experiencing how they can be used to achieve expression in concrete situations.

Echoing an earlier point, how experience is expressed has always to be questioned, but questioning experience is different from using our positionality and way of knowing about the world to displace other people’s accounts of their experience, or from misusing an assumed intellectual authority to dismiss such accounts as falsely conscious and politically compromised, seeking certainty in theory instead. Theory without reference to experience may appear cogent and comprehensive, but experience always has the potential to offer empirical exceptions that do not fit the theoretical rule, to disrupt intellectual exposition, to contradict ideas. This is because experience constitutes the meeting-place of individual perception and cultural meaning, self and symbolic forms, life-story and social conditions of existence. Experience occupies the contested territory between ways of being and ways of knowing.

EXPERIENCE AS PROCESS AND PRODUCT

Occupying that territory leads us to another duality of structure inherent in experience. It is manifest in the continual unfolding of experience in time while also acting back on that ongoing development across time. The relevant distinction here is between experience as process and experience as product. These are far from exclusive. Both are set in play at once, and operate with mutual reference to each other.

With this in mind, we can speak on the one hand of a subject’s immersion in a flow of action, observation or feeling where the meanings of events, encounters, episodes or states of being are relatively inchoate, and not as yet realised in any developed manner that can be carried forwards into the future. On the other hand, we can refer to what is derived by the subject from the everyday reality of the social world they inhabit where the meanings of what has happened are more fully interpreted and assimilated, as the accepted products of experience, against which change and development, or disruption and loss, can be assessed, now and in the future. Both of these dimensions of experience can be referred to as lived in that they cover what has been moved through, and learned from, in a vast array of possibilities and consequences.

The qualities and values of different forms and modalities of experience are articulated, weighed and arranged, in the contingent and always provisional art of understanding, only on the basis of the transactional relationship between these two dimensions of experience. It is particularly at the point of experience as process that definite, and at times quite subtle, qualitative features of social and cultural life are felt, sometimes intensely, regardless of whether they have achieved any conventional cultural expression. It is also at this point that the tension arises between what is felt and what is known, and between what is established and what is changing. Creative cultural practices work with this tension, but if they are to have a fruitful outcome they first need to know thoroughly what it is they have to go beyond. That is why we should understand experience in this specific manifestation of its dualities as it occurs in the intermediate spaces between the established structures of social worlds and the dynamic processes through which they are lived.

The focus of cultural analysis is then on how this duality is represented and given expression, or when it is distorted and occluded, on the task of explaining
this and bringing it into play, not in ways that disregard people's own accounts but in ways that cross-refer different accounts and remain alert to contradictions, ambivalences and silences across different narratives. What is not said in recounting experience may be just as important as what is said.

Two brief points follow from this. First, an informing premise of all cultural studies research should be that people are self-interpreting, and how they understand their experience of and in the social world is fundamental to cultural analysis. Even if the subjects' self-definition of an experience is limited or heavily skewed, it is central to what we study and cannot be bracketed out of the equation as it is in positivist, naturalist and behaviourist approaches. Second, while it is always important to attend to others' experience in the various accounts given of it, experience is neither sufficient in itself nor sufficient for analysis. Attending to experience is to utilise an analytical resource. Analytically it requires the tools for interrogation which we can bring from cultural theory, but as a resource it can also be used to interrogate the abstract formulations of theory. It is a two-way process.

QUALITIES OF EXPERIENCE

We cannot make sense of any experience, our own or those of other people, without reference to conceptual and theoretical ideas of one kind or another, or without carefully applying the methods we bring to bear on eliciting and helping bring into being stories of the experience of social worlds. Experience is not the high road to the palace of wisdom. We utilise methods because they supply us with procedures and principles for generating data about social and cultural experience, how it is configured and articulated, and we draw on theories because they supply us with frameworks for analysing that experience and the forms in which it is expressed. It is a mistake to assume that such expression simply bears the experience we seek to uncover or recover, that it brings to us pearls of evidence already formed before the application of method or analytical examination. You cannot explore experience in the hope of discovering a set of methods, but you can apply a set of methods to the narration of experience, both in generating it and analysing it.

Attending to experience as process and product is nevertheless of enormous importance in telling us about how social worlds are inhabited and understood, in a forwards and backwards motion between what has happened and what is made of it, in the continual, reflexive, interpretive accounts of which any individual is in some way an author. This is not to say that narrative articulations of experience provide us with direct, unmediated access to experience, but to emphasise that experience only attains meaning when it is framed within communicative form. It is only in such form that it enters into social exchange and cultural circulation, whether this is a letter from a soldier abroad to a loved one back home, a sardonic comment on the gap between social experience and political rhetoric whispered in someone's ear at an electoral rally, a television drama about bullying at school, or an old blues record that is reinterpreted across several generations. Experience does not attain meaning once and for all. Some stories are told and retold, and often honed and polished in the retelling, and how they are heard and understood depends on the social location and historicity of their auditors. Even in the first move to communicative form, there is a crucial distinction between experience and how it becomes framed in words, images, music or gestures. Once again this mutable category generates rule and deviance at one and the same time, for we also have to acknowledge that experience and the subjectivities through which it is lived and narrated are not simply determined by the language and discourse in which they achieve expression. One of the reasons why experience is always worth attending to as a category is that it is not wholly encompassed by language and narration: 'any attempt to transmute the tingle and smack of lived experience into language loses something essential to it' (Magee 2003: 286). This may lead at times to metaphysical vapourings or the false elevation of experience over understanding, but that does not demean the category itself.

We should always see experience and expression as transactional, for if they were not, experience would become endlessly repetitive and expression would become irredeemably stale. Experience is not a category that is fixed or given but a modality of human existence that is contingent and changeable, moving between what is familiar and unfamiliar, and registering the incessant tension between who we are and what we know. Experience seems at some points to confirm what we know, and at others to pull us up short, surprise us into rethinking, make us reassess what we have previously accepted or taken for granted. It is because experience can operate in both these ways that we need to build it into our research practice. We should expect research to act in both these ways, to proceed in certain ways as we would expect, but also from time to time to subvert those expectations and challenge our assumptions about the evidence we confront. This brings me to the final quality of duality in experience which I want to discuss.

As a category, experience embraces routine activities and mundane occurrences, and events, encounters, responses to what happens to us which somehow stand out, which act as the culmination of a certain process or the precipitation of certain feelings, perceptions or thoughts. In attaining prominence in this way, these extraordinary experiences shed light backwards and forwards in our lives, giving new meaning to what we have experienced or will experience in a more habitual manner, perhaps making us realise that this is what such-and-such a poet or novelist meant in a particular passage which we had not fully grasped at all. The distinction here is between experience in its
quotidian usualness and an experience that creates a heightened perceptual or intellectual arousal and seems to impart to us a vital quality of experience that henceforth remains key to the way we conceive of ourselves and the shifting pattern of our lives.6

Experience is thus structured around expectations and breaks with those expectations in ways directly relevant to what we want to derive from research. If research and the methods we employ only confirm our expectations, little is achieved. While we do not anticipate our findings being totally contrary to our initiating assumptions or hypotheses, research would be a dull and relatively valueless affair if these were never challenged or upset by the evidence that is produced. Just as with our day-to-day experience, much of what we do in the course of researching is a matter of routine. The elements of surprise in research are inseparable from the more common passages that lead up to and away from them, but they are central to making research in itself a rewarding experience.

SUMMARY: KEY POINTS

- The chapter explains why experience is a question of critical importance for cultural studies. Most of all, this importance arises out of the tensions and conflicts over what is made of experience in our understandings of the social world.
- The methodological significance of experience as a category is addressed in terms of (1) the politics of culture and the work of cultural studies in promoting cultural democratisation; and (2) the relations of researcher and researched, and between evidence and analysis.
- Experience is approached as a vital analytical resource which is always in need of interrogation.
- Experience is conceptually outlined in the chapter via examples of its dual qualities. In particular, it is conceived as an intermediary category coming between ways of being and ways of knowing.

FURTHER READING

Although experience is a key category in the social sciences and humanities, it has not received much critical attention as a concept. This has recently been rectified by Martin Jay (2005) for uses of the concept in philosophy and social theory, historiography and aesthetics. I have responded to the poststructuralist rejection of the concept in Pickering (1997), while also dealing with its uses in social history and cultural theory, feminism and critical hermeneutics. See ch. 6 in particular for my assessment of the use of the term experience in the work of Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. Keith Negus and I approach artistic and cultural practices in terms of the communication of experience in Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value (2004). Among other writers, we draw there on the American pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, particularly in Art as Experience (1980); Richard Shusterman (1992) also builds on Dewey in developing a philosophical aesthetics for the late-modern period. Turner and Bruner (1986) is a stimulating collection of essays on the anthropological uses of the concept. Engagement with the alleged loss of integrated experience in capitalist modernity, by intellectuals including Adorno, Benjamin and Kracauer, is covered in most of the commentary associated with them and with critical theory more generally; see, for example, Cesar (1992), and Caygill (1998). A stimulating theoretical engagement with experience, gender and personal identity is Probyn (1993), while Kruks (2001) offers an interesting phenomenological treatment of experience. Finally, for the life history approach in sociology, see, for example, Bertaux (1981), Plummer (2001), and Roberts (2001).

NOTES

1. For a wide-ranging survey of such ideas, see Jay (2005).
2. For its use in cultural studies, including discussion of its methodological and analytical value, see Pickering (1997).
3. An example of a self-authenticating standpoint claim is Alison Jagger's (1983: 384) assertion that because of their subordinate status, 'women do not have a clear interest in mystifying reality and so are likely to develop a clearer and more trustworthy understanding of the world'. For further discussion, see Harding (1993); McLennan (1995); Skeggs (1995); also Segal (1987).
4. The phrase 'democratization of culture' comes from Karl Mannheim's 1933 essay on this topic, which he described as involving a broadening out of those 'actively participating in cultural life, either as creators or as recipients' (Mannheim 1959).
5. This relates to Raymond Williams's concept of structure of feeling, the real strength of which lies in its application to liminal forms of experience in the process of coming into expressive form (see Pickering 1997: ch. 2).
6. Keith Negus and I have discussed this aspect of duality in experience in greater detail in our discussion of the relation between experience, creativity and cultural value (Negus and Pickering 2004: ch. 2).
worlds might provide a means for better understanding the processes of social change. Beginning with some assertions about what I believe are some strengths and weaknesses of the interactionist tradition, I shall then outline several features of social worlds, including some of their implications. In the final pages, the main argument will be taken up again. In short, I am suggesting that this Meadian “fluidity” and the interactionists’ general emphases on antiderminism and group encounter at any scale or scope be worked through for its implications, rather than restricted to certain kinds of groups of processes, and certainly not restricted to “micro” or “macro” studies of these matters. I believe that one means for doing that job is to study worlds and to take “a social world perspective.” Social media is often becoming a replacement for building and establishing connections in the real world and there is something fundamentally wrong with this mentality. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 54 percent of those surveyed said they text their friends at least once a day, while only 33% said they talk face-to-face with their friends on a consistent basis (Antisocial Networking). We are sacrificing the experiences and understanding of real world interactions that are necessary in our development for a mere connection that is established in social media, one that is superficial.