In conversation with Graham Crow - Research Methods Past, Present and Future

Vernon Gayle

Right, so my name is Vernon Gale. I'm one of the Co-directors of the National Centre for Research Methods. And it's a great pleasure today to be in conversation with my old friend and colleague, Professor Graham Crow. So we'll start by saying thank you to Graham for an enormous amount of work in the, I was gonna say last two phases, but I think it's actually probably three phases of ncrm. And it's a sort of joyous time and also a sad time. It's joyous insofar as Graham's come to the end of his, his sort of formal work as it were. But sort of sad in the sense of we won't be seeing him day to day around the centre around the department, but we wish him well and wish him a sort of happy and joyful and productive and hopefully restful retirement. I've got a present here in the drawer for you, Graham, but I'm going to wait until sort of COVID times relax a bit more, so I can actually give it to you in person. But yeah,

Graham Crow

My present to you is in your pigeonhole?

Vernon Gayle

Great, great, yes. Thank you. I heard you were going to leave me something. So yeah, so maybe you'd like to tell us that you I think you have a particular recollection of the first time we met. Maybe you could remind me of that?

Graham Crow

Yes. So this was back in the the phase of National Centre for Research Methods when there were nodes, and you were part of the Lancaster Warrick Stirling node with Brian Francis as the principal investigator. And he couldn't make that meeting, we used to have meetings of the centre team along with a representative from each of the six nodes. And so you represented the the Lancaster, Warrick Sterling node, and you're very self effacing about how you weren't necessarily able to cover all the things that Brian, Brian might have been able to, and you said he was the brains of the outfit, but you provided some glamour, so well, that that broke the ice for us.

Vernon Gayle

Yeah, I'm not sure I didn't provide much glamour, but certainly Brian was the brain. So you're coming to the end of really, what is it a 38 year career? Is it?

Graham Crow

Yeah,

Vernon Gayle

Lecturing? And where did you? Where did you start studying sociology?

Graham Crow

Oh, well, back at school, I remember having some little penguin, sociology books in my uniform jacket pockets which led my mother to despair because she... I frequently put in too many books into my pockets, and she had to do various, she kindly did various sewing up with the pockets, and so on. So I remember reading sociology books at school, but we didn't study sociology at that particular school. And so that was like an extra for me. I was doing history and geography and economics and, and thought that sociology sounded interesting. So I then went to Oxford, where I studied philosophy, politics and economics. And there, they had the option to do a bit of sociology as part of the politics curriculum. So I did a couple of sociology, options there, including sociological theory, and also the quite a bit of sociology crept into the study of the developments in Sub Saharan Africa, which is a fascinating, fascinating course to take. But, but then, then then, as a graduate student, I went to Essex where they didn't have a fully fledged sociology department and I did my masters and PhD there, in essence.

Vernon Gayle

So and then you went on to remind me, did you go straight to a lectureship from ethics? Or?

Graham Crow

Well, I, I did what a lot of people did then and now we just have a sort of precarious existence, living rather hand to mouth. But back in those days, the Social Science Research Council as it was before it became the ESRC used to have a rule that if you had been funded to do a Master's, then you have only two years money to do a PhD. So as I was finishing up writing my PhD, I was doing all sorts of teaching here and there, including local Technical College and various, various other places. And then I got a temporary lectureship at Southampton in 1983. And I think one of the reasons I got it was because they asked me if they offered me the job when I could start and I said tomorrow, so they, I think they admired me for my work ethic. And that then became a permanent post and then I sort of rose through the ranks there before moving on to Edinburgh. And as I say, eight, eight and a bit years ago,

Vernon Gayle

Say so. Okay, so we got a bit of a sense of your, your biography there. Although very potted, it was so grim. I always see you as I might describe you to someone else's the sort of lastof the great Weberian and I'm not sure last of the great Weberian, but yeah, I've always seen that sort of heard you speak and read your work. Consort view more generally, as a very Orthodox faith bearing in a good sense, would that be a fair description?

Graham Crow

Well, Max Weber has been described as, in some circles as the last person, who knew everything. So that's a very flattering comparison to be in that kind of tradition. I suppose what attracts me about Weber's work is his, his sort of breadth and his preparedness to try different things. So maybe we'll come on to this later. But one of the things about Weber that is less known is that he was one of the first people to pursue the idea of interviewing factory workers directly. Previously people wuold, if they wanted to know about factory workers, researchers would speak to their employers and he said, well, we should get it from the horse's mouth really, rather than, rather than getting it secondhand, from what

employers think that factory workers, the employee thing. And that was over 100 years ago. And now we wouldn't think about going to an employer and saying, what do your employees think we will go straight to them with our various methods and so on. So he was inventive in that way, and obviously, took a comparative approach. And I've always thought that that's useful to think about, well, if we're studying something, how does it sit alongside? how does it compare and contrast with something else? And then the other aspect of Weber's work that I think, is interesting, although it's a problematic legacy, but his position about value neutrality, and the importance of separating out our politics, from what we're studying, because of the danger, if we don't have going in and finding what we want to find. So that whole thing about being prepared for findings that are uncomfortable to us, perhaps, and perhaps not what we're expecting, and certainly not what we would ideally like to be the case, but I think that sort of sets, sets sets a useful benchmark for preparing us for, for the research process. And also for the, for the teaching process as well. He wasn't himself a great, a great writer in the sense that his hard work, his prose style is very difficult. But but by all accounts, the lectures he gave, in particular, the the lectures on politics, vocation, and science as a vocation, were given apparently, without notes, and, and are the verbatim versions of those are just ones I keep going back to, because there are so many kinds of truths in there about the nature of academic inquiry and about the whole underlying rationales about what it is that we're about when we undertake research and academic inquiry. So yes, I think there are, there are many useful things in those, in those vocation, speeches, which would certainly warrant an inner repay going, going back to so. So I do find myself going back there, and he's just sort of has various asides in these, in these speeches, such as if, if you want an academic career, you should be prepared for not necessarily making such fast progress in your in your career as other people around you. And also, we shouldn't necessarily think that as people get older, they necessarily get better informed. So he says, it's not age that matters in in academic inquiry, which I think is it's useful for some of us who, you know, have got a lot of years on, on the on the clock, to kind of bear in mind that we're not necessarily smarter or in a better position to pronounce on things than people who are earlier on in their in their careers. There's lots of things about Max Weber, he wasn't a particularly cheerful chap. And you know, very few very few kind of jokes in his work. So I thought I'd find him quite hard work. And he'd probably find me a little bit flippant in, in that respect, but I think he's one of those people who, even though he died over 100 years ago, meeting someone that you can always get something from going back to him.

Vernon Gayle
Okay, so this is sort of stood the test at a sort of intellectual test of time as it were?

Graham Crow
Indeed, yes. Yeah.

Vernon Gayle
Sort of moving on really to it because I did rightly or wrongly, always immediately associate you with community studies or community research or what people would like to call it now neighbourhood research, perhaps. I always feel it's a sort of area of British sociological inquiry, at least that's probably not in decline, but not as prominent as it was certainly when I was an undergraduate. And yeah, could maybe tell us a little bit about your your experience as a sort of communities researcher?

Graham Crow

Yeah, I think I'm like a lot of people so, David Morgan who sadly died recently used to talk about how when he first encountered sociology, it was through community studies. And that was what kind of captured his imagination and gave him the sense of what can be learned about different aspects of society. And, and the old community studies tradition, which, you know, many of us grew up with, do the studies in that, in that tradition, do capture just the nature of ordinary people's everyday lives. And that can be very revealing. A lot of people refer to call is our life study by Norman Dennis and his colleagues about life in a Yorkshire mining village and how revealing that is about the world that can be geographically close by, that's a world away in terms of, in terms of its its makeup. So for example, in mining villages, much less common to find women in employments. And so I grew up in Kent, which used to have a small set of mining villages nearby that were on my dad's post round. And some of the stories he would he would tell about, you know, the very different nature of those communities to the community I grew up in, even though it was only about 10 miles away, but very different kind of makeup and so on, and other studies of fishing communities, and some rural communities and so on. And so there was a fascination about them. But you're right, that they did go out of fashion. Because I think people working in the fields lost a certain confidence about what it was that they were about. And in particular about whether, if you did another study, whether it would add to that kind of community body of knowledge, or whether it was just another study of an interesting place. So yes, they did, they did sort of go out of fashion.

But various attempts to reinvent the tradition have have been undertaken, and particularly one that that's influential to me is Ray Powell and his team study of the Isle of Sheppey, he didn't call it a community study. In fact, he was quite critical of the whole underpinning idea that you'd have rural communities and urban communities, and that they would have these different character according to how built up the the residential areas were and Sheppey is fascinating for that respect, because it defies classification, it is not rural or urban, and it and it's got a distinctiveness about it. And I think he also wanted to take a particular, you know, kind of theoretical problem to that study in a way in which some of the earlier traditional research just said, well, we'll go and see what it's like, and people will tell us about their lives. And we can then report on that. Whereas he was particularly interested in the 1970s, when that research started in the changing nature of work, and the changing nature of how people kind of got by in the context of recession. So he and his team were sort of fascinating for what they found out that and also because it as a study, it's, it's an example of someone going in thinking that they understand something, and then having to change their mind. So it's some of these early, early kind of investigations on the island were ethnographic and Seward himself and said, he's dead now. But he himself would have said, you know, involve chatting to people in pubs or in cafes, and so on. And he got this idea that actually the unemployment wasn't particularly, you know, problematic for people because there were all sorts of opportunities, people would have to undertake work outside of formal working organisations. And it took a survey of one in nine of the households on Sheppey for him to realise that that wasn't how work in the context of recession was distributed, that actually, there was a polarisation and and those people who were in work would also be doing informal work, you know, kind of off the books in the hidden economy. And people who had no work in their households were likely to be, you know, suffering from a downward spiral. So it's a fascinating study in that respect. And since then, there have been various other contributions to the field of community.

And another one that I write about in, in the book I did in the what is series of what argument is that his book is an American study, which was a re study of Muncie, Indiana, the famous location of the original Middletown Studies. And that was just great for kind of revealing that you can go back and re study somewhere and find a whole new dimension of, of local social life that had been missed out by earlier researchers so they were particularly keen on to highlight and focus on the lives of the African Americans in Muncie, Indiana, who made up, you know, a significant part of the population, but who were kind of screened out because in the original research, and, and they did that research, which was a real challenge for, you know, at large, the white research team to go into the African American community and in that, in that city, but they did that by working with people, and got some really fascinating, fascinating material. And just within that study, you know, there are bits that stay with me, doing an interviewing, and, and sort of pursuing an issue about why someone held the views that they did about about work, and about, you know, how well paid that work was. And she pursued the question and the reply came back from the participant saying, well, I said that because you shouldn't drink champagne if you're on a beer budget. And she said, it's just throw out those lovely kind of insights into how the world looks to ordinary people in their in their everyday lives. So community studies may have kind of come in and out of fashion. But I think that the idea of just looking at people in the context and trying to see how work and education and and, and politics and religion, and leisure all sort of fit together, just appeals to me and clearly appeals to other people as well, both past in terms of how they got into sociology, but also present as well, because it continues to be, you know, a much used approach, even if people don't necessarily say I'm doing a community study.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah. So I'm coming to sort of not the end of the sort of formal sort of full time work, are there any sort of is there a particular community or an area geographical location, you think, oh, I've got my time again, I might have investigated there is a anywhere or any?

Graham Crow
One of the one of the nice things about NCRM was that we were a team and one of our PHD students did go back to Ferguslie park in Paisley I, which was the location of a of a community development project in the 1970s. Because it was arguably the most deprived part of Scotland, and in the early 70s, and in the 2016, multiple deprivation kind of index, Ferguslie Park continues to be the most deprived area in Scotland you know it's in Paisley, it's not in Glasgow you might think. And, you know, that's a real puzzle, how can it be that somewhere that was identified, and any number of projects to try to break that cycle of disadvantage, and yet here we are in sort of 40 years on, and it's still the site of great disadvantage and deprivation. And it's not for lack of trying on the part of local community activists and the local authority and so on. But there is something about the area of a reputation that it's very hard to heal them, even now people would say, Well, if I'm applying for a job, I won't necessarily give them my postcode, because then they'll locate me in this area that's got a problematic reputation. So I think that's the sort of fascinating study about, you know, some of the limitations of social science research, because the original research was intended to try to, you know, help lift that area, and and stop it being disadvantaged part of Scotland, but for all sorts of reasons that that, that Sue Rawcliffee looked into, you know that that was a challenge that is ongoing.

Vernon Gayle

Yeah, that's fascinating. So you'd probably have liked to have, that would have been one of the possible locations?

Graham Crow
Well, it wouldn't actually, you know, if you go there, it doesn't necessarily fit with preconceived ideas about what deprivation looks like. Because, the housing stock, you know, the poor quality housing to stock with, that was clearly there in the 70s has been demolished. But poverty can be disadvantage, that dimension disadvantage, can often be hidden. So you might think that it's a pretty ordinary kind of face, but clearly, in terms of health indicators, in terms of educational attainment, in terms of household composition, and in terms of income, you know, it's been continues to be a challenge too. You can then apply that more generally and say, well, if that's true in this one area, then we should we should think about the other initiatives that we have that are trying to tackle, you know, disadvantage and make interventions to improve social mobility, for example, and learn some of those lessons about just the enduring nature of disadvantage and how difficult it is to kind of break, which, in the 1970s, there was a great deal of optimism and people thought, Well, if we, if we make these interventions, we'll break that cycle of, of reproduction and disadvantage. And then, you know, everybody will be on the up. But and you know, in a way, in the context today of levelling up, I think there's an enormous amount of naivety about the mechanism by which that objective, then, you know, I'm not I'm not, not against the objective, but the naivety of, of how that might come about.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah, thank you. So it leads me on to another sort of strand if you're one of these people who I quite envy in terms of having some very kind of, so I'm not only a big cannon of work, some really kind of broad, you know, pillars or chunks and I always get another one is sort of part of your palmares, as people might say, is disability research. So you've got a big chunk of empirical and theoretically informed work on disability that sort of dovetail sideways with your work and community. So can I invite you to talk about some of the methods that you used in disability research?

Graham Crow
Yeah, well, in the way I kind of got into disability, first of all, through teaching because of, you know, family connections, and I became aware that this is another dimension of social life, that actually raises all sorts of interesting challenges, and once with the potential for interventions and so on. And so I taught in the field for, you know, maybe 15 years or something. And there's this fascinating body of material to, to kind of draw on, but working in the field, then more directly. Because there are some issues about you know, an able bodied person going into a field and, yeah, and researching disability, which, you know, I respect those, the different points of view on that. So the way that I then was more involved directly in research and disability was around the whole issue of ethics. So I and some other colleagues, Rose Wiles and Sue Heath and Vikki Charles, were fortunate enough to get a grant in Angela Dale's research methods programme on confidential, confidentiality, anonymity, and the whole ethics of research and so on, and really focused in that, in particular, on groups that are identified as having some vulnerabilities. And I already had a PhD student, Rebecca Pockney, who had been studying adults with learning disabilities, and friendship networks. And some of the you know, to her great credit she wanted to include in her research, the people who were the most difficult to interview so she could have cherry picked and found a few suspects and done a perfectly decent study. But she

wanted to interview people who were amongst other things nonverbal, you know, so how do you how do you include in this study people who don't have verbalization, and she carried that off with with great success. And we were interested in that in that project to say, well, if we are undertaking research, if we're looking at the, you know, the methods that are most appropriate to use in disability research that are respectful, but they're also effective, and that are inclusive, you know, they're including people who are hard to reach groups, and there are plenty of examples of that in the disabled population. And that was a fascinating study. So actually, what we did was, was to do that research at one removed. So rather than trying to do more original research, we talked to people who were researchers in the field, about some of the challenges and some of the tips that they could pass on to other researchers researching in the field, about how to handle anonymity, how to handle confidentiality, how to deal with consents, and you can imagine some of the challenges of dealing with consent, if you've got people who are, who are who are non verbal, or maybe people who have, you know, say, advanced dementia, and so on. And these are very brave researchers, because what they were driven by was wanting to be inclusive of people are not to say, that group is too hard to study, because that's just that's just going to be a nightmare to get consent. So let's just focus on the people where it's easy to show your consent. And that was, that was a fascinating project. And indeed, looking at the NCRM website yesterday, I see that the things we wrote now, probably you know, 15 or so years ago, are still quite widely accessed because I guess you know, we had some useful things to pass on about people who want to research hard to reach groups. So people with disabilities were one of those, children was another. Another, of those, another of those kind of difficult to reach groups. But there are ways in you know, yeah, there were lots of problems. But there are also solutions to those problems that are ways of handling researching in that field. And, and it was really, it's really good to see that, that, you know, that work is still hopefully useful enough for people to come to come to NCRM and to check on the things that we've written about, you know, our experiences, and indeed, other people's experiences of of researching in that field. And that's been, then that was such an eye opener that that whole project, but I think once you kind of go through that experience that it stays with you, i've continued to be interested in the whole issue about the ethics that was gender balance, and you know how to how to try to be inclusive.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah. So we're really touching on the project there that was in the research methods. programme. Around the same time, National Centre for Research Methods came alive. Are we phase four, now or phase five?

Graham Crow
when so the the research methods programme that was run by Angela Dale, in a way that started in 2002. And in a way national central research methods wouldn't have had the form it had without Angela's research methods programme. So the funding came from ESRC for National Centre for Research Methods, starting in 2004. And then we, you know, sort of shaddowed, Angelas various initiatives, including the research methods festivals, so Angela, kicked off the research methods festivals in 2004, in 2006, and then, and then we in NCRM, took them over when the research methods programme funding came to an end. And here we are. NCRM is about habits nine, research methods festival virtually next month, which is getting really good to see. So it's, it's it's interesting to look back and see how, you know, the faith that Angela had in bringing people together from different methodological depressions and different disciplines, different career stages in different sectors, all in

one big festival. And expecting them to talk and have a kind of constructive dialogue came off, because I think there were a lot of sceptics at that time. And so that gave that gave a real kind of boost to the NCRM. Because she had shown she and her colleagues and shown that, that actually, people don't have to be in their silos and that they can come and learn from others. And also to learn at various career stages. It's not just for early career researchers to learn about methods actually, there's, there's all sorts of potential. So So yes, we say the first phase round from 2004-9, and then the second phase. And then the third phase came to an end in 2020. So you are now in the in the fourth phase, so I was involved in the first three phases, but bowed out and added on to the next generation.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah, so just a couple of evenings ago, I was watching, I was actually searching something else and ended up in a, in a sort of internet rabbit hole, which is a very productive one. And I've got to Andrew Gelman's talk at the research methods festival. And Andrew Gelman, I think he starts off by saying, we don't have methods festivals in the US because methods aren't cool. And, you know, this is some sort of point to that there is a sort of minor point and he gives a fantastic talk, but that there is a sort of, you know, whether something's cool or uncool probably doesn't bother men of our age or people of our age more generally. But there are clearly some trends in in social science research methods. You know, what? Over the years, you've seen various things come and go and various things been touted as innovations. Yeah, I think sometimes I've heard you be sceptical of the whole idea of innovation. Maybe you tell us a little bit about your current thinking?

Graham Crow
Yes, just on Andrew Gelman talk. I mean, one of the things that that sticks in my mind for that was that he talked about a particular TED Talk that's had millions of views. And he said, you know, if we if we look at the underpinning methods that have been reported on here, they're highly suspect. And in particular, you know, other people have tried to replicate

Vernon Gayle
Yeah, was it the power pose, was it?

Graham Crow
Yes, it was. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And so he said, you know, here is one of the most watched TED talks with an I guess it takes us back to that point about, you know, finding out what you want to find. And you know, the message of that of that TED talk by Amy Cuddy is that, you know, how women present themselves at interview makes a big difference to their chances of success in being awarded the job or the studentship, or whatever it is that they're pitching for. And, and yet, it was a very small sample, and the underlying kind of analysis of the data was problematic, and when other people have gone back and tried to do it, you know, to replicate, have not found the same things as he found. So that's one one thing, I suppose if we're talking about passion is yes, there are some very highly viewed TED Talks, but we should apply the same criteria of rigour to you know, as to whether we should be persuaded by those arguments, they can be a bit flashy, I mean, I, I before Andrew Gelmans, you know, kind of deconstruction of it. I used to say there's a great TED talk on the power pose, you know, and then when he kind of said, well, are we sure about this? I think I think there's a lesson there about how we shouldn't necessarily be taken in by, you know, celebrity culture. And just because someone's done a

good performance, we should still apply the same rigour to asking that question, am I convinced by this? And you know, what are their methods? What's their? What's their reasoning? What's the what was the underpinning research design? And so fashion certainly is there. And I guess, I guess, you know, that came back to me in relation to the research that was done on Fergus Lee Park, because the, the, the original research in the 1970s, was undertaken as action research. So sometimes people present themselves as if they've just invented a method, or they just discovered something that's been around for five minutes, whereas actually, that's been around for 50 years or so and we shouldn't forget that history. Because actually, you know, some of the challenges that the original Fergus Lee park team came up against are still relevant now. You know, one of the things that they quite quickly discovered was that people had different ideas about what was the social, socially just outcome? You know, if you're looking at housing allocations, is it more just to allocate housing in Paisley, to really deprived families from central Glasgow? Or is it more socially just to give housing in Paisley? to people who've been on the waiting list in Paisley, and who have family connections there, you know, for for many years. And so I think there's, we lose something if we don't include in our curriculum, the history of research, because the history of research actually shows that there are some enduring problems, and we can continue to talk about them. And my favourite example of that is, so Howard Becker wrote a very famous paper in the 1960s, called whose side are we on? And I'm very much in that kind of mode of thinking about well, do we position ourselves as neutral? Or do we take sides? Do we side with the underdog, or whatever. But Martin Hammers, Martin Hamersley has has written an excellent piece on that, where he says, actually, if you look at that article, it's very highly cited and lots of people regard it. But if you look at an article by Howard Becker, he says different things in it, you know, it's not a consistent argument there. He says, yes, we should take sides, or we should be careful about taking sides because it's problematic. And so it's one of those things where people go to the original, or maybe cite the original, and use it to support a whole range of different incompatible positions, you know, so people who want to take sides will cite it, but people who say, taking sides is quite problematic, because, you know, how do you characterise those sides? And how do you work? Is it always two sides, or the more?, you know, lots of awkward questions. And if we forget our history, then we're, we're, you know, kind of inevitably end up with the situation where we have to relearn those those lessons that actually, you know, if we talk about sides, it can land us into some more difficulties than we we might at first think. So. So certainly, you know, if I were 20 years younger, I would probably be thinking about putting into the curriculum, a course on the history of methods, because there's lots and lots of examples whereby, if you forget the past, or you know, if you overlook the past, then you can find yourself going into and going around the same sort of set of challenges that you could have avoided. If you knew a bit more about about that history, and that, you know, there are a lots of examples of that in the area of research ethics too the whole thing about Lord Humphreys, and the Tea Room trades, you know, his his research again from 50 years ago, in some ways, quite dated, but in other ways, very, very topical, because it's about the ethics of gaining access to confidential, confidential information. In his case, it was through a police department. But nowadays with, you know, with the amount of data that we have on us in various contexts, it's exactly the same challenge. How do you, where do you draw the line about what sort of data it's appropriate to draw on to pursue your research and it wasn't that he, you know, was reactionary in his intentions, but some people I think, feel that he overstepped the mark in in in saying, well, the end of doing this progressive research will justify these these rather dodgy means that I'm using of abusing a point of connection to a confidential data set of information about about people.

Vernon Gayle

Yeah, yeah. Okay. Yeah. So So, yeah, I was, lit sparked some more questions, but I, I, you know, I'll, I'll try not to wander too far. Yeah, so obviously, that sort of history of research is sort of area maybe that's one of the areas we could think about more in terms of the curriculum, but well, you spent a lot of time teaching methods both at undergraduate and postgraduate level but also in terms of early career researchers and ongoing research in terms of knowledge exchange and and capacity building but also a you had a spell as director of the Scottish Graduate School and the DT was DTP then? was it DTC?

Graham Crow

Doctoral Training Centre, they are now training partnership partnership, yeah, there, it was a centre

Vernon Gayle

Centre. So So yeah, what did you take away from that experience in terms of methods, training, capacity building to doctoral research training, particularly?

Graham Crow

Yeah, I was there for nearly four years. And I mean, there were certainly lots of challenges, but the thing I take away from it is the great enthusiasm that there is for, for for training, and, and look back and sort of think, however did we manage without the training that we have available. And, and the same with NCRM. You know, having a range of research methods, training, sessions available a whole programme of methods means that we're in a whole lot better position than that the generation of researchers who came before me. So there's a very nice book by Paul Thompson and Ken Plummer, and Neli Demirievar, called pioneering social research, which is about the social science researchers who were making their mark and shaping social science in the UK, in the 1960s, and 70s. And most of them say, well, I had very little formal training myself, you know, when I was studying, or when I was doing when I, when I was a research student, I was thrown back onto my own resources. And in some ways, it's a very heartening tale, because they were resourceful, and they came up with all sorts of new ways of doing things. But in another way, it's a terrible kind of indictment of the curriculum as it was. And it's also true for me, as an undergraduate, I had no methods training whatsoever, I have some when I went to Essex as a post grad. But now I think we're much better placed and I think that's, that's a useful, useful thing, because then what it tells us is that we have a whole range of opportunities available to us, different methodological expressions, different specific methods as well, that we can draw on. And that frees us up enormously because we don't you know, as an early career researcher or a PhD student, we don't have to do things in the way that our supervisor tells us that they did them and it was good enough for them. There are all sorts of ways in which we can break new ground and both with adopting new methods but also new combinations of methods as well. And the you know, the ethos of the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science was very similar to National Centre for Research Methods, which was, we have, you know, so many opportunities and so on. I used to borrow the phrase from Jamie Oliver, you know, try something new today, which is within Sainsbury's adverts slogan. In that case, he was talking about food I was talking about, you know, really, why not have a go with a new method because, you know, it may not work but these things are worth a try. And that's how innovation takes hold and becomes normal. And the pioneers are actually interesting. For what they were doing that was innovative and pioneering has become standard. So now if we look at what they

were saying about how to go about doing interviewing that that wouldn't be remarkable at all. In fact, the surprising thing is that, that they needed to make that innovation but like was talking about with Max Weber earlier and his point about, you know, if you want to know about what a worker thinks, talk to the worker rather than their employer. So I've got happy memories of, you know, being encouraging and generally pushing on an open door. My sense is that is that early career researchers are keen to, are keen to, you know, kind of take up opportunities and learn new things and try try new methods, probably more of a challenge for NCRM is people in middle and Later career who may be a bit more sort of stuck in their in their way. But not not absolutely, and in the pioneers book, there were lots of examples of people who were trying new things in their 40s. So Anne Oakley with her move into randomised control trials and Ray Pahl with his decision to use nine different methods in the study of in Sheppy, with all the challenges that there are about how do you kind of sit those alongside each other, and Peter Townsend, you know, who is probably best remembered for his work on statistical analysis of poverty, but he came to that from a very different tradition of, of, you know, ethnographic research with older people and so on. And it wasn't until his 40s that he really kind of got into those things. So I think there are, there are there are lessons there that people further on in their careers can learn from earlier career colleagues about the preparedness and the kind of enthusiasm to try try something new. Yeah, yeah, that's sort of interesting. So I've occasionally heard you talk about the T shaped researcher. So he's having kind of bredth, but also depth. Yeah, yeah,

Vernon Gayle
Is that something you would advocate as a sort of, as a way forward for for anyone?

Graham Crow
Yeah, it's a it's a challenge, of course, because in a way, if you, if you go down the Ray Pahl route of saying, I'm going to use nine methods, you're going to need a lot of time and a lot of colleagues and a lot of funding. So I wouldn't recommend, you know, going so broad to say that every project should have nine different methods, because that will then end up being superhuman not having much depth. But I think there's a trade off there. And for people who are using just the same methods, year, on year, decade or decade to, to maybe consider whether they might put another method alongside that or maybe just give another method ago, and that's one of the things where, again, in the Scottish graduate school, it was echoing the National Centre for Research Methods, in the enthusiasm for some of the resources that there are around what is, so one of the things that that kind of characterises the NCRM resources that are available, many of them captured at research methods festivals, is these presentations, short presentations, introducing a method aiming at people who are not assumed to know anything about it beforehand. And that that was as much designed for later career researchers who might want to know something about events, history analysis, or auto ethnography or whatever, as it was for people thatat the start of their careers. And I was really pleased to see in the programme for the methods festival, that there are lots of what is presentations going on there. Because I think that's a really neat idea. And I'd love to claim it as my own. But in fact, it was Angela Dale's,

Vernon Gayle
Ah, it was Angela's idea.

Graham Crow

Yeah, this idea that, you know, if we can, if we can capture in 20 minutes, the the rationale for a method, the basic characteristics, some of the challenges that there are some of the examplars of its use, and some of the answers to those, those challenges. And it's a really interesting format. And we've then got the book series, which of course, you've you're, you've got a book in that series, and in fact, you're writing another one.

Vernon Gayle

Yeah, well, yes, I would like to say just, I was hoping to say, have just submitted another one, but we are still in the process. So maybe tell us a bit more about the whas is? Do you think there's anything that you would have liked to, any direction you'd like to take in the what is series when you are editor that you didn't quite accomplish?

Graham Crow

Yeah, well, I think um, so I was very grateful to have your book with Paul Lambert, because that was, that was one of the more quantitative ones, I think they're probably as a format, they're probably easier to write for more qualitative methods than they are to write for more quantitative methods. So I think I'd like to see more more quantitative books in the series. And of course, that's what your second one will be. But it's not just about the book. So there are not quite 20 in the in the book series, but I think there are around about 100 recordings of presentations on the NCRM website. And as I say they are still being consulted. Some particularly stand out. So Charles Reagan's on qualitative comparative analysis is is a particular favourite of mine because i think that's that's such an interesting idea and and people who, I know people who got into that method through that and then you know, found that it's the answer that they weren't they were looking for. So yeah, I'm a great, great, great supporter of the of the initiative. And as I say it was, it was Angela Dale's excellent idea which, you know, she, the very first methods festival, tried it out, see how it went. And they were very popular and they've now become a fixture.

Vernon Gayle

Yeah. Okay. So moving, moving on. There are various people you've mentioned in int NCRM over really that sort of four phases, the three that you're involved in, and it is an absolutely, amazingly broad array of people in terms of ages and stages and of career and also substantive interests and methodological interests. And it always seems like that must be it must be in a fantastically fertile environment to kind of be thinking and working in. Is there any you know, we sometimes hear the good news about collaborative work and we sometimes hear that it's much more tricky than we anticipate. But that seems to be a particularly successful set of collaborations that really lasted two decades. So, you know, what do you think you learned from various people that you may not have kind of touched on so far?

Graham Crow

Yeah, for thinking about the three directors of ncrm that there have been so first of all, Chris Skinner, who sadly died not long ago, and then Patrick Sturgis, and now Gabby Durrant. And I think they were good choices for that role, because they are all experts in their own field. And for example, Patrick's Patrick's videos on structural equation modelling I see are close on a quarter of a million views. And I mentioned that out of envy, but well done patrick. And they all have their own sort of specialisms, and

Chris Skinner had his specialism in listening data in surveys. But they will none of them have the view that they have the answer, they were all open to other people having useful and interesting and important ways of approaching problems. And I guess they all, i don't know if they ever expressed it, but there is a nice expression, no one has a key that fits every knock. And I think that's absolutely the philosophy of the NCRM that, you know, we face a range of challenges a range of problems in social science research, and we need a, we need a full toolbox of different approaches. And we should be respectful of those other approaches, even if we're not necessarily going to practice them ourselves. And I, I think, probably NCRM, and the research methods programme came at the right time, because ahead of that, we'd had a lot of conflict, we'd have the paradigm wars of people who were quantitative saying, if you can't count something, then I'm not interested. And you had some qualitative people saying, you know, numbers are hopeless iy's not worth it, numbers are just misleading. And that, that those decades of paradigm wars were very destructive, where people took camps and, and spent a lot of time for the sniping at the other side. And so by the current century, I think people had grown weary of that, and wanted a more kind of constructive dialogue. And it doesn't mean to say that you can't have robust criticism and engagement and so on, but it's within the philosophy of pluralism. And I think that that, that you know, that that is, what has what for me characterises the the NCRM, that when I was looking at the programme again, and thinking, gosh, there are so many new things that are going to be in the research methods festival coming up next month. And that would be fascinating to hear about this new way of approaching things. So it's kind of a space for an open dialogue across disciplines across methodological traditions, across career stages, and also across sectors. One of the things that I think fit into that, if you'll forgive the pun, is that the first research methods festivals were held at St. Catherine's College in Oxford at the college dining room. And when you went to get your lunch, you then had to sit next to someone who might be a complete stranger. And I'm a great believer in conferences, have those kind of serendipitous sitting next to someone who you don't know from Adam or Eve, and then striking up a conversation. And sometimes, you know, their pleasant but fairly superficial, and sometimes they lead to, you know, lifelong collaborations and so on. So I think that's, that's one of the things that I guess we all reflect on is how do you try and do that in the context of virtual conferences and virtual gatherings because it's, it's those kinds of bits in between sessions where you quite often have the takeaway moment from, from from a festival. So if people who are organising virtual events can crack that, and I know there is the chat line and all those things, but it's not quite the same as just those those sort of coincidental meetings, or where people say, Oh, do you know so and so and then you kind of you broaden out your network. So I think that's part of the success is being open to meeting people who do things differently and look at things differently to you. Because as I say, we can always agree with Jamie Oliver in space, but trying something new today.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah, yeah, that's so yeah. So really kind of picking up again, on this idea of sort of research innovations. Do you think there's anything where it's, it seems to me that sort of every, every festival every couple of years, when we first we, we could we could pack it full of things, and people get in touch? And they say, oh, we're very disappointed. Last time there was a session on X and there isn't one this time and you know, or, you know that? Yeah, we could delete the possible list, the diet is endless as it were. Are there any innovations that you can think of rumbling around currently that you have a sense that might be blind alleys? methologically?

Graham Crow

Yes. Well, I suppose there are one or two. So I mentioned earlier about the kind of disruptive period of paradigm wars when people were, you know, forced to take sides and so on. And I don't think that's entirely gone away. I think there were, you know, for understandable reasons, sometimes people are so enthusiastic about what they're developing, that they can be rather over critical of other ways of doing things and rather dismissive. And so I think we, we need to kind of be on our guard, where people make rather grand claims about how they've got the answer to a particular problem. And I've written some things somewhere about co-production and collaborative research, which I think, you know, I can understand people's zeal and enthusiasm for it. But I think there were some real challenges and difficulties there when that's presented as if it is, you know, the route to and this is a direct quote, a new sorry, I'm going to try and get the right group, a new knowledge landscape, you know, I think there's always a danger of over promising in, in academic research, certainly in grant bidding, you know, fund us to do this and we will eradicate poverty or, or whatever. I think you know, socialised knowledge is more incremental than that, and the process of the impact is more in increments. So I think there are still things to guard against in terms of innovations where people have what I kind of think of how Becca talked about it as kind of like a religious zeal for a new way of doing things. And again, if we, if we know our history, we will know that, you know, there have been various claims made for innovations. If we if we look back to the history of ethno methodology, for example, in that time, in the in the 1960s 1970s, people thought that this would sweep away the old approaches and, and replace them with new, I think, we do see some similar kinds of claims around, around social media research and big data and those sorts of things, which, to my mind, are interesting and useful. But I don't think that they necessarily are reframing problems, that there are still some challenges about, you know, dull old, routine, but important questions like sampling. And, and like, you know, what to do with what to do with missing data and those kinds of issues. So, but but that's the nature of innovation, that you actually have to have a number of things that you try, and then some of them will come off, and some of them won't, but unless you try them, then you won't know whether they have the potential to be to add to the cannon. The other challenge I think about that I don't think I've ever really kind of found the answer to is, if you're, if you're looking at innovations, ideally, you will get that innovation into the next generation of textbooks. Textbooks are written for 12 week courses. And so if you've got someone who's already teaching a course successfully, and it's got 12 methods, one per week, and you want to squeeze that, that that 13th one in, does it, you know, what, what does it take the place on? How, how does innovation come to the point where people say we've got to have this so much that we're going to drop out and you know, it may well be that community studies is the thing to drop out or it may well be something but but there are there are certain sort of standard points of reference that you've got to have, like interviewing and like surveys, and so on. But actually, there's scope for achieving that innovative breakthrough is really constrained by the formal curriculum with it's set number of weeks, which, which is, which is the challenge, which is, again, if we then go back to the what is theories, you know, so it's unlikely that if you if you were to choose 12 most important methods, I guess the diary method probably wouldn't be in the top 12, but on the other hand, that doesn't mean to say we shouldn't have that as one of the books in the series. So I think there are ways around that by, but it is, it is a challenge that, that students will generally, i mean, some, some students will take risks, but a lot will kind of be risk averse. And certainly in my experience of supervising master's dissertations, and so on, students generally go with the methods that they've been introduced to, rather than kind of branching out into a new field. And maybe that's something for supervisors also to bear in mind about,

you know, well, if you do go down, thiss more innovative route I will give, you know, more support in order to kind of help you with that. But it's it's innovation is about risk.

Vernon Gayle
Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So, so do you think we should sometimes think about, you know, awarding marks for a valiant trial, but a failed attempt, perhaps?

Graham Crow
Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And that, although that does take you into the whole thing about, you know, publication bias that it's, you know, it's much harder to get published. If you're writing up something that didn't work, you know, it's you, and you can so there's, there's an education that's there to be done for journal editors and reviewers as well, I think, because actually, you know, we can learn a lot from mistakes and so on. But it's a much less compelling narrative than, you know, I, I tried this new method, and it was a brilliant success.

Vernon Gayle
Absolutely, absolutely. So. So I'm gonna start off a segway now because I feel we could, but I well I to know, we could talk all day. And one of the things as well as conferences, one of the things I've been missing is actually just bumping into you in George Square. And invariably, we end up at the mosque kitchen or continuing these conversations, and the last 18 months has not been at tall as sociable like that. But, but one of the things I know you've been, that will bring us nicely to where you are now, is your more recent funded work on the academics in retirement? Yeah, so it was a little bit about that.

Graham Crow
Yeah. Well, I was intrigued by you know, how difficult many of my colleagues who were approaching retirement age, if there is such a thing, you know, the inevitable is there's there's, there's a range of different ways in which people relate to having been in the job for 30-40 years. Obviously, some people do come later, you know, but for people who, who've always been in academia, academia as I have, having had 40 years of lecturing, then the thought arises, and the conversations with others around is and are you thinking about retiring and so on, and it was fascinating to see how some people will never retire. And other people, you know, couldn't wait to retire. So I thought, Well, why don't I you know, do some research on this and look at what goes into that process of managing a career, and then preparing for and going through into, into retirement. And was then put on to a study by Barbara Tizzard done in the late 1990s, where she had done a big survey of the USS people and people with the pension scheme, USS who had retired between three and five years ago, and how they'd gone and how they manage that process to retirement because back then there were fixed retirement ages and because one of the big differences now is that there aren't fixed retirement ages in most universities in one or two there are Oxford and Cambridge and St. Andrews but the most we don't have to retire we can carry on if we if we wish to. And I think you know, that's that's an interesting phenomenon to investigate because clearly some people want to go on indefinitely, and I did interview someone still working full time in their 80s even though you have to start taking your pension at 75. So clearly not doing it for the money but doing it for the other sort of benefits of the job. But I also interviewed people who were, you know, who had retired early and had gone and done different things. And it is quite fascinating how most people, so I did interviews and also did a smaller survey then Barbara TIzzard

had had undertaken because it's hard to get a sample these days because of GDPR and data protection. But what was fascinating was that, although there are some academics who, on their last day, stop being an academic and say things like, I'm never going to have another academic thought, and my new life starts here. There are other people who never retire. In the middle, though there's the majority position of people who retire, but continue with those aspects of the job that they enjoy. So that can be supervising it can be research, very rarely administration. But and they may be, they may be paid for that. But in more cases, in my study, they're doing this unpaid. And indeed, I will be in that group, because I'm going to be, you know, writing the book that I didn't have time to write while I was still employed, so my retirement is partly going to be you know, writing a book about Anne Oakley's social science career. And it was kind of fascinating to get a sense of what's going on there. But I think the I think the lifting of the requirement to retire at a particular age, has put some people into a bit of a quandary, because they have to sort of say, well, when should I retire? And what else would I do you know, if you're made to retire at a particular age, then it's, it's a decision made for you. Now that it's open, I think there are some people who are very clear that that they still have a lot to give, but I think there are also some people and one other study is called them the sort of undecided who prevaricate as they approach state retirement age being 66. And, and maybe stay in the job longer than they need to and and don't necessarily investigate. And, and that's the place where I think universities have a lot of scope for being useful. So there are various universities, I looked at the HR policies of, of these various local, various universities that put them on the web, and Sheffield is very good, I thought, Sheffield University in terms of the way in which it treats retirement, so people don't feel compelled to retire. But but there are various sort of sessions. And indeed, people are encouraged to start thinking about the process, maybe 10 years before it actually happens. And that's, that's mulling over time. And now, obviously, it's, it's, it's going to be different now. And I need to be careful, because I'm still of the generation that will have, you know, a good pension in a way in which I think the pension has become much less generous over time. So for succeeding generations, the the opportunity of retiring early will be at the cost of a reduction in living standards. But in general, I found that people are, on average retiring at 64. So a little bit ahead of State Retirement, state retirement age, but across a huge range. Some people do someone in the London Review of Books, who wrote about retiring at 53, because he felt he did have nothing more to say, and so moved on to doing other things. Other people, as I say, in their 80s, still, you know, going strong as full time, employees, one salutary thing I did was to look at the times higher obituaries. And although they're not a representative sample of all academics, the average age at which the people in the five years from 2015 to 2020 had died was 75. And I think that's probably, you know, a shortcoming of sound some academics think that they're going to go on forever, but actually, you know, we're human like everybody else, and we are vulnerable to illness and disease and, and other challenges. And so that that was a very useful thing, when I went on a kind of pre retirement training session, in addition to all the information about pensions, and about National Insurance Contributions, and so on, which may change today. But I think it's quite salutary to kind of recognise that, you know, for every academic who lives to be 100 there's another one who dies very shortly after retiring. And, and I think that, you know, it takes us back to this question about, are we more than the jobs that we do could, we could we, and that's where I think has been a really good development, to have universities encouraging people to go to fractional contracts, because then you can sort of try out a different work life balance, because, you know, I'm under no illusions, it is an A has become increasingly a very high sort of stress, high pressure job, where, you know, today's academics are expected to function on all, you know, fire on all cylinders in relation to research and relations,

teaching and ratio, administration ratio impact. And one of the one of the events we ran at the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, had people who came back to talk about what they'd done after their PhD and one person who had gone on from doing their PhD work for the Scottish Government, I remember very clearly she said, You know, I talked to my PhD peers who stayed in academia and the difference is I have my weekends.

Vernon Gayle
Okay, that's quite interesting.

Graham Crow
And I think that's good that that that's, that's an important thing not to push to one side. And to recognise that, however brilliant our career may have been, there will always be things that we haven't done haven't had time to do, there's always more that you could have done. But if you do that it is at the cost of something else, in relation to, in relation to volunteering, in relation to you know, setting up an antique shop, in relation to spending more time with grandchildren, in relation to whole range of other things. So I had some fascinating interviews and and I put some material from that. On the on the website, I also wrote a piece using a wonderful Scots word from someone who had been a dean and he talked about how many people he had seen over the years retired scunnered.

Vernon Gayle
Maybe for the English folks you can explain a little further?

Graham Crow
Well, it's kind of it's stronger than disappointed. It's it's kind of having had high hopes, but ending up really kind of frustrated and disappointed. And and, yeah, kind of having to get used to the fact that it hasn't turned out quite as well as what has been expected. It's a it's a wonderful Scott's word.

Vernon Gayle
Absolutely. Yeah. So yeah, so hopefully, will the will this all be packaged in book format, or is it gonna be a series of articles?

Graham Crow
So I wanted to kind of get stuff out there. And so so the, the piece on my websites for the project, which is about 40,000 words, was my attempt to just kind of have a first stab at putting things down there with some fairly simple titles, like, you know, when when is a good time to retire? And you know, why? why might you decide to retire? So, said that, and that's rather under analysed. But there's still some really interesting and useful material in there, from both the survey and the, and the interviews, and also from the analysis of the documents about retirement policies in HR. And then I've written a piece about, about whether we can think about academics and being more hedgehogs or more foxes, or whether there are other animals that we like. And I'm currently working on a couple of others, one of the things I did there was true to my kind of encouragement to people to try something new. I for the first time, use some visual materials and ask people to talk about, you know, what they made of the images that presented them with of retirements. And yes, that was that had a mixed reception, there were some people who, one person said, I think all 32 of your images are terrible. So that was quite a short part of

that in that interview. But other people were very thoughtful about what they what they were thinking about in terms of. Because the people I was talking to were, some were retired and some were yet to retire. We're not going to think that that's it's an interesting phase. And if we just kind of go back to biography, you know, it kind of it's, it's, it's interesting that I had the idea of doing that having when I was a PhD student worked on a project with Niki Hart, about health of people between the ages of 55 and 65, which was then, you know, retirement age, and then, so maybe somewhere that lodged in my brain, and then 40 years later, it kind of came out again. And I probably claimed more kind of credit for the idea than I should have, because it was Nikki's idea.

Vernon Gayle
So we're running out of time, but it sounds fascinating. And I said there certainly. Well, this week with the government announcements today and the union meetings in the coming days about the pension there. These are interesting times to think about retirement. So I'm going to bring things to a close now but I really have to say an enormous thank you on a number of levels. I'm sure there are hundreds if not a thousand plus students who would like to thank you for all your hard work over the years and your input but particularly your, your sort of overall support of people encouragement of people, plenty of staff like myself and staff at NCRM and other institutions that would also like to thank you and also you other administrators. Laura was I was at a meeting with Laura Marshall yesterday and she said please say thank you to Graham for all his hard work for me. And I think it's, it's particularly special when a retired academic when administrators want to thank them as well as i thnk that shows the sort of the sort of character of your your work and management and so on. So I think it's up, there are, well, really different constituencies if student staff and administrative staff who, and I guess they'll probably even be some research participants who you would like to wish you well, it's a shame, we're not in better times, when we can do that, and I'm sure I'm sure we will be in the coming years. We're going to think of a title for you, but we haven't yet thought of it. So it's going to be, i don't know, a special friend of NCRM, because we hope that in some sort of, some sort of retired professorial fellow, you'll continue to work alongside us and contribute, you know, the, the door, the NCRM, door is always open. And thanks for all you've done for us over all three phases. And we hope you have some involvement in phase four. But most of all, that retirement is a productive, healthy, and happy and very long period for you, Graham. So thank you very much.

Graham Crow
Thank you, too, and I'm sure that those feeling are all mutual in that. Yes, I, you know, thinking back to Laura, for example, in her administrative work, I, I, I often wonder where we'd have been without her and it wouldn't have been a good place. So and that's true as well, for colleagues and for former students and so on. So well, that'd be nice to to think of a title. And absolutely, I think, you know, one of the lessons from my project is that is that there are opportunities to carry on contributing to these debates in different ways. And NCRM is a great kind of forum for doing that, as we know, from various people who have, you know, given their time to do various presentations and various training that over the years, so it's it's a new phase, but definitely not a stop.

Vernon Gayle
So, Grham Crowe, I'm Vernon Gale, I've been in conversation with Professor Grham Crowe. Thank you very much, Graham. Very much.

Graham Crow
Goodbye.