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## Did Hamilton Ever Use the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression? Reflections on the (Re-)Use of Oral Histories and Their Accessibility via the ComBio Website

Saul Benison, a central figure in establishing interview collections in the history of science and medicine, noted already in 1962 that “we often forget that it is not enough to collect documents. They must be used and analysed. Our archives are too dusty and too quiet.”<sup>1</sup> Oral history collections have been expanded or newly created since then, and some of those collections offer at least partial online access. But there are still limitations to their use.<sup>2</sup> The sheer number of such interviews available online hosted by various institutions, each of them with their own logics for access and metadata, pose serious challenges for accessing them as a *corpus*—it has been impossible to search *across* all these collections. We have developed a project and web-

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1. Saul Benison, “Oral History and Manuscript Collecting,” *Isis* 53, no. 1 (1962): 117.

2. As of 2023 there are roughly 4,000 English-language oral history interviews with biomedical scientists, doctors, nurses, patients, and hospital administrators available online. More or less the same number are only available offline, either because they contain sensitive material or simply haven’t been digitized yet. These interviews are hosted by some of the wealthiest institutions for biomedical research in the world, as well as by lesser-known medical schools, public libraries, and centers for the history of biomedicine across the US and the UK.

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site, called Commoning Biomedicine, hereafter ComBio, that provides a platform to make oral history sources on biomedicine more accessible and searchable.<sup>3</sup> The ComBio website is a collaborative project between digital humanists and historians of science that provides a cross-platform search function. Enabling researchers to search many collections at once realizes the founding vision of oral history collections, allowing more people to use and analyze these sources, and to confidently treat them as a corpus, including the necessary critique of its coverage. But as we will elaborate, the possibility to search across collections also expands the epistemic uses of existing interviews. In this essay, we illustrate how aspects of accessibility—and considerations about archival politics in the digital age—shape the secondary use of interviews, thereby reflecting how our project has been influenced by the history of oral history as well as by contemporary ethical and political discourses on history writing. Let us start with an example.

When Max Hamilton died in 1988, he was already celebrated as one of the most influential psychiatrists of the postwar era. Part of this fame derived from the eponymous rating scale, the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HRSD), first published in 1960 and by the 1980s one of the most highly cited and widely used rating scales in depression research. The scale included twenty-one items and was designed to quantify changes in a patient's symptoms due to treatment expressed as a score out of 100.<sup>4</sup> Using the ComBio platform and searching for “rating scale” and “Max Hamilton,” one of us discovered a brief but surprising discussion about Hamilton within an interview between psychiatrists David Healy and Mandel Cohen conducted in March 2000.<sup>5</sup> In this passage Cohen recounted how Hamilton told him that he never used his own scale in clinical practice. As Cohen said to Healy:

3. See <https://combio.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/> (platform website) and [www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/feature-story/commoning-biomedicine-open-source-network-oral-histories-online](http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/feature-story/commoning-biomedicine-open-source-network-oral-histories-online) (feature story about the platform); for a video of the public launch event held in December 2023 see [www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/video/commoning-biomedicine-public-launch-event](http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/video/commoning-biomedicine-public-launch-event). The project is collaboratively conducted by Alfred Freeborn, Michael Winter, Pascal Belouin, Kim Pham, Elizabeth Hughes, Hanna Lucia Worliczek, Steffen Hennicke, and Lara Keuck.

4. Max Hamilton, “A Rating Scale for Depression,” *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* 23, no. 1 (1960): 56–62. An updated version of the scale can be accessed here: [www.apa.org/depression-guideline/hamilton-rating-scale.pdf](http://www.apa.org/depression-guideline/hamilton-rating-scale.pdf).

5. The interview took place on 28 March 2000 at Mandel Cohen's home in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Cohen died later that year on 19 November 2000.

Many years later, I was at a meeting that Max Hamilton was at. We got to be friendly. We spent three days looking for a good Indian restaurant. We went to many poor Indian restaurants. But in the course of it, I had an opportunity to talk with him and found out among other things that he didn't use his rating scale once in his own clinical practice.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of their conversation, Cohen mentioned this detail in passing while explaining how he got involved with studying electrotherapy for depression. The focus of the conversation is not Hamilton's scale but rather how Hamilton was at the time strongly in favor of electrotherapy for patients with depression who did not recover. And yet, Cohen's recollection is significant for our understanding of Hamilton and his work. It is possible that Cohen liked to share this anecdote about Hamilton with colleagues, strategically aware of its ability to surprise and at the same time exercising his authority to air the individual practices of a prominent figure. There is no mention of this detail in the published interviews with Hamilton or the numerous biographical essays that appeared after his death.<sup>7</sup>

However, the anecdote was used by Healy in his history of psychopharmacology as authoritative evidence that the demands to use evidence-based evaluation instruments—such as the HRSD—in clinical practice served the interests of drug companies, not clinicians and patients.<sup>8</sup> These companies encouraged clinicians to use standardized evaluations that increased the prescription of antidepressants. Healy did not give a citation for this anecdote, stating simply that “Max Hamilton never used his own scale in clinical practice.”<sup>9</sup> For Healy, Hamilton was a pioneer from an older generation of clinicians who developed technologies that have been used by regulatory bodies and drug companies to restrict the clinical expertise of a younger generation. Moreover, Healy's decision not to provide a reference for this claim speaks both to the rapport he established with Cohen—in other words, he did not question Cohen's credibility as a source—as well as his over-eagerness to use Hamilton as a mouthpiece for his own historical argument.

6. Healy, David. “Mandel Cohen and the Origins of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition: DSM-III.” *History of Psychiatry* 13, no. 50 (June 2002): 217.

7. Barraclough, Brian, and Max Hamilton. “In Conversation with Max Hamilton. Part I.” *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists* 7, no. 3 (March 1983): 42–45; “In Conversation with Max Hamilton. Part II.” *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists* 7, no. 4 (April 1983): 62–66.

8. David Healy, *The Creation of Psychopharmacology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

9. Healy, *The Creation of Psychopharmacology*, 350.

A decade later, in 2013, historian Michael Worboys cited Healy, saying “there is no evidence that Hamilton used his own scale in clinical practice,” but he did not make much of this point, since as he argued, “it was a research rather than clinical tool.”<sup>10</sup> We see clearly in this instance how the distance from the interview, which is literally removed by Healy’s failure to reference his claim, produces a different interpretation. The detail that Hamilton, according to Cohen, didn’t ever use his own scale in clinical practice, taken in the original context of Healy’s discussion with Cohen, is a thinly veiled critique of those who *did* use it in clinical practice. Taken outside of this context, this detail is reduced to the truism that the scale was a research tool not intended for clinical practice.

The ComBio platform enabled us to find the source of this detail: a published interview that was not even directly concerned with Max Hamilton’s work. By using the platform, we could uncover this passing anecdote. By following its trajectory in the work of Healy and Worboys, we could trace how the context of the interview was decisively erased. Accessing the original interview transcripts helps those of us who couldn’t be part of the conversation access the private historical self-evaluations of a research community. As Nathaniel Comfort has argued,<sup>11</sup> there are many benefits of conducting interviews yourself: the creation of historical data that come into existence only when the interviewer specifically asks about them, the co-creation of meanings by interviewer and interviewee specific to a historian’s epistemic interests, and the active and reliable sampling of a “complex environment” that is “someone’s memory.”<sup>12</sup> However, as Comfort convincingly demonstrated, it was his secondary use of Barbara McClintock’s interviews with others that permitted him to understand her “vocal style” and her consistent modes of linguistic expression across different interview situations, and ultimately allowed him to reinterpret McClintock’s publications in a novel way and get as close as possible to their intended contemporary meanings.<sup>13</sup> Users of ComBio can search across

10. Michael Worboys, “The Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression: The Making of a ‘Gold Standard’ and the Unmaking of a Chronic Illness, 1960–1980,” *Chronic Illness* 9, no. 3 (September 2013): 202–19.

11. Nathaniel Comfort, “When Your Sources Talk Back: Toward a Multimodal Approach to Scientific Biography,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 44, no. 4 (November 2011): 651–69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10739-011-9273-9>

12. Comfort, “When Your Sources Talk Back,” 652–53, 662.

13. This would, in Comfort’s interpretation, however, not have happened if not for a firsthand account of a contemporary witness reporting directly to him during an interview. Comfort, 657.

the entire texts of the transcripts, browsing by names, technical terms, or places. As we have demonstrated, this enables new and exciting possibilities of engaging with these sources.

The secondary use of interviews conducted for other reasons than one's own project-specific epistemic interests and archived in a collection reveals general features of the interview as a historical source. A scholar might use archived oral histories in lieu of conducting an interview themselves. This is highly relevant in terms of accessibility: actors central within a research project might be deceased or unwilling to give interviews; scholars might lack the resources or ability to travel for meeting the actors in person. Moreover, existing interviews offer narratives about people and dynamics not directly accessible through their own archival records or interviews through what Richard Watson has termed "shadow history."<sup>14</sup> Concepts from M. Susan Lindee's "Essay on Sources," which focuses on written sources such as essays, lectures, and historical papers produced by scientists or medical professionals—that is, internal historical narratives—can be applied to oral histories as well if those oral histories are considered as a corpus additional to their highly individual character. Consequently, if understood in the logic of a source corpus, interviews may play the role of primary sources by "providing insight into a community's sense of its own history" and can be analyzed as such. They might also serve as secondary sources to find one's own scope at the beginning of a research project by offering "rough empirical maps of important people and events, of dates, technologies, institutions, and theoretical problems."<sup>15</sup>

The latter point becomes even more important if a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon is considered that mainly affects explorative phases of research projects on the more recent past. On the one hand, there is an increasing abundance of sources that are accessible, whether published or archival, leaving us on the brink of drowning in the complex dynamics of post-disciplinary research fields and their scientific cultures. Benison had already attested in 1962 to "a superabundance of documents created by modern technologies." He also argued that this was paralleled by a decline of personal documents as new communication and transport technologies led to more immediate and traceless personal correspondences.<sup>16</sup> The resulting drought of personal documents

14. Richard A. Watson, "Shadow History in Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (1993): 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1993.0018>

15. M. Susan Lindee, "Essay on Sources," in *Moments of Truth in Genetic Medicine*, by M. Susan Lindee (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 231.

16. Benison, "Oral History and Manuscript Collecting," 113–14.

that could complement other sources was, in his view, to be remedied through oral history research programs, sources explicitly designed for use by future historians.<sup>17</sup> Oral history, for Benison, was about making the personal past more accessible for future historians, but inevitably the interests of these historians would diverge from the questions of the oral historian.

Since the 1930s, when the first large-scale oral history projects were conducted in the context of the economic program of the New Deal in the United States—which created jobs for unemployed academics to record the memories of plantation and factory workers—oral history was as much about saving memories as it was about imagining future historians who would use these sources to write history differently.<sup>18</sup> In the history of science, big oral history programs aimed to save the last memories of pioneers of Quantum physics’ “scientific revolution” in Thomas Kuhn’s project in the 1960s, and later, in the early 1990s, to write history “while it happens” during the Human Genome Project.<sup>19</sup> Oral historians have frequently argued that learning their particular historical method would enable students to become better historians in general. Indeed, oral history has influenced the development of source criticism and the theory of history in several ways: collections of interviews, in particular interviews with holocaust survivors, have shaped the concept of witnesses as *Zeitzeugen*.<sup>20</sup> Attempts to expand the sources of historians into fields that have left no written traces, such as African oral traditions, have kindled debates on the blinding effects of the colonial archive that only kept official documents, thereby privileging the historian’s access to the perspective of those who were in power.<sup>21</sup> Interviews have thus been conceptualized as both historical sources that should be critically acknowledged and used and analyzed just as any other historical source, and as a special kind of source that has a particular power to counter hegemonic narratives, opposing them to lived experience, putting the interviewed human being, its interpersonal relationships, biography, emotions,

17. Benison, “Oral History and Manuscript Collecting,” 114.

18. Rebecca Sharpless, 2006, “The History of Oral History,” in Thomas L. Charlton, Louis E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (eds.), *Handbook of Oral History*. Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 19–42.

19. te Heesen, Anke, *Revolutionäre im Interview. Thomas Kuhn, Quantenphysik und Oral History* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2022); Susan M. Lindee, Susan L. Speaker, and Arnold Thackray, “Conference Report: Writing History While It Happens,” *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 13, no. 4 (1992): 479–86.

20. Steffi de Jong, “Zeitzeugin/Zeitzeuge, Version: 1.0,” in: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 24.06.2022. [http://docupedia.de/zg/Jong\\_zeitzeuge\\_v1\\_de\\_2022](http://docupedia.de/zg/Jong_zeitzeuge_v1_de_2022)

21. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology* (London: Aldine, 1965).

memories, and judgments upfront. The Hamilton Rating Scale case exemplifies how the decontextualization of anecdotal evidence massively reduces our space of interpretation. The ComBio platform helps the historian to recontextualize how interviews have been used or misused by their colleagues. The secondary use brings the historian into a position of critical distance to both interviewee and interviewer.

Healy interviewed numerous researchers in the field of psychopharmacology for his book project and is noteworthy for making them freely accessible online. All ninety-nine of these transcripts are now searchable on the ComBio platform. Along with several other psychiatrists and historians, Healy has also been involved in conducting interviews for the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, which has recently removed its ten-volume collection of oral history interviews with its own members from its public website. These 213 interviews are available for purchase as published volumes and are not included in the ComBio platform. This is a central challenge to building a platform like this that does not grow out of an institutional collection. We have so far networked fifteen online public collections, making up 1,637 interviews in total. While this is already a substantial body of interviews, the granularity of our argumentation will inevitably depend on the (in)accessibility of our sources. The ComBio website is a contribution to the vision of networked and linked archival sources, but it also faces and sometimes reproduces challenges intrinsic to the archival politics of contemporary sciences.<sup>22</sup>

This urges us to reflect on the scope of the corpus, and the ways in which accessibility intersects with power. Some of our collaborators have pointed out that a striking property of our project is that it did not grow out of a collection. Indeed, they argued that an institutional collection could not have received funding for coding a website that gives equal access to collections of other institutions. The verb “commoning” emphasizes this focus on access rather than ownership. The term stems from the history of struggles over land enclosures in early modern England but has more recently been adopted to talk about sustainable ways of administering environmental and digital resources. While developing the ComBio website, technical, institutional, pragmatic, political, and historiographical questions frequently intersected. To provide and host an open-access infrastructure became a move against platform

22. Soraya de Chadarevian, “The Future Historian: Reflections on the Archives of Contemporary Sciences,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 55 (2016): 54–60.

capitalism; to start our project with networking English-language collections of interviews with elite scientists turned from a pragmatic starting point to a representation of the skewed availability of resources or to a questionable choice in need of explanation. We became aware of the division of labor between those who prepare, conduct, and curate interviews for collections and those who use them, and how this division often serves specific power relations that prioritize certain thematic interests and determine questions of longevity and access. If we don't want to just reproduce power relations, we must question the politics of sources and of collections: Why have these interviews been compiled and collected? Which voices are missing? Within the ComBio project, we have started the lecture and discussion series *Conversations* with various historians and archivists that illustrate a breadth of approaches to and concerns about the ethics and politics of choosing interview partners, and pursuing, editing, and publishing interviews in contemporary oral history projects and collections. While some of the concerns about privacy and representativeness are not new, others are nowadays framed in different terms: When is the historian extractive? When can the pursuit or use of an interview be traumatizing? How can digitally accessible personal interviews of living people be misused for non-academic purposes? How can such a federated platform be used to represent more voices beyond elite institutions and scientists?

It remains to be shown if the ComBio platform will be of use to future historians, but for sure, working not only with but on such a project has urged us to reflect on the contemporary conditions of historical work, its increasing embeddedness in digital infrastructures, and our own agency in shaping and changing the structures in which we (re)search.