

MAKING RECORDED INTERVIEWS WITH WORKERS IN HUMAN AND MEDICAL GENETICS

Notes for ESHG collaborators,

Peter Harper, October 2016 (originally written September 2013).

I have now made 100 recorded interviews myself, mostly with older workers in the field, but I am not able to continue the work myself, so I am very pleased that others have volunteered to take the project forward across different countries. The full list of my interviews, with transcripts of almost all of them, can be found on the Genetics and Medicine Historical Network website, www.genmedhist.org/interviews now hosted by ESHG itself.

Several people have asked me for advice on carrying out the interviews. In fact there is no magic involved and the process is quite straightforward, but like any technique, a combination of practice and a few basic guidelines is of help. Here are a few hints from my own experience, though I cannot claim any special expertise and the process can be adapted to your own particular requirements.

It is best to divide the points into three phases: things to do before the interview; the interview itself; and things to do afterwards.

Before the interview

Give the person to be interviewed reasonable notice where possible (though I often carry a recorder with me to meetings in case an opportunity arises).

Read up a bit on the interviewee's work, especially if you do not know them well personally. I often print out a PUBMED list of publications. It is also worth making a list of particular questions or topics to be covered.

Use a pocket size digital recorder (mine is an Olympus WS 560M) which will give good quality and allow the recording to be transferred direct to computer. I also use a separate recording microphone that is plugged into the recorder.

Make sure in advance that the batteries of the recorder are fully charged. It is often inconvenient to have to be near a mains socket.

Choose a quiet place for the interview, but complete silence is not necessary.

Allow two hours time to avoid rush, though I usually find that interviews last around 1 to 1 ½ hours

Practice several times with close friends or colleagues, so that you become familiar with the machine and with the interview process overall. This will help you be more confident and relaxed, which in turn will help the interviewee to relax.

The interview itself.

Make sure the recorder is turned on and working. It is best to leave it on throughout the interview even if there are interruptions, rather than turn it on and off. After a short while you will both forget that the recorder is there. Irrelevant conversation can be left untranscribed.

Choose a comfortable and quiet place with a small table or something between yourself and the interviewee, on which the recorder can be placed. Using a recording microphone it should not be necessary to clip it on to the person. Turn mobile phones off to avoid interruption.

It is worth explaining a bit about the overall interview series and its aims, even though you will probably have done this already in advance.

Once you are both 'settled', start by stating who you are interviewing and the date, for future documentation. After that you can begin the proper interview; I usually start at the beginning and continue from there, spending longer on particularly important aspects of the person's work and life. It's worth looking at some examples on the www.genmedhist.org website, though not all are full biographical interviews. As a rough guide, I try to touch on: Family background and childhood; factors that may have given an early interest in science or medicine; university experience; early career and research; teachers and mentors; development of principal interests. What do they feel their main contribution has been?

I try to say as little as possible myself, leaving the interviewee to tell the story in their own way. A certain amount of 'steering' may be needed if they jump ahead in time too fast; a few people may need prompting with 'leading questions' but this is rare.

At the end it is worth asking if there are topics that you have not asked about that seem important.

When the recording is over, ask to take a photo or two. A small digital camera should be fine for this. (I have never used video, feeling that this can be intrusive, and that it is one more thing to bother about; but some people feel differently on this).

Ask the interviewee for written consent, which is required for copyright purposes; I try to take a form with me and enclose what I use, which you can adapt as needed. I always explain at the start and after that the transcript will be sent to them for correction and that anything which they are uncomfortable about can be removed from the version to be put on the website.

After the interview.

Listen to the recording to make sure it has worked and is of reasonable quality. (If it hasn't, it is best to be honest and if possible to arrange for a repeat. This has happened to everyone, including me!).

Write a short 'background note', in which you can document any particular features or problems with the interview, or important points not in the recording. Some people may remember things after the recorder has been switched off.

Transfer the recording to your computer (follow the instructions on your recorder). Make sure the file title gives name and date. Don't erase the interview from the recorder until later and make sure that both a 'sound file' and the transcript are electronically archived.

Files are often too large to email unless 'compressed'. It may be easier to transfer to a memory stick or CD for whoever is going to transcribe it.

Unless you are expert yourself, it is better to get someone with experience to do the transcribing. You may be lucky and have someone in your institution who can do it out of hours if paid; there are professional free-lance transcribers who are very good, but older secretaries used to audiotyping should be able to do it also.

When the transcript is done, be prepared for a shock! As well as errors and mis-spellings of names and scientific terms, you will often find that the conversation looks quite ungrammatical and unlike written prose. Some interviewees are quite upset by this, insisting that they could not possibly have spoken such 'rubbish'! They do not look at it like a conversation, but rather a written document.

My approach is first to correct obvious errors while reading through the transcript; then to listen to the recording with the preliminary transcript on screen, stopping and starting to make corrections (often a tedious process). After this is done, things look a lot better.

I then go through it again to edit out 'ums' and 'ers' and similar interjections that are usually unconscious. (proper social scientists often leave them in).

Now the transcript is ready to send to the interviewee to correct and to edit if needed. I ask them not to try to 'improve' the interview or to try to turn it into a written essay, which can destroy much of the spontaneity. If there are 'sensitive' passages that might upset people when put on the website, then these can be removed for this (but keep them for the archival version).

As you can see, this process can take a lot of time, and is more work than the actual interview itself, but it is well worth it.

Translation: It is probably best for the interview to be in whatever language is most familiar (I have used both English and French) but an English translation for the website to go alongside the original would be of great value, though of course it means extra work and perhaps cost.

I should say that, unless you are more fortunate than me, you should not expect to find any funding for the costs of travel or transcribing. Historians, with a few notable exceptions, have until recently not been interested in the field of human genetics and may even disapprove of 'amateurs' being involved in oral history. But you may find some local source of funds to cover costs.

Archiving the interview

Things get lost very quickly, whether on computer or paper, so try to have an organised system from the start. I have an electronic file for each person interviewed that contains:

- 1 the recording audiofile itself
- 2 the original corrected transcript
- 3 the transcript as on the website
- 4 photo
- 5 background note

I also print out these documents. Quite often, the interviewee may give you reprints or other items that need filing along with the interview.

I have often found that people express concern as to what will happen to their own records after they die. We have been fortunate in the UK to have had funding from Wellcome Trust so that we have been able to coordinate records archiving. What is possible will vary in different countries, but the least you can do is to persuade people not to throw things out. For books, don't forget that the Human Genetics Historical Library now forms a unique international collection of over 3000 genetics books and is always ready to accept donations (see the www.genmedhist.org website).

In conclusion, I suggest that you start making interviews as soon as you have a recorder and practiced a bit, rather than wait until things are perfect. Even if you are unable to get your interviews transcribed at once, you can store the recordings on computer (with back up) until you can sort out transcription. Nobody is expecting your interviews to be perfect.

Best of luck to you all!

Peter Harper.