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Towards a sociology of healthcare safety and quality

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Introduction

Improving the quality and safety of healthcare is a global priority (Braithwaite *et al.* 2015, WHO 2002). As healthcare organisations and systems across the developed and developing world face unprecedented financial constraints, growing demands for services (especially from ageing populations with long-term conditions and co-morbidities), and the challenge of keeping pace with technological progress, the case for a deeper understanding of these issues is particularly pressing. Hitherto, research and practice in quality and safety have been dominated by disciplines such as medical and safety science, social psychology, and human factors which have framed how quality and safety is understood, how it should be measured and studied, and the policies, interventions and practices through which it should be addressed. While quality and safety cuts across many traditional sociological concerns, and sociology has continued to progress understanding in this field, its insights and potential contribution have, until recently, been relatively neglected by mainstream policy and research. This might, in part, reflect a tension between the interventionist orientation of proponents of the dominant paradigm and the more critical detached stance of sociologists who, historically at least, have eschewed simplistic explanations or prescriptions for policy and practice. It may also arise from the complexities so often revealed by sociological research, rendering pressing clinical and organisational problems as less amenable to immediate solutions. After all sociologists have the reputation of Cassandra: when we make prophesies they are usually laden with doom and thus fated to be disregarded (Dingwall and Allen 2001). It is also the case that while sociologists have made, and continue to make, important contributions to the understanding of quality and safety, much of this work is fragmented across different sub-specialisms. As the introductory review chapter to this monograph shows (Waring *et al.* this volume), the insights of classic contributions by Strauss *et al.* (1985) on the social organisation of healthcare work, Illich (1976) on medical iatrogenesis, Bosk (1979) on managing medical mistakes, Timmermans and Berg (1997) on standardization, Fox (1999) on medical uncertainty and Rosenthal (1995) on the management of problematic doctors have largely been ignored within the prevailing orthodoxy. Within sociology itself, however, these earlier studies have provided the foundations for a new generation of sociological research oriented to this policy priority (for example, Dixon-Woods 2010, Jensen 2008, Mol 2008, Waring 2005). What has emerged from this growing corpus of work is a recognition that patient safety is not simply a matter of individual or group psychology or systems engineering,

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but is shaped by wider socio-cultural and political structures. A sociological perspective also reveals the hidden influence of inequalities of power (between occupations, within occupations and between patients and professionals) on quality and safety, how these problems might be managed and by whom, as well as the everyday – and often invisible – situated practices through which quality and safety are accomplished (Allen 2014, Iedema *et al.* 2006, Mackintosh and Sandall 2010, Macrae 2014, Mesman 2011).

If healthcare safety and quality are to be more thoroughly understood, their textured nature and multi-dimensional properties drawn out, and a more integrated and programmatic approach provided, it is important that such sociological insights are brought to the fore. The aim of the 22nd *Sociology of Health & Illness Monograph* is to further this aspiration by showcasing some exemplary studies. It offers a reflection on the contribution sociology can make and is making to the healthcare quality and safety agenda and raises some critical questions about the future of sociological engagement. How can we understand and explain the social, cultural and lived experiences of quality and safety? What theories, models and concepts are useful in progressing the quality and safety agenda? What is the appropriate balance between a sociology ‘of’ and a sociology ‘for’ quality and safety? What distinctly sociological research approaches might be applied to the study of quality and safety? What analytical perspectives might offer novel insights?

Parallel paths?

The first chapter in the collection reviews the emergence of this field and traces its evolution. Waring *et al.* argue that research and practice in quality and safety has progressed along two largely parallel paths. While an orthodox paradigm, dominated by those pursuing medical and safety science, has largely set the agenda in this field, the sociological paradigm has offered a more critical and nuanced understanding of these issues drawing on central disciplinary concerns such as: expertise and knowledge, the professions and healthcare division of labour, deviance and social control, risk, socio-technical innovation, governance and regulation, experiences of health and illness, organisational culture, help-seeking behaviour, professional-patient relationships, power and politics, and bureaucracies and institutions. There is now an accumulated body of sociological knowledge to provide the foundations for systematic engagement with dominant understandings of the problem of healthcare quality and safety and approaches to the management of risk and error and the chapters in this collection signal some fruitful directions of travel.

Organising for safety and quality

The first theme in the Monograph considers organising for quality and safety. Within the orthodox paradigm many see the solution to healthcare quality and safety in the restructuring and reorganisation of healthcare work (e.g. Chang *et al.* 2005, Donaldson 2009, Woloshynowych *et al.* 2005). This rationalist view is founded on the belief that organisational systems can be engineered and that revising formal structures and processes is the key to safer, more effective and efficient service delivery. From a sociological perspective, such assumptions are overly reductionist, and can often result in mechanistic interventions which have unintended negative consequences. For example, Braithwaite *et al.* (2006) found that restructuring large hospitals had deleterious effects – such as confusion and inefficiencies – rather than creating more streamlined systems, and Fulop *et al.* (2005) found that restructuring put

people back at least eighteen months in terms of managerial and planning progress. Oxman (2005) and Braithwaite *et al.* (2005) went even further, and questioned the preoccupation with restructuring health systems activities, parodying the efficacy, the relevance and even the sanity of continually applying the structural 'solution' with no obvious benefits. Infante (2006), coming from a different angle, eschewed managerialist-oriented optimism about the possibility of organising for quality and safety, arguing against the very idea that systems are able simply to respond to some form of 'rolled out' improvement activities. For Infante, a 'system' is an abstraction, even a kind of mirage, and progress is infeasible without adequate theorisation at the centre of which lie relationships, power, culture and complexity. As a rich body of sociological research has shown, healthcare work is complex and its organisation challenging. There will always be a human spirit which wants to see complex problems addressed through the application of clear answers and solutions. Unfortunately, it is rare for the world to yield to this kind of simplification. Focusing on 'the structure' or 'governance' or 'organisation' in order to address quality and safety while important, represents a partial view. Politics, culture and relationships – all important constructs in making care safe and improving quality – are overlooked when excessive attention is placed on structural factors.

The governance and coordination of patient safety is thus a significant organisational challenge which remains theoretically and methodologically under-developed. The chapters in this section attempt to address this problem. Freeman *et al.* draw on observational data from four hospital Foundation Trusts to offer insights into the operation of hospital boards in the English NHS. Boards are responsible for ensuring the quality of care and safety of patients under their jurisdiction. Following Hajer and Versteeg (2005), Freeman *et al.* combine elements from the conceptual frameworks of dramaturgy (Goffman 1974) and performativity (Austin 1962) to explore the enacted dimensions of patient safety governance. The chapter is underpinned by the idea that 'reality is mediated through the application of frames', and examines the socio-cultural nature of patient safety as administered by Executive Boards, focusing in particular on the processing and interpretation of performance data. Despite the distance between them, Freeman *et al.* found an unexpected influence from the Executive Board at the 'blunt end' of the hospital on the clinical frontline. Executive Boards can set the scene and through their activities establish a tone for patient safety and quality across the organisation. The Boards in Freeman *et al.*'s study focused attention differently and through this, established different standards and priorities.

Shifting focus, Mackintosh and Sandall drill down into the world of seriously ill patients and through observations and staff interviews examine the frontline organisation of how patients are identified, rescued and resuscitated in medical and maternity settings. Applying Strauss *et al.*'s (1985) classic patient trajectory concept they examine patients' journeys to show how 'rescue work' differed across the two contexts. In maternity services, patients were typically healthy and adverse events few, staff were alert to crises and they mobilised their capacity to be responsive when necessary. In contrast, in the medical wards where patients were older, more infirm and longer-term, it was accepted that rescue was necessary but that sometimes patients would die. The structures and organisational arrangements in these study sites were poorly designed to meet the needs of this patient population and as a consequence, deterioration was much harder to forecast and more difficult to manage. All in all, the complexity of rescue and resuscitation in the medical wards with patients with multiple conditions and co-morbidities was more demanding and difficult than it was in the corresponding maternity settings. In these chosen hospitals, younger maternal patients were effectively being prioritised over complex, older patients.

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A central sociological concern is the interaction between the individual and the system of which they are part. This has been a deep preoccupation of sociologists and manifests in diverse ways in the work of many thinkers. Examples are Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, through the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1974), to Scott's (1995) work on institutional theory. Aveling *et al.*'s chapter goes to the heart of such debates about the relationship between structure and agency, and focuses on how hospitals address managing individual versus collective accountability for patient safety. They draw on a rich ethnographic database in five hospitals: three in a high income country (UK), and two from low income countries (both in Africa). They reach into the work of two key theorists to render a framework for their study. Following Thompson (1980), they conceptualise healthcare work as a 'problem of many hands' and combine this with Pellegrino's (2004) four principles for organising (there ought to be an organised system; accountability for each health professional; individual competence and character; and systems reinforcement of these) to frame their analysis. In clear echoes of Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, they show empirically that individuals influence the systems of care, while simultaneously being shaped by that system. The existing model of accountability within the orthodox paradigm, which implies that somehow the individual is accountable independently of the system in which he or she acts, is called into question. Systems and individuals are co-constitutive, interdependent, and their relationships are recursive. In other words, people are subject to social forces, and the impact of social forces is mediated by social action.

All of this is not to say that individuals are not responsible agents, and of course they need to be held to account for their actions. But for Aveling *et al.*, systems need to support both individual and communal professionalism and accountability. Simplistic patient safety models which blame individuals or make them individually responsible for group activities should thus be rejected. Aveling *et al.*'s analysis lays the foundation for more sophisticated models of accountability than allowed by the narrowly instrumental frameworks which dominate the orthodox paradigm.

Technologies and practices of quality and safety

The second theme in the collection centres on technologies and practices of quality and safety. Healthcare is a technologically intensive and dynamic environment, with new interventions emerging regularly. These range from the most sophisticated (and expensive) scanner or item of surgical equipment, through new medications and treatments, to everyday 'mundane' technologies such as the patient record and care-plan. All have a bearing on the social organisation of the work and hence healthcare quality and safety. In addition, a range of infrastructural technologies are used in healthcare to organise and support work activity, and many quality improvement initiatives and safety interventions hinge on the introduction of artefacts or tools to bring about behavioural change in the workplace. Examples include surgical checklists, patient status at a glance whiteboards (one of the foundation modules of the UK National Health Service Institute for Innovation and Improvement Productive Ward series) and early warning scores (see McIntosh and Sandall this volume). Yet while the orthodox approach to patient safety has developed and promoted numerous technological solutions to quality and safety problems, it has been rather less adept at theorising the operation of the technology itself and how it is anticipated to have its effects in different contexts. It is also the case that the implementation (or not) of such technologies often rests on a poor understanding of the fundamental nature of the work processes they propose to modify (Allen, in press). The effect of this double neglect is that all too often interventions

are routinely imported into healthcare from other fields – such as aviation or manufacturing – with little consideration of sector differences, and progress straight to implementation with scant attention to problem diagnosis as a precursor to intervention selection and/or development. This, as Dixon-Woods (2013) has observed, is equivalent to by-passing the laboratory and pre-clinical and pharmacokinetic stages of drug development.

There is considerable scope for sociologists to contribute to this technology-practice agenda. Under the influence of scholarship in Science and Technology Studies, the sociology of healthcare work (Hughes 1984, Strauss *et al.* 1985) has developed to generate a rich vein of empirical research on healthcare practices and, in particular, the effects of new technologies and their interaction with the social organisation of practice in the workplace. Insights from the sociology of healthcare work prompt critical questions about the intersection of new technologies with extant socio-technical arrangements. Marc Berg has been a leading contributor to this field offering insights into the impact of medical records (Berg 1996), protocols (Berg 1997c) and related health information technologies (Berg 1999) on healthcare work. A fundamental tenet of this scholarship is that formal tools can transform workplaces in important ways (Berg 1997a), but that their generative power can neither be attributed to the tool nor its users; rather it arises instead from their inter-relationship in action. Technologies embody diverse assumptions or scripts and are structured in different ways that are consequential for their impact on the organisation of work. Berg (1999) argues that there is a need to understand this relationship, not least because tools do not slip into some predefined space in the workplace; getting a tool to function as intended requires sensitivity to the work setting (see for example, Berg 1997b, Brown and Webster 2004, Webster 2002). All too often resistance to new technologies in healthcare is interpreted by quality and safety advocates as symptomatic of wider tensions between healthcare professionals or managers or seen as an implementation problem in need of culture management or better leadership. It may also be the case, however, that technologies are genuinely a poor fit with professional practice (Allen 2014, in press; Macintosh *et al.* 2014).

Szymczak's chapter speaks to these concerns. It focuses on the limitations of interventions drawn from aviation designed to encourage clinicians to come forward in the face of known threats to patient safety. These include reporting errors and near misses, blowing the whistle on the poor conduct of colleagues (Jones and Kelly 2014) and encouraging clinicians to raise concerns before harm reaches the patient (Lindsay *et al.* 2012). Szymczak examines an intervention designed to encourage clinicians to 'speak up' and argues that, despite the efforts of patient safety advocates, speaking up remains difficult. Orthodox approaches to this problem focus on individual-cognitive or organisational factors. Demonstrating the value of taking a distinctly sociological approach to a safety problem, Szymczak deploys Collins's (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains to explore clinicians' accounts of speaking up in the context of potential breaches to hospital acquired infections in a US hospital. Three mediating factors are identified that influence the decision to speak up. First, Collins (2004) suggests that successful interaction rituals require participants to have a shared focus of attention. Szymczak observes, however, that despite healthcare providers being co-present in their work, they are not all necessarily focused on the same thing and raising concerns in such a context could have a potentially inflammatory and disruptive effect on the ongoing flow of action. Second, speaking up is interactionally path dependent, that is, decisions to speak up or not are mediated by past experiences as well as those that are anticipated in the future. The data presented here reveal participants to be acutely sensitive to their relationships with other healthcare professionals. Third, speaking up is influenced by the presence of an audience. Collins argues that interaction rituals are facilitated when there is a barrier to outsiders. Much healthcare work takes place in the presence of an

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audience – such as family members – and clinicians indicated that this was a further factor shaping their decision to speak up. What emerges from the chapter, then, is recognition that in a given moment, the decision to speak up or remain silent, is highly context dependent and embedded in the interaction rituals that shape everyday work. Szymczak argues that teaching scripted communication, as is the custom in aviation, can only have a limited impact on practice; it is not the words that clinicians struggle to find, it is the *place* and *way* to integrate them into the ongoing flow of action that is the issue.

A further insight offered by sociological studies of healthcare work is that many quality and safety interventions do not take into account the invisible daily practices through which healthcare quality is achieved (Allen 2014, Mesman 2011). Grant *et al.*'s chapter contributes further to these sociological insights. Applying Strauss *et al.*'s (1985) scholarship on 'articulation work' and drawing on extensive ethnographic research in NHS Scotland and NHS England they examine the invisible work of general practice team members in the achievement of repeat prescribing. Repeat prescriptions are medications for long-term use, typically for chronic conditions, and are issued without a consultation between the patient and prescriber. This is a high volume process in which risk and vulnerability are distributed across time and space, in a context in which medications management is a significant cause of adverse events. While clinicians are often the primary object of quality and safety interventions, Grant *et al.* illuminate the contribution of non-clinical staff – in this case GP receptionists – and make an important addition to the growing literature on this hitherto relatively neglected group (Arber and Sawyer 1985, Copeman and van Zwanenberg 1988, Swinglehurst *et al.* 2011). Viewed through the lens of articulation work, the study reveals the central role of the informal, invisible practices of receptionists, with informal cross-hierarchical communication often more effective than formal organisational structures. The chapter adds further weight to an emerging body of sociologically informed research which underscores the imperfect and contingent character of healthcare work and its attendant risks. Rules, guidelines and protocols have self-evident limitations in ensuring healthcare quality and safety in such circumstances, with quality and safety being dependent to a considerable extent on the informal resources of resilience and practical wisdom employed by local teams (Hollnagel *et al.* 2013, Wears *et al.* 2015).

Experiences, and contribution to quality and safety

The final theme focuses on experiences of quality and safety. It is concerned with the meaning of quality and safety for patients, professionals, managers and policymakers, and the implications this has for the relationships between different actors as they negotiate quality and safety in the clinical encounter or secure quality improvement across stakeholder boundaries. Prior work on patient safety has focused mainly on systems and professionals, but there is an emerging interest in patients' contributions to their own safety. Since 2004, Patients for Patient Safety (PFPS) has emphasised the role patients and consumers can play in efforts to improve the quality and safety of healthcare around the world. PFPS works with a global network of patients, consumers, caregivers, and consumer organisations to support patient involvement in patient safety programmes, both within countries and in the global programmes of the WHO Patient Safety. The ultimate purpose is to improve safety in all healthcare settings throughout the world by involving service users and patients as partners, and through the development of patient-focused empowerment tools to support help seeking. Patients and their families see things that busy healthcare workers often do not.

The voice of patients and families who have suffered preventable medical injury is a powerful motivational force for healthcare providers across the globe. However, patients have much more to offer than as the victims of tragic medical errors. Important as that perspective is, a victim orientation does not position service users as partners working with healthcare providers to prevent harm. Indeed, the perception that patients and their families are helpless or antagonistic victims has served to distance service users from playing meaningful roles in the development and implementation of patient safety work in the past and has generated fear among some clinicians who would have otherwise engaged with the process (Annandale 1996). At the service delivery level, patients who wish to contribute knowledge gained or lessons learned have often found few effective pathways for doing so (Snow *et al.* 2013). Particularly after healthcare accidents occur, a ‘wall of silence’ may descend and productive interaction may cease. When patients and families register concerns, their actions often are perceived as adversarial threats or unscientific anecdotes that lack evidence, rather than potential knowledge contributions. Although there are notable exceptions, at the policymaking level user participation tends to be marginalised too, often by well meaning leaders who assume patients and families are unable to appreciate the complexity of healthcare (Iedema *et al.* 2008, 2011). Such an approach fails to take into account that many users offer the richest resource of information related to medical errors as many have witnessed every detail of system failures from the beginning to end.

There is some evidence that patients report suspected adverse events earlier than professionals, suggesting that increased patient involvement has the potential to reduce delay in the identification and treatment of problems (Egberts *et al.* 1996, Coulter and Ellins 2006). However, strategies to improve patient safety have so far mainly focused on changing the organisation of delivery and provider behaviour and paid limited attention to the ways in which patients already contribute to their own safety (Vincent and Coulter 2002). A handful of initiatives, mainly from the USA, have been designed to empower patients and relatives to escalate care themselves. These include ‘SBAR for patients’ which develops the application of structured communication tools developed for use between health professionals (Denham 2008), ‘family-activated paediatric Rapid Response Systems’ (Ray *et al.* 2009, Entwistle *et al.* 2005) and the ‘Speak up for patient safety’ campaign in the USA.

While the scope for involvement is considerable, there is limited understanding of the potential for patients and relatives to contribute to their own safety, the contextual circumstances that moderate acceptability and the effectiveness of various interventions which might promote this, and potential unintended consequences (Davis *et al.* 2007). For example, patients in some settings were reluctant to challenge professionals, and were further discouraged from doing so if their concerns were not heard or attended to (Rainey *et al.* 2013), and even when service users did speak up, they found that staff did not take their concerns seriously (Rance *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, assertions about the benefit of patient involvement have been based on experiences of chronic disease management, rather than acute episodes of care which may involve life threatening events, and thus assume a level of agency that does not exist in all cases (Peat *et al.* 2010). There has been little research on understanding the organisational context and influences of staff responses to patient concerns (Dixon-Woods *et al.* 2014).

Two chapters in this Monograph explore these issues in the under researched settings of primary care and mental health. Sanders *et al.* draw on Weick’s (1995) concept of sense-making, and explore the ways in which patients make sense of their experiences of primary medical care and how that conditions their conceptualisation of safety. In qualitative interviews with primary care patients in England, patients reported being proactive in taking

action to protect themselves from potential harm within the context of the routinised and predictable nature of the primary medical care consultation. The authors argue that this contrasts with previous research that highlights the relative passivity of patients in acute hospital settings. Patients had to balance different dimensions of safety and weigh them against other concerns and social imperatives. Safety, for patients, was not necessarily always their top priority, and their preferences may not always have been considered 'safe' from the perspective of health professionals. Their accounts draw attention to a largely invisible and inaccessible (but taken for granted) safety infrastructure, the importance of trust and psycho-social as well as physical dimensions of safety and the interactions between them, informal strategies for negotiating safety, and the moral dimension of safety. The ability to take a proactive role was dependent on patients' expertise and knowledge accumulated over time, the social distance between doctor and patient, and patients' self-confidence. In consequence, some patients were more able to adopt a questioning, assertive and proactive role than others.

In the mental health context, Brown *et al.* report on findings from in-depth interviews with service-users, professionals, managers and other stakeholders across three mental healthcare (psychosis) teams in England, in what is described as a low trust service context. They note that trust has been seen as fundamental for quality healthcare provision and outcomes, enabling action, cooperation and knowledge sharing where these are otherwise problematic. They draw on theoretical understandings of the interlinking of different trust relationships across healthcare settings. They argue that analyses of micro-level mechanisms through which cultures of trust or distrust propagate are vital to sociological studies of quality and safety due to the ways in which trusting relations underpin patient's sharing of information, and the flow of knowledge within healthcare organisations. Describing chains of (dis)trust as a key element of organisational culture, they explain how (dis)trust within one intra-organisational relationship impacts upon other relationships. They explore how knowledge-sharing and care giving are interwoven within these chains of trust or distrust, enhancing and/or inhibiting the instrumental and communicative aspects of quality healthcare.

Both chapters highlight the importance of sensemaking as an analytic lens and of the value of looking at the creation or not of trust in two areas of healthcare where there is a paucity of research.

The sociology of quality and safety: future directions

The empirical chapters in this collection address technologies, practices, experiences and the organisation of quality and safety across a wide range of healthcare contexts. Spanning three continents, from hospital to community, maternity to mental health, they shine a light into the boardrooms, back offices and front-lines of healthcare, offering sociological insights from the perspectives of managers, clinicians and patients. In their review of the field, Waring *et al.* argue that hitherto the sociology of quality and safety has evolved in parallel with the orthodox paradigm with relatively little cross-fertilisation beyond critique. As the sociological corpus matures and critical questions about the prevailing orthodoxy gain wider currency (Swinglehurst 2015), the conditions exist for more constructive engagement. In their chapter, Waring *et al.* identify three dilemmas within the current orthodoxy – concretisation, culture and politics – which they argue would benefit from a sociological perspective. In the second part of this chapter we consider how the chapters in this collection contribute to these concerns and outline potential lines of inquiry.

Concretisation

In contrast to the orthodox view which treats quality and safety as ‘things’ that can be measured, managed and experienced, the chapters presented here add further weight to the value of a distinctly sociological understanding of quality and safety as emergent processes, mediated through complex networks of actors. As Aveling *et al.*’s chapter observes, healthcare quality and safety are a ‘work of many hands’ and while their specific concern is with the implications of this insight for accountability, it is also consequential for an understanding of how quality and safety is accomplished and by extension how best it might be supported. There is a growing appreciation that for all the policies, protocols and standards, achieving quality and safety across time and space depends to a considerable extent on practical wisdom which, as Grant *et al.*’s chapter on repeat prescribing has shown, is often invisible to the organisation. While formal processes are important and demand serious attention, efforts to improve quality and safety are destined to fail if these intentions are based on a partial understanding of the work (Allen 2014). There are also very real risks that the introduction of new technologies and structures will unwittingly undermine important sources of organisational resilience. There is a strong tradition of sociological studies of healthcare work (Allen and Pilnick 2006), going back to the classic studies of Hughes (1984) and Strauss *et al.* (1985), and within the field of quality and safety there exists a self-evident niche for programmatic sociological inquiry to better understand the social organisation of contemporary healthcare work as a distributed and cooperative activity. In order to move forward, however, a shift in focus is necessary. While enthusiastic efforts are being made by quality and safety advocates to embed a commitment to quality and safety at all levels of healthcare organisation, as evidenced, for example, by the introduction of the Q Initiative by NHS England and the Health Foundation, sociological studies have for too long been preoccupied by the inner workings of medicine, and to a lesser extent nursing, with relatively little attention given to the work of others within healthcare. Recent research and policy highlights the important contributions of managers, allied health professionals, paramedics, clerical staff, cleaners, caterers and procurement specialists to quality and safety. Such initiatives indicate that future sociological work might consider the diverse range of actors and networks involved in realising improvement, in addition to its longstanding concern with the medical and nursing professions.

A major contribution of Strauss *et al.*’s (1985) study of the social organisation of medical work was the acknowledgement of patients’ and families’ contribution to healthcare, concerns that were subsequently taken up in their research on chronic disease management (Corbin and Strauss 1988) and more recently in a programme of work on burden of treatment (May *et al.* 2014). As we have seen, there is a growing recognition of the potential for patients and their families to contribute to healthcare quality and safety, but it is less clear how this might be supported given the inequalities of power and expertise which are the hallmark of professional-patient interaction. The contributions by Sanders *et al.* and Brown *et al.* in this monograph call into question to what extent service users’ understandings of quality and safety concur with healthcare professionals and how any such discrepancies should be managed. As Sanders *et al.* show, not only is the practice of healthcare quality and safety a distributed and emergent phenomenon, but patient’s experience of it is too. There is considerable scope for patient involvement in their own safety but limited understanding of how this potential might be realised, the contextual circumstances that moderate this process, or the various interventions which might promote this. Moreover, if we accept that quality and safety defies concretisation, then this raises the question of how quality and safety are negotiated within the clinical encounter and how quality and safety are balanced and any

attendant risks managed. Research into the contribution patients can make to improving the safety of their care is still in its early stages and an area that sociologists are well placed to contribute to.

Culture

While the dominant paradigm has embraced the ostensibly sociological concept of culture, its application can be called into question. On the one hand, culture has been understood as an organisational property that is receptive to change, so that, for example, a blame culture can be turned into a safety-aware culture. On the other hand, it has become a residual category to which policymakers assign all the organisational phenomena outside their control or understanding (Ormond 2003). Sociologists have rightly countered that culture has to be understood as an emergent property of underlying social structures, intrinsically infused with differences, shifting allegiances and variable attitudes, values and predispositions. But if there is a serious intent to engage with policy and practice in this field, emphasising this complexity can only take us so far. Acknowledging culture to be important, but acknowledging the challenges of its operationalisation, Brown *et al.*'s chapter focuses on very specific features of culture – interwoven relations of (dis)trust across organisations – which bear fundamentally on their concerns with the communicative and learning functions of local healthcare services. They argue that: 'Far from capturing all aspects of organisational 'culture', our analysis nevertheless identifies salient processes which help explain important patterns of relationships and meaning across organisations and beyond' (Ormond 2003: 230). Adopting such a lens, they are able to trace chains of trust throughout the organisation and the impact of these on patients. Their enquiry signals the way for more focused sociological work on those specific aspects of organisational culture that are consequential for healthcare quality and safety and their inter-relationships across the diverse contexts, groups and levels within an organisation.

Building on this theme, Freeman *et al.* also point to a potentially fruitful avenue of further research focused on the performative aspects of culture. This moves us away from considerations of culture as a reflection of group sentiments to a conceptualisation in which culture is viewed as a constellation of props, scripts, settings, frames and performances that shape how quality and safety is enacted from board to ward. Understanding culture as practice has potentially important implications for how it might be addressed and taken into account in safeguarding healthcare quality and safety.

These contributions offer a view of culture that avoids treating it as manageable property of an organisation, whilst also showing in very specific ways how cultural characteristics and attributes influence the organisation and delivery of care. Without question, cultures have a significant bearing on quality and safety, and policies are likely to continue calling for culture change as basis for improvement, but sociology has the potential to contribute to the development of more sophisticated understandings of cultures and their role in the advancement of quality and safety.

Politics

The orthodox approach to quality and safety often appears to operate on the assumption that healthcare settings can be rendered benign by appropriate efforts such as team building or transformational leadership; whereas from a sociological perspective, differential resources,

interests and ideologies will always be manifest. In their analysis of rescue trajectories, Macintosh *et al.*'s chapter draws attention to how institutional arrangements mitigated 'rescue work' in the care of older people but enforced its prioritisation in the maternity context. There is ample sociological work on social and health inequalities to suppose these institutional sources of disadvantage to be more widespread. Such insights serve as an important cautionary tale for enthusiasts of systems reengineering as a mechanism for service improvement. As Berg and Timmermans (2000) have argued, orders do not emerge out of and thereby replace a pre-existing disorder; rather, with the production of an order, a corresponding disorder comes into being. It is ironic that as the global population ages and the needs of healthcare users become ever more complex, healthcare services are becoming increasingly rationalised, bringing benefits for some and disbenefits for others. In a similar vein, Sanders *et al.* reveal the importance of social capital for patients in negotiating access to services and how those with greater experience of the healthcare system considered themselves to be at an advantage relatively to those who had had less exposure. For all the commitment to patient-centredness within the quality and safety movement it is clear that service users are unequally placed to negotiate this social good.

A further key theme to emerge across the chapters presented here is the relational nature of healthcare quality and safety. Szymczak's examination of interaction chains highlights the importance of professional relationships in influencing participants' decisions to speak up in the face of a potential safety threat and both Brown *et al.* and Sanders *et al.* underline the centrality of provider-patient relationships to users' experiences of quality and safety. Common to both chapters is an emphasis on the importance of 'psychosocial safety' and 'trust', with the technical aspects of quality and safety being largely taken for granted by service users. Indeed, organisational targets and standards were perceived to impinge negatively on their relationships with providers, who they viewed as constrained by performance indicators which reduced contact time and physician discretion. This concern with structure and agency takes centre stage in Aveling *et al.*'s chapter on the relationship between healthcare professionals' moral authority to do the right thing, while recognising that these decisions do not take place outside of healthcare systems. It is also a pivotal concern in Freeman *et al.*'s analysis of how clinical governance is framed and performed by different NHS hospital boards and how such arrangements shape how the governance of quality and safety is enacted within organisations. Such questions about the relationship between social structures and human agency are well-trodden topics within the sociological tradition and an issue that – in the context of quality and safety – would benefit from such expert insights.

The failure to attend to the political structures of healthcare organisation, especially where these are associated with professional power, frames many of the protracted and limited efforts at transformation and improvement. The act of introducing quality improvement often means defining existing practices as imperfect, substandard or problematic; practices that are closely bounded up with professional identities and jurisdictions. As such, resistance to change might not always be seen as recalcitrant groups protecting their jurisdictions or privileges, but also groups seeking to maintain their sense of self or place in the workplace.

Theory and practice

The chapters in this collection signal alternative approaches to the three dilemmas of the orthodox paradigm, and suggest future avenues of empirical sociological inquiry. These centre on the social organisation of work, reconceptualising culture and the politics of structure

and agency relationships. But what about theory? Chapters featured here have drawn *inter alia* on established sociological concepts – articulation work, interaction rituals, trajectories, structuration, sensemaking and dramaturgy – all with positive effect. There is also an emerging view that the development and evaluation of interventions to bring about improvements in healthcare quality and safety have been impoverished by a failure to connect with social theory. Against a mounting weight of evidence that an intervention that has been successful in one location will not necessarily deliver the same results elsewhere, there is a growing appreciation of the need to better understand the inter-relationships involved in the content-context-implementation triangle. Theory-driven approaches are widely believed to be central to this aim, necessary to better understand the problem to be addressed, how an intervention has its effects and the modifications and conditions required for successful implementation in different contexts. This has led a number of authors to call for greater collaboration between social scientists and quality improvers (Davidoff *et al.* 2015, Dixon-Woods *et al.* 2011). While there are some nascent efforts to support developers in making their taken-for-granted ethno theories explicit in improvement initiatives (Davidoff *et al.* 2015), attempts to close the theory practice gap have largely involved the importation of existing sociological theories. These are clearly important advances, but if we are to build on the logic of a distinctive sociological conceptualisation of quality and safety, there is also a need to develop new theoretical frameworks to enrich this agenda grounded in the growing corpus of empirical sociological work and/or through close engagement with real life improvement efforts.

Collectively the chapters in this monograph highlight the need for theories and frameworks which support the systematic analysis of the processes that mediate individual agency and structural constraints in producing healthcare quality and safety in which the latter is understood to be both a distributed practice and a negotiated experience. Such mid-range theories are needed which offer new frameworks of understanding and a common language to support research and practice, so that sociology might not only strengthen improvement efforts, but also radically reshape from the inside how the problem of quality and safety is understood, experienced, assessed and studied. A number of the chapters in this collection have sown the seeds of such sociological novelty. Szymczak's use of Collins' concept of interaction rituals offers an alternative understanding of the problem of not speaking up in the context of threats to safety and Aveling *et al.* combine concepts from philosophy (Thompson 1980, 2014) and ethics (Pellegrino 2002, 2004) with structuration theory to reframe individual accountability and moral responsibility in patient safety. We also see potential in theoretical syntheses from within sociology. For example, Grant *et al.* and MacIntosh *et al.* utilise Strauss' classic ideas on articulation work and patient trajectories respectively, but as Allen (2014) as shown, these can be fruitfully combined with more recent theoretical insights from practice-based approaches and in particular actor network theory. Several of the chapters in this collection also contribute to current theoretical developments in the study of governance, which involves new connections between political sociology, interpretative methodologies and social theory (Bevir 2013). In particular, the works of Strauss, Goffman, Foucault and Giddens are invoked in various ways to understand how healthcare quality and safety are organised and governed. This line of analysis contributes to growing interest in the study of governance and social order, not in terms of formal structures, roles or institutions, but rather as situated, embodied and discursive social practices, albeit located within a given historical and structural field. In particular, there is scope to pursue new lines of theoretical synergy by linking different theoretical traditions, such as Strauss' concept of negotiated order with Foucault's work on knowledge/power, to contribute both to the sociological study of healthcare quality and safety, and also new perspectives on governance and relational sociology (Crossley 2012).

Our focus here is on the sociological contribution to healthcare quality and safety, but the management of risk and safety transcends a whole host of organisational locales and sociologists have done much to augment understanding of these issues (Perrow 1984, Vaughan 1997, 1999). As yet, however, there has been no attempt to work programmatically across a diversity of contexts. Healthcare has been deluged with interventions imported from other high risk environments in the expectation that these will confer the same benefits as they have been claimed to have brought elsewhere and sociologists have been quick to critique the naivety of such assumptions. Bosk *et al.* (2009: 445), for example, caution against the overuse of checklists in healthcare:

The success of checklists in preventing disasters during the takeoff and landing of commercial aircraft is often pointed out. But checklists are also used to track baggage for airlines. On this task, check lists perform less admirably. Handling baggage that comes in different sizes and shapes, involves complex transfers, and is often in poor condition, is a more realistic analogy for the use of checklists in achieving patients' safety than their use on takeoffs and landings. Baggage handling is a task that shares with managing patients a staggering amount of coordination, time-pressured decisionmaking, frustrating delays, and tracking systems for non-standardised raw material that needs to be handled safely.

As the sociology of healthcare quality and safety comes of age, there is not only scope for insight from healthcare to be applied to other organisational contexts but also for more collaborative working between social scientists with expertise in different industries and domains. As Hughes's (1984) classic studies of work have shown, much can be learnt from analysing such commonalities and differences. Evidence syntheses are only recently emerging in the social sciences, but as empirical work on quality and safety accumulates, more needs to be done to advance theories grounded in this cumulative material. It is from such foundations that we have the prospect of advancing a sociology of quality and safety that transcends organisations and institutions.

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