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Mining Men: Reflections on Masculinity and Oral History during the Coronavirus Pandemic

by *Emily Peirson-Webber*

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically affected historical research worldwide. It has closed archives, curtailed or cancelled research visits, and left researchers housebound and reliant on what they can access digitally. It has also led to a disruption of oral history research as it has usually been understood, where interviewer and interviewee are in dialogue with each other in a shared physical setting. Here as elsewhere (see also meetings, pub quizzes and even funerals) what has been impossible to do in person has moved online via video-conferencing software which allows researchers to conduct meaningful oral history interviews remotely. Contrary to methodological orthodoxy, where in-person encounters are crucial to achieving good rapport and ensuring the ‘subjective composure’ of respondents, my experience of conducting remote interviews during lockdown suggests that at least in some cases the use of virtual meeting platforms may actually facilitate the process of gathering reflective interviews and indeed of achieving a sense of mutual connection.¹ In contrast to the disembodied ‘down the line’ phone interviews I conducted, the online method proved broadly superior in encouraging meaningful engagement. Additionally, during a time of restricted social contact, the oral history interview offered interviewees a means to regain some sense of identity and agency. Among the former British mineworkers I interviewed using online video-conferencing platforms during lockdown, while some saw learning to use these as an incentive allowing them to break out of their isolation and contact friends and family, for most it was a mode of communication they were already using to maintain social connection during the crisis – making it more ‘normal’ than an oral history interview would typically be.

My research explores experiences and representations of men working in the British mining industry from nationalization in 1947 through to pit closures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Oral histories are my primary source base and at the start of my project I anticipated conducting a total of thirty interviews with former mineworkers. By March 2020, I had conducted fifteen oral history interviews, most in the

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interviewees' homes and four in communal settings like community centres and pubs. When the national lockdown was imposed at the end of March I had two further research visits scheduled, in which I had planned to interview an additional fifteen former mineworkers. Given the high incidence of lung conditions amongst former mineworkers as well as their age, the majority of my participant group were advised to shield during the pandemic.

Keen to continue my research and aware of the rise in activity on social media sites amongst groups of former mineworkers, I circulated a call for mining memories, which was subsequently published by the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and *The Chronicle* in the North East, as well as on a number of relevant social media groups. Following this I received an incredible response in the form of emails and letters from former mineworkers all across Great Britain, with written contributions from over thirty individuals, aged between fifty-six and ninety-three. I received a number of lengthy unpublished memoirs, many of them written intermittently over the decades following pit closures, but never previously shared with anyone outside the author's immediate family. It seemed that the pandemic had spurred these men to share their memories more widely. I was also contacted by men who suggested that they would be happy to be interviewed remotely, and I scheduled interviews for the subsequent weeks. Alongside this a number of those whose interviews I had postponed suggested that we could speak remotely. Between March and August I conducted twenty-seven interviews remotely, by telephone and via online meeting platforms.

I allowed respondents to determine the form of interview, and in total sixteen interviews were undertaken over the phone and eleven were conducted via video-conferencing software. Although the recording quality of remote interviews is dependent on a consistent internet connection or phone signal and reliable hardware like microphones and speakers, across these sixteen interviews I only experienced technical issues with one, which was remedied during our conversation. Because I was homeschooling my two children, I undertook most interviews after bedtime, seated at my kitchen table. Consent forms were sent digitally or by post. I was mindful of each interviewee's own personal situation and capacity to be interviewed, and did my best to ensure they were happy to speak to me, adapting my questioning to my assessment of their situation. All of my interviews seemed to be a positive experience for both parties, which gave me confidence to continue.

The remote approach meant that I lost some of the intimacy of being invited into the interviewee's home and the observational benefits this would have enabled. However, a number of the men who I interviewed using video-conferencing software took me on virtual tours of their home to point out pertinent objects or images. One interviewee chose to speak to me over Skype in his upstairs bedroom, which meant that when he was speaking about the loss of his young daughter, who died during the '84-85 strike, he was able to do so beneath the portrait of her he had hung next to his bed. There was also a security in my disembodied presence, with respondents

happily taking me into their upstairs rooms. Such movement rarely happened during face-to-face interviews and on one occasion when it did, I experienced a sense of both personal and social discomfort being taken upstairs by an interviewee who towered over me at six foot seven inches.

Writing of oral history methodology, Alessandro Portelli acknowledged how the successful interaction of two subjects depended on the establishment of mutuality.² The remote format significantly altered the traditional relationship between interviewer and interviewee, where an unfamiliar interviewer is present in the interviewee's domestic environment; to a greater extent than in a traditional interview format the encounter was one of being both 'the observer and the observed'.³ With the reciprocity of video-conferencing software, interviewees were given an insight into my own domestic situation, and our interpersonal relationship seemed to benefit from my loss of anonymity, with interviewees commenting on the cuckoo clock in my kitchen which struck early, or my choice of non-alcoholic lager. One of my interviewees had been asked by his wife to apologize for the untidiness of their lounge, visible in the background of our interview, and in return I could point out the disorder in my kitchen after a day of homeschooling. As an interviewer this was a new and humanizing experience, but one which went some way towards disrupting the 'hegemonized power dynamics' of traditional scholarly interactions described by Alan Wong.⁴ The usual anxiety at being in a stranger's house was absent, as were potential unspoken tensions following the offer of hospitality, captured in Celia Hughes's account of her discomfort at being presented with a 'milky, lukewarm' tea, and her interviewee's disappointment at her reaction.⁵ My own experiences were never so fraught, but even simple acts of hospitality like brewing tea 'correctly' sometimes generated unhelpful social anxieties. There was no disruption caused by the setting up of recording equipment and though the fact the interview was being recorded was always acknowledged, the positioning of the recorder off-screen reduced the formality of the engagement. Alongside this, in both my telephone and online interviews a sense of mutuality was developed in that we were both being affected by the social restrictions of the lockdown and interviewees were both aware and accommodating of my new need to fit my research around the demands of a young family. The sense of what the anthropologist Victor Turner termed 'communitas' was particularly evident during the interviews that took place on a Thursday evening, which would invariably begin with discussion of our mutual participation in the weekly 'clap for carers'.⁶

Some of my interviewees seemed to be more physically at ease during our remote interviews. One gentleman was interviewed with a fan next to him as he had a health condition that necessitated its occasional use, but I was aware that had I been sitting opposite him he might not have felt comfortable doing this. Interviewees were also at greater liberty to smoke or vape during our conversation, without fearing an adverse impact on me. When my phone interviews began a number of men mentioned that they were just

going to go and get comfortable, presumably behaving in the same way they would if a friend or relation was to call for a chat. As a consequence of my interviewees' greater sense of comfort, my remote interviews lasted significantly longer than any of the in-person interviews I had previously conducted, with some stretching over two and a half hours and late into the evening.

Writing in *Miners' Lung*, their oral history study of dust disease first published in 2007, Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston concluded that the legacy of respiratory disease in mining communities 'will continue to scar such communities for many years to come', and this has never been more true.⁷ To borrow Portelli's phrase, it became apparent that my interviews were 'historically conditioned', as the enhanced threat the pandemic poses to older individuals and those with underlying health conditions had created a new impetus for such people to share their experiences and commit them to the historical record.⁸ My interviewees were conscious of the threat the pandemic posed to former mineworkers with their pre-existing medical conditions. One interviewee described a miner's lamp he had at home and told me:

I'm lighting it every night for old miners that are dying, we're dying out, we're going, you know I mean – this, this virus, you're seeing some of Welsh pits put 'so and so's passed away' or some of Lancashire pits, it's like every day they're going.⁹

The oral historian Joanna Bornat describes how reminiscence can be 'empowering and enhancing' for older people, and likewise Lynn Abrams observes that when aspects of life seem out of control the oral history interview can provide an opportunity for interviewees to demonstrate knowledge and perform an alternative version of the self.¹⁰ Similarly, reflecting on an oral history interview undertaken with a dying man, as well as interviews with incarcerated individuals, Valerie Yow noted that the oral history interview could restore a sense of self and personal agency to the interviewee, 'a realisation that he was a man with his own mind and integrity'.¹¹ In my experience, men made vulnerable to the pandemic as a result of their former careers were able to reflect on their experiences, temporarily overcome the social dislocation they were experiencing, and regain their sense of agency during our interviews.

Many of the former mineworkers I spoke with were still active members of a social community founded in the pit, and described how usually their days and evenings would be spent pursuing group hobbies or in the local pub. As a result of the lockdown much of this activity had moved online, with former mineworkers regularly conversing via social media or on group Zoom chats. I was also surprised at the degree to which the interview in itself had become a social occasion. The shared experience of lockdown contributed to informality: some online interviews were punctuated with a raised

drink to ‘cheers’ me. A number of interviewees ended by expressing how much they had enjoyed the experience and one described how he had been telling his friends about it, joking in later correspondence that the interview had been so successful that it should be turned into a full-length feature film. It became increasingly apparent that for some men remembering former working experiences and social life was presenting a much-needed occasion for escapism in light of current uncertainties.

These interviews were not just opportunities for nostalgic reflection. The pandemic also presented a number of my interviewees with the time and space for greater introspection, as men used to living in the moment, began to consider their life reflexively. In their study of masculinity in the workplace Deborah Kerfoot and David Knights describe how some men demonstrated ‘an unceasing preoccupation with purposive action in the drive to be “in control”’.¹² I observed similar behaviour amongst ‘big hitters’, coalface workers who had a well-established reputation for being the strongest, most fearless and productive workers. In the interviews I conducted before March, coalface workers were a minority among respondents coming forward. After lockdown began, however, significantly more of them volunteered for interview. During the pandemic such men were temporarily rendered powerless as a consequence of government restrictions, and found their opportunities for purposive action limited. For such individuals, the oral history interview offered the chance to pause for self-reflection (something that was new to a number of them as evidenced by their comparative unfamiliarity with sharing their life history), while simultaneously regaining some sense of status via a new, interested audience.

Whereas for Kerfoot and Knights, the masculine subjects they observed ‘know no other’ than control and the instrumental use of others to secure that control’, my interviews showed that it was possible for such men to step beyond this, even if only for the duration of our interview.¹³ Though Abrams noted how, unlike women’s, men’s storytelling in oral history interviews was often ‘a means of “self-aggrandising”’, my ‘big hitter’ interviewees, who could most easily brag about being the pride of the coalface, became unexpectedly self-reflexive.¹⁴ Samuel, a ‘big hitter’ whom I interviewed twice over the telephone, reflected on his wife’s displeasure at her recent discovery of the risks he had taken during the miners’ strike of ’84–85. Samuel still identified as a miner, regularly participated in online mining forums, and took pleasure in describing his strike tattoo, his ‘passport into the next life’.¹⁵ Yet despite this he was surprisingly frank about his self-destructive relationship with the pit:

I’ll be honest like that, I mean, and I say it like that, I mean [sighs] after the miners’ strike and that, I was married to pit, had I been still working, I’d have been a single man, because you couldn’t punch me home from pit, because I was married to pit [. . .] *what on earth* is the love affair with working underground?¹⁶

Anthony, another ‘big hitter’, who told me how he was at one time a member of Europe’s largest coalmining family, spoke candidly about how he was used to putting up walls to prevent people from getting to know him on a deeper level, as he described: ‘I am a very, very hard person to get into, because I shut me door, you know what I mean?’¹⁷ He was recruited via another interviewee who was unsure whether he would be willing to talk to me, and was surprised to find that he was eager to do so. What followed was an online interview that lasted for almost two hours, during which Anthony spoke movingly and candidly about his late father, about the mental harm the ’84–85 strike had done his older brother, and about his regrets:

[...] me biggest regret in me life was me mother never met me wife, because she’s the closest thing of a female I’ve ever, ever come to me mother, and that’s, that’s a fact, that’s a fact. And she never met, she met me dad, she loved me dad, but she never met me mother, and really, really wish she did, you know.¹⁸

Regrets were something that a number of interviewees shared with me, perhaps as a result of the hiatus in the forward motion of everyday life, or the way in which their new medical vulnerability had reminded them of their mortality. During my online interview with Geoffrey, who was now employed by the NHS, he became unexpectedly emotional when speaking about his continuing guilt that he did not stand alongside his friends on the picket line:

[...] I, I, I think because I lived about fourteen, fifteen miles away from the pit, it, it, I, I, early on I didn’t get into, I didn’t go. It’s like er, you know, you’ve got no money, you can’t really justify driving halfway across South Yorkshire, and, I regret that. I, I, you know, the one thing in my life that I regret, is not making the effort and going picketing.¹⁹

The pandemic enabled interviewees to draw parallels with their past lives, as Geoffrey observed: ‘it seems that if I look back at my working life, you know, the miners’ strike and this are just *standout* moments as being *completely* like, life-changing and world-changing events, you know’.²⁰ Valerie Yow noted how through sharing our life history, ‘we gain an understanding of things that have happened to us, how we faced them, how they fit together in our story, how we have become the kind of woman or man we are’.²¹ The remote interview offered a vehicle whereby former mineworkers could tell their story, whilst also seeking some sense of connection with the uncertain present. Similarly, during our conversations a significant number of interviewees sought to pass on their life lessons to me and the interview provided them with a means by which to do this, with a tacit awareness that this would also be shared more widely. As one interviewee James described: ‘me dad, his pearls of wisdom, “always be true to yourself” [...] and mine

is, to pass on to you if you like, is be kind to your future self'.²² The passing on of such wisdom demonstrated how these men saw the interview as an opportunity for me not just to study them but also to learn from them, echoing Portelli's experiences building confidence with oral history interviewees in the Kentucky mining community of Harlan County.²³

In the pursuit of both my in-person and remote oral history research I felt many of the same concerns voiced by Hilary Young in her oral history work with men in Glasgow, in particular that my gender and age would act as a barrier to deeper social connection.²⁴ Indeed, in their work with former mineworkers, McIvor and Johnston noted that their own age, background and gender may have helped their respondents feel secure in their 'traditional' male identities and better able to express these than they might otherwise have been.²⁵ However, while in person I might have hesitated to ask questions touching on the performance of masculinities in the workplace, during the remote interviews I felt less trepidation or embarrassment, and my interviewees perhaps felt similarly as they answered my questions with little reticence. Likewise, a number of my interviewees felt able to be candid about their feelings about working in a male-only environment, without fear of judgement. Whilst their preconceptions concerning my own feminist outlook were not absent from our conversation ('I'm not a sexist but' was a frequent preamble to such discussion), at the same time my unembodied presence seemed to permit greater honesty, as one interviewee remarked: 'there was something quite good about not working with women, and I can't quite, I can't justify that, or say that that's *right* but, in a way it were, yeah, if I'm honest about it, honest to meself, it were. . .'.²⁶ Likewise, compared to my previous in-person interviews, men demonstrated less reticence in describing lewd happenings in the pit over a webcam, as Joseph shared one such practice:

this is disgusting this is so [. . .] but they used to stick their fingers up your nose, they'd wait until you were doing summut and they'd shove their fingers up your nose, right, and they'd say then, after they'd been round their bum, and they'd say things like 'er have you met me wife?', and they'd, horrible. . . But that's how it was, you know.²⁷

Significantly, my interviewees were considerably more candid when speaking about sensitive or potentially embarrassing topics like male genitalia and were less inclined to 'stock responses' talking via online video-conferencing platforms than they were over the telephone. This marked a crucial difference between talking to a virtual but visible presence and speaking into the unseen void.

In the most recent edition of his 1978 seminal guide to oral history, *The Voice of the Past*, Paul Thompson argues that interviews over the phone or via online video-conferencing software are unlikely to produce the 'deep interview' that could be achieved in person.²⁸ The Oral History Society

has published extensive guidelines concerning the appropriateness of remote oral history interviews, which include the advice that it may be preferable to wait. Whilst all oral history research proposals must be subjected to rigorous ethical review by both investigators and their affiliated institutions, the challenge presented by the recent pandemic should not be seen as an insurmountable block to oral history collecting. Caution concerning a participant's capacity to be interviewed is necessary, but this must be balanced against the desires of those in vulnerable groups, like those shielding in 2020, to share their experiences, as well as the greater opportunity to access those who may be otherwise hard to reach. My experiences have demonstrated how for certain groups of interviewees, remote oral history interviews can encourage greater comfort for both interviewees and interviewer alike, and can enhance the quality of the interview produced. It is difficult at this point to separate the special effects of the pandemic for many older men in poor health (like the spectre of mortality it evoked) from the question of the mode of interviewing, and whether it was easier for these men to be reflexive into a webcam than face-to-face. Nevertheless my experience demands that we re-think orthodox methodological advice concerning best practice.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 The idea of 'subjective composure' is discussed by Graham Dawson, and refers both to how the interviewees compose their identity from culturally available narratives, and to their sense of psychic comfort with the constructed identity achieved: Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, London and New York, 1994, pp. 22–3. The notion was further explored by Penny Summerfield in her 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History* 1: 1, 2004, pp. 65–93.

2 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany, 1991, 'On Methodology', p. 31.

3 Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, 'Introduction', p. xii.

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- 13 Kerfoot and Knights, '“The Best is Yet to Come?”', p. 92.
- 14 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 119.
- 15 Mr Samuel Broad (b. St Helens, 1953; name altered), unpublished transcript, ref. IDT260820. (Author's possession). All transcripts for this project will eventually be lodged with the National Coal-Mining Museum for England.
- 16 Mr Samuel Broad.
- 17 Mr Anthony Webber (b. Lancaster, 1964; name altered), unpublished transcript, ref. IDO050620. (Author's possession).
- 18 Mr Anthony Webber.
- 19 Mr Geoffrey Brown (b. Sheffield, 1961; name altered), unpublished transcript, ref. IDO020720. (Author's possession).
- 20 Mr Geoffrey Brown.
- 21 Valerie Yow, 'What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?', p. 39.
- 22 Mr James Carman.
- 23 Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, 'Introduction', p. xi.
- 24 Hilary Young, 'Hard Man, New Man: Re/composing Masculinities in Glasgow, c.1950–2000', *Oral History* 35: 1, spring 2007, pp. 71–81.
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- 26 Mr Geoffrey Brown.
- 27 Mr Joseph Broadbank (b. Stoke on Trent, 1957; name altered), unpublished transcript IDO190520. (Author's possession).
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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our ability to undertake oral history research as it is traditionally understood, where interviewer and interviewee are in dialogue with each other in a shared physical setting. Reflecting on experiences conducting twenty-seven remote interviews with former British mineworkers, this article explores how meaningful interviews can be produced with certain groups via video conferencing software and over the telephone. While some of the observational benefits of in-person interviewing were lost, there were gains in terms of the comfort of interviewees and interviewer alike. The reciprocity of video conferencing software went some way to disrupt the power dynamics of oral history interviews. Likewise, interviewees seemed more self-reflexive and willing to discuss sensitive topics when talking via online video-conferencing platforms than over the telephone, or inperson. My experience demands that we rethink orthodox methodological advice concerning best practice. The remote oral history interview can allow access to groups who are hard to reach, and offers a means through which vulnerable interviewees can regain some sense of identity and agency in a time of social dislocation.

Keywords: oral history methodology, remote oral history, masculinity, coronavirus, intersubjectivity, British mining industry, Deindustrialization