Acting in Anaesthesia: Ethnographic Encounters with Patients, Practitioners and Medical Technologies

In recent years, evidence-based medicine (EBM), clinical governance and professional accountability have become increasingly significant in shaping the organization and delivery of health care. However, these notions all build upon and exemplify the idea of human-centred, individual action. In this book, Dawn Goodwin suggests that such models of practice exaggerate the extent to which practitioners are able to predict and control the circumstances and contingencies of health care. Drawing on ethnographic material, Goodwin explores the way that ‘action’ unfolds in a series of empirical cases of anaesthetic and intensive care practice. Anaesthesia configures a relationship between humans, machines and devices that transforms and redistributes capacities for action and thereby challenges the figure of a rational, intentional acting individual. This book elucidates the ways in which various entities (machines, tools, devices and unconscious patients, as well as health care practitioners) participate, and how actions become legitimate and accountable.

Dawn Goodwin is a social science lecturer in medical education and director of problem-based learning. She teaches courses on various aspects of science, technology and medicine to both medical and social science students. Her current research interests focus on the development of embodied knowledge, its place in clinical practice, and the processes of learning involved. Her doctoral and postdoctoral research centred on the notions of participation and accountability in health care practice. Along with colleagues Dr Buscher and Dr Mesman, Dawn Goodwin is currently editing a book of ethnographic studies of diagnostic work drawn from a range of disciplines.
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Continued after the Index
Acting in Anaesthesia

Ethnographic Encounters with Patients, Practitioners and Medical Technologies

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# Contents

*Series Foreword*  
*Acknowledgements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Understanding Anaesthesia: Theory and Practice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Refashioning Bodies, Reshaping Agency</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Accounting for Incoherent Bodies</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teamwork, Participation and Boundaries</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Embodied Knowledge: Coordinating Spaces, Bodies and Tools</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Recognising Agency, Legitimating Participation and Acting Accountably</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*References*  
*Index*  

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Series Foreword

This series for Cambridge University Press is widely known as an international forum for studies of situated learning and cognition.

Innovative contributions are being made by anthropology; by cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology; by computer science; by education; and by social theory. These contributions are providing the basis for new ways of understanding the social, historical, and contextual nature of learning, thinking, and practice that emerges from human activity. The empirical settings of these research inquiries range from the classroom to the workplace, to the high-technology office, and to learning in the streets and in other communities of practice. The situated nature of learning and remembering through activity is a central fact. It may appear obvious that human minds develop in social situations and extend their sphere of activity and communicative competencies. But cognitive theories of knowledge representation and learning alone have not provided sufficient insight into these relationships.

This series was born of the conviction that new and exciting interdisciplinary syntheses are underway as scholars and practitioners from diverse fields seek to develop theory and empirical investigations adequate for characterizing the complex relations of social and mental life, and for understanding
successful learning wherever it occurs. The series invites contributions that advance our understanding of these seminal issues.

Roy Pea
Christian Heath
Lucy Suchman
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