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REVIEW ARTICLE



What we do and do not know about public inquiries: a narrative review

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ABSTRACT

Public inquiries have become a common governmental response to high-profile organisational failures, disasters or flagrant abuses of professional standards. Inquiries are detailed investigations charged with establishing 'the facts', 'learning lessons' and making recommendations to prevent similar events recurring. Despite their increasing frequency and public importance, knowledge about inquiries is limited and fragmented across political science, management science, organisation studies, science and technology studies, criminology, law and health. We reviewed the literature to synthesise learning from across these fields and identify gaps in understanding. We discuss five key concerns – political management of risk; sensemaking; procedure; learning and change; and the evolution of inquiries – and the research questions we see as arising from them. We suggest that there is a need to move beyond what we can learn from inquiry reports and, instead, to explore how people experience inquiries, what they value about them, and what personal, human costs are involved for whom.

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Introduction

Public inquiries have become a key tool in governments' responses to high-profile organisational failures, disasters or flagrant abuses of professional position where members of the public have sustained serious injuries or fatalities. Jasonoff (2005, p. 218) has characterised them as 'Britain's favoured mechanism for ascertaining the facts after any major breakdown or controversy', and the Institute for Government (Norris & Shephard, 2017, p. 6) has claimed that inquiries 'are now a permanent fixture in public life'. Inquiries are increasing in frequency: in the UK, from 1900 until the 1980s, there were on average four per decade and typically only one in each year. Between 1997 and 2001, this increased to four per year (Burgess, 2011). In September 2025, there were 24 ongoing or announced public inquiries in the UK (Sangha & McKee, 2025).

Inquiries are an administrative law method for holding government and other agents to account, and part of the UK's administrative justice system, alongside courts, inquests,

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tribunals, ombudsman and auditors (Ireton, 2018; Williams, 2023). They are established at the discretion of a government minister to examine a discrete event or series of events in a public way. They are a hybrid of political and legal processes and vary in form, power and legal status, but can be broadly divided into two types: statutory and non-statutory (Ireton, 2018). With statutory inquiries, the chair has the power to compel testimony, requisition documents and a mandate to hold hearings in public. Non-statutory inquiries, by contrast, rely on voluntary cooperation and have varying degrees of openness to the public. Inquiries are distinct from other investigative methods and institutions, as they are ad-hoc bodies, established for a particular task, and that allow, in unique ways, for public interaction with authorities (Peplow, 2018; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006, 2010). They report both to government and to the public (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006, 2010; Vincent et al., 2020; Walshe, 2019).

All inquiries are detailed investigations about issues of high public sensitivity, charged with establishing 'the facts' of the case, 'learning lessons' and making recommendations aimed at preventing such events from recurring. Further functions are thought to be: catharsis, in providing opportunity for reconciliation and resolution; reassurance, in rebuilding public confidence after a major failure; accountability and blame, in publicly holding people and organisations to account; and inquiries serve a wider political function for government, conveying a sense of decisive action (Brown, 2003; Burgess, 2011; Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Howe, 1999; Hutter, 1992; Walshe & Higgins, 2002; Warner, 2006; Williams, 2023).

In the articulation of public concerns, inquiries play a critical role in public debate; yet, despite their importance and increasing frequency, scholarship on them remains relatively limited (Burgess, 2011; Peplow, 2018; Salter, 1990; Schlembach & Hart, 2022). This may be because the issues inquiries investigate naturally take priority over the inquiry process itself (Salter, 1990). More recently, Stark (2019) has suggested that research on inquiries is beset with methodological and conceptual problems, and Thomas et al. (2024, p. 1) have described inquiries as 'undertheorised'. It has also been noted that the existing literature is fragmented and, as such, underappreciated (Burgess, 2011). Critch (2024), therefore, undertook to synthesise the literature around the question of whether inquiries are considered to provide accountability or to serve the functions of the state. That important review is primarily oriented towards the concerns of political science. The present review takes a more interdisciplinary perspective to consolidate learning from diverse fields across the social sciences and to reflect their broader concerns.

Aims and structure of the review

We undertook a synthesis of the literature on public inquiries, with the aim of consolidating learning from all relevant disciplines (political science, management science, organisation studies, science and technology studies, criminology, law and health), and to identify where gaps in understanding lie. Our main focus is to understand how inquiries function in the UK. However, we have also included literature from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Norway and Ireland where inquiries conform to the definition laid out in the introduction and are used in a recognisably similar manner to the UK. Comprehensive searches of three multidisciplinary databases were conducted (Academic Search Ultimate, Web of Science and Scopus) using the search terms Public inquir*, Independent

inquir*, Inquir*, Panel of inquir*, Official inquir*, Commission of inquir* and Non-statutory inquir*. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to search returns.

To meet inclusion criteria, items had to be research articles as our focus was on identifying areas that required further research. We were concerned with studies that take the inquiry itself as the focus for analysis. We therefore included articles that explored the aims, purpose, process and outcomes of inquiries; we largely excluded studies that used inquiry reports as lenses on the subject of the inquiry – for example, safety, risk and error, as often considered in disaster studies and social science studies of organisational failure. We recognise that this is a porous boundary: often studies that used the inquiry report as a source of data also drew conclusions about the purpose and process of the inquiry itself. We have consequently included some articles of this type where it advanced the discussion. We restricted our focus to inquiries that were commissioned by the government into matters of public concern, such as following a disaster, organisational failure, abuse of professional position or other such scandal. That is, we excluded other inquiries undertaken by private or public bodies (including planning and highways inquiries, and those dealing with issues of public policy reform: Barker, 1998; Ireton, 2018). Likewise, as Royal Commissions have tended to address broader policy issues, rather than specific incidents, and have fallen out of use in the UK (Ireton, 2023), we did not include this term in our searches. However, we have included some literature on Royal Commissions where, internationally, they are used in a comparable manner to public inquiries in the UK following specific incidents of public concerns. All included studies were published in either peer reviewed journals or books published in English. No publication date range was specified.

Analysing 57 research outputs from the disciplines outlined above, we identified the following key concerns: political management of risk; *sensemaking*; procedure; *learning and change*; and *the evolution of inquiries*. Procedure was such a dominant concern that it was further separated into five subthemes. Two concerns – sensemaking and the evolution of inquiries – were less prevalent but still notable. The former was an almost exclusive focus of organisational studies scholars, and dovetails with broader concerns about procedure. The latter was limited to a small number of articles but was relevant in the context of the increasing use and public importance of inquiries. The main body of the review discusses these concerns in turn. We then outline what we see as the key gaps in the understanding of public inquiries.

Political management of risk

Inquiries are involved in the public understanding and political management of risk. This operates at two levels. First at the level of government, they help manage the political situation by conveying a sense of decisive action to calm public discontent, provide reassurance and rebuild public confidence (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Walshe, 2019; Walshe & Higgins, 2002). Second, inquiries intervene at a more operational level, reshaping the ways organisations, professionals and other workers are held to account, and intersecting with existing forms of regulation (Goodwin, 2018; Rajan & Topp, 2022; Schlembach & Hart, 2022).

On the first point, much of the impetus for an inquiry involves macro-politics. Mounting public concern, lobbying by patient groups and media scrutiny all play a role (Corby et

al., 1998; Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Hutter, 1992; Mannion et al., 2019; Walshe, 2019; Walshe & Higgins, 2002). Thomas and Cooper (2020) suggest that commissioning decisions hinge on 'issue salience', reflecting three key features: relatability of the 'victims', how visible the failings appear, and behaviour that can be perceived as blame-worthy. A common observation is that commissioning an inquiry serves to depoliticise matters, delay government action while at the same time giving the impression that something is being done (Gephart, 1992; Peplow, 2024; Thomas & Cooper, 2020; Williams, 2023) Stutz (2008, p. 501), however, contests that this necessarily works in governments' favour: 'If inquiry hearings are the top item in the news, it is hard to see how that furthers a government agenda to bury the issues'. Still, commissioning an inquiry can be a long process, and it may take many attempts to raise concerns before an inquiry is even considered; indeed, in some cases, the inquiry never happens. For example, the Lockerbie incident of 1988 was never the subject of a public inquiry despite calls for this, a choice Scraton has called 'an extraordinary political decision' (2013, p. 57). The protracted process of holding an inquiry – usually several years, sometimes more than a decade – can mean that by the time the inquiry concludes, many of the issues will have already been addressed through other means (Corby, 2004), or quietly forgotten.

Greer and McLaughlin (2017) highlight how some states have changed their reaction to institutional scandal from a commitment to protect the reputation of public institutions, to a more distanced position, using inquiries to acknowledge, investigate and respond. This distance from the issues under investigation avoids reputational damage to the government (by association with the scandal) and repositions the government as part of the solution rather than part of the problem (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017). However, while distance from the scandal may be a short-term gain for the government, political independence comes at the cost of relinquishing control over the findings, recommendations and potential criticisms (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010). The cost of independence is particularly consequential where government departments are the subject of investigation. Here, even when inquiries are conceptualised as a political tool to manage public perceptions of state institutions, they also have the capacity to challenge the government's control in this respect (Williams, 2023).

Indeed, Resodihardjo (2006) questions the 'instrumental view' of inquiries – that they are used primarily to manage a crisis – showing how, on some occasions, inquiries can redefine the problem, shape public debate and act as catalysts for reform. Still, the degree to which inquiries can *independently* reach their conclusions is open to debate. As Rolston and Scraton (2005, p. 552) observe, 'While public inquiries have the potential to reconcile disputes and resolve serious public issues, they are rarely free of political management or manipulation'. Terms of reference can be tightly defined, limiting the scope of the inquiry (Rolston & Scraton, 2005), and simply knowing that the recommendations will be scrutinised by ministers may mean that governments retain some element of control (Stark & Yates, 2021).

With regard to accountability and regulation, inquiries are often commissioned to achieve accountability where inspectorates, parliamentary or judicial processes have failed, or where the cause(s) of incidents remain unknown (Clough & Manthorpe, 2004; Howe, 1999; Hutter, 1992). However, Mannion et al. (2019, p. 236) question whether inquiries are suited to the task and argue that inquiries are a 'weak and expensive institutional instrument for addressing failures of the regulatory apparatus'. Others, though, have

suggested that while inquiries have no powers to determine civil or criminal liability or remove professional registration, they provide a form of accountability unlike that provided by parliamentary or watchdog scrutiny (Peplow, 2018; Schlembach & Hart, 2022). They thus add to the ways in which institutions and professionals may be held accountable (Goodwin, 2018), and statutory inquiries – by virtue of their public hearings – offer particular advantages for transparency and redress (Schlembach & Hart, 2022). Indeed, Schlembach and Hart (2022, p. 15) found that participants in their study placed ‘significant value on the public inquiry as a site of acknowledgement, accountability and justice’. Rajan and Topp (2022) draw attention to two aspects of accountability – answerability and enforceability. They conclude that public inquiries have effective mechanisms to ensure answerability, facilitating the provision of information and evidence to the public, and requiring justification for actions. However, inquiries were weaker as regards enforcement of recommendations, with no powers to impose measures or sanctions (Rajan & Topp, 2022).

Nonetheless, inquiries have been described inquiries as ‘instruments of micro-regulation’ and linked to the expansion of regulation that often follows high-profile incidents (Burgess, 2011, p. 25). In the context of health, for example, the UK inquiry into Harold Shipman’s conduct (a GP convicted of the murder of 15 patients) resulted in changes to cremation regulations, professional revalidation and doctors’ access to drugs.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking involves the interpretation of a crisis or scandal, to understand the risks and threats both before and after crises occur (Gephart, 2007). Inquiries are exercises in sensemaking to the extent that they undertake a forensic investigation where different and even ‘opposing groups’ attempt to validate their claims and undermine claims of other groups, and where regulatory logics are contrasted with situational logics (Gephart, 1992). Through the inquiry’s control over *how* evidence is heard, interpreted and excluded, what results is what Gephart (1992) terms a ‘distortion’ of local logics, showing how their use diverges from mandated procedures.

Inquiries are also criticised for imposing a simplified version of reality to assign blame and expedite closure. For example, Brown (2003, p. 96) argues that inquiry reports present ‘a univocal and coherent view on what are generally readily acknowledged in the reports themselves to be complex and uncertain events’. However, Fraher (2021) argues that this is not always the case. Indeed, she suggests that the *9/11 Report* – which resisted identifying individuals at fault and instead located the problem in a collective ‘failure of imagination’ – is an example of an inquiry report that invites learning about the complex factors that underpin a crisis (Fraher, 2021).

Analysing the sensemaking practices involved in constructing an ‘official’ account, organisational studies scholars have focused on the narrative choices and techniques that establish the credibility of inquiry reports. Boudes and Laroche (2009, p. 79) highlight how a seemingly ‘objective’ chronology of events entails a set of choices that suggest a storyline. Other start and end points, the inclusion of some occurrences and not others, may cast the events in a different light. Terms of reference play a part in this, but inquiry chairs have considerable influence in their editorial role. For example, the insertion of comments and the way evidence is presented, with mitigation or challenge, help

interpret evidence and distribute accountabilities (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Goodwin, 2018). Often inquiry reports will set participants' actions in the context of what is known about a subject, or what professionals might be expected to understand – for example, implying culpability by suggesting that tragic events should have been anticipated (Boudes & Laroche, 2009).

The narrative must also involve a 'plot' (Boudes & Laroche, 2009) and be narrated in a way that engages readers. This is achieved using direct quotations from witnesses, the inclusion of micro-situational details, and large amounts of contextual detail (Brown, 2003). Brown also warns of a pressure to offer explanations that conform to generally held notions of how people behave in crisis situations. Thomas et al. (2024) liken inquiry staff to archivists and highlight their discretion in whose perspectives are included, excluded, legitimised or criticised in the historical record. This agency over which voices are preserved in societal memory challenges assumptions that inquiries are sites of apolitical truth (Thomas et al., 2024).

Procedure

As Brown (2003) points out, the authority of an inquiry's findings draws from rules governing knowledge production and representation of valid and reliable accounts. These include making provenance claims – who commissioned the inquiry, under what legislation, with what remit, and describing the status and qualifications of the chair and expert panel members – and comprehensively detailing the evidence reviewed, investigative and analytical methods (Brown, 2003). Attention has focused on five aspects of procedure: inquiries' inquisitorial approach; impartiality; transparency; ambiguous relationship with legal process; and frameworks of interpretation.

Inquisitorial approach

The inquisitorial approach of inquiries sets them apart from legal proceedings. The stated purpose of inquiries is to find out what happened, not to establish culpability. This involves inquiry chairs trying to put witnesses at ease, stressing that the purpose of the inquiry is to establish the cause of the event(s) and to make recommendations to prevent a recurrence, not to determine legal responsibility (Hutter, 1992). However, the distinction is a subtle one, as inquiry processes draw heavily on the legal system's philosophy and norms of practice (Brown, 2003). This can lead to easy slippage between inquisitorial and adversarial approaches (Corby, 2004; Salter, 1990), such that some characterise their approach as 'quasi-judicial' (Dingwall, 1986; Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Ireton, 2018, 2023). Indeed, because individuals may be named as contributing to the cause of the incident, inquiries cannot but be involved in establishing blame (Brown, 2003; Burgess, 2011; Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Hutter, 1992). This impacts upon witnesses and their faith in the inquiry process. Eburn and Dovers (2015) found that despite seeing the value in inquiries, witnesses experienced the inquiry process becoming too adversarial and attempting to place blame (Eburn & Dovers, 2015). Consequently, inquiries have been said to cast some people as scapegoats (Eburn & Dovers, 2015; Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Howe, 1999); litigation may also follow the identification of individual mistakes (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002). To avoid individual blame and move toward shared responsibility, Eburn and

Dovers (2017) suggest applying the principle of restorative justice to post-disaster inquiries ('restorative inquiry').

Impartiality

Much of the political and public value of inquiries is seen to lie in their independence from government and from the institutions, professions and matters investigated. The degree of independence from government may be questioned when inquiries are commissioned by and report to government departments (Barker, 1998; Peplow, 2024) and when the convening minister has powers to restrict access to evidence, as is currently the case in the UK (Ireton, 2018). Inquiries are often led by a senior judge, both for their perceived impartiality and for their skills in dealing with complex evidence (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Howe, 1999). Dingwall (1986, p. 505), however, sounds a sceptical note: 'It is surely only in symbolic terms that one can understand the recurrent use of lawyers in these enterprises. To the extent that the law can successfully be defined as independent of any sectional, political or moral interest, its officers can depoliticise the issues which arise'.

More broadly, independence does not arise solely from the individuals appointed to run the inquiry. Independence must be demonstrated in the extent to which inquiries prioritise 'victim' concerns over state functioning. Bias may creep in through the selection of the expertise thought to be necessary to understand the matters of investigation, often prioritising 'technical' explanations over 'social' ones (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Renå & Christensen, 2020). Walshe (2019) suggests that inquiry panels rarely reflect on their beliefs or biases, thereby problematising the veracity of the conclusions that inquiry panels draw. Furthermore, 'the nature and preferences of the inquiry chair shape fundamentally the direction and form of the inquiry and its outputs, but again this is rarely discussed and never questioned in inquiry reports' (Walshe, 2019, p. 212). These sorts of worries are reflected in Rolston and Scraton's (2005, p. 560) plea that inquiries 'must be directed towards justice rather than the political management of injustice'.

Transparency

One of the most important factors in inquiry procedure is how far it is conducted in public or private (Howe, 1999). Inquiries vary in their degree of openness and must balance the need for confidentiality, sensitivity and, in some cases, national security (Ireton, 2018), with the 'wider presumption in favour of openness on any matter in respect of which public confidence is justifiably disturbed' (Howe, 1999, p. 301). The degree of openness is central to their legitimacy and ability to provide reassurance that matters are being investigated thoroughly (Hutter, 1992; Ireton, 2018; Schlembach & Hart, 2022). Where evidence and proceedings are not made public, this may result in suspicion of an attempt to avoid accountability and diminished confidence in the findings and recommendations (Ireton, 2018). Previous non-statutory inquiries, the Iraq Inquiry for example, have been subject to intense and widespread criticism due to their level of secrecy (Ireton, 2018). Consequently, although there is no legal presumption of openness (Ireton, 2018, 2023), non-statutory inquiries usually still aim for some degree of openness to the public (see for example, Barker's (1997) account of the controversial procedural precedents set by the Scott Inquiry into the export of arms to Iraq).

As compared with other forms of investigation and regulation, inquiries typically make more efforts to involve people affected by the events concerned (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Howe, 1999; Penhale & Manthorpe, 2004), although this is not necessarily how they are experienced by those affected (as discussed below). Depending on the form of inquiry, written submissions may also be encouraged, members of the public may be able to attend and listen to oral evidence, there may be face-to-face meetings with affected families, and it is now obligatory for inquiries to have a website containing the interview protocol, interview transcripts and the final report (Burgess, 2011; Goodwin, 2018).

However, prioritising transparency over anonymity can affect interviewees' willingness to speak candidly, and it can also aggravate already troubled working relationships and leave whistleblowers open to retribution (Goodwin, 2018; Howe, 1999; Walshe, 2019). In terms of procedure, the use of judges to chair inquiries, and lead the questioning, also shapes an inquiry's conduct in ways that may be counterproductive to fact-finding. This can be seen, for example, in the routine use of the caution: 'you should be aware that your conduct may be called into question in the following respects ...', and in the adoption of an interrogatory manner of questioning (Dingwall, 1986; Howe, 1999). The public nature of inquiry hearings may also amplify the stress and fear of an already intimidating procedure (Ireton, 2018; Walshe, 2019), and Walshe (2019) questions whether such hearings enable people to give open, honest accounts.

Ambiguous relationship with legal process

Salter suggests that 'Inquiries are both freed from the constraints of legal proceedings and, at the same time, very much influenced by legal considerations. They can, in fact, be described as trials in disguise' (1990, p. 185). Salter explained this in terms of inquiries' 'legal substratum' – the adoption of many standards and procedures required by a court of law, at the same time as other legal protections are absent (Salter, 1990). Participants in inquiries can find themselves subject to cross-examination, but, believing that inquiries are not courts, they tend to fare poorly (Corby, 2004; Salter, 1990). While the allocation of blame is not a stated aim of an inquiry, the investigation is likely to expose some individuals to criticism, and if the protections of a court are removed – such as defence lawyers – there are obvious worries about (in)justice (Dingwall, 1986; Howe, 1999). Also potentially unjust, but from a different perspective, is the inequity of access to representation between families or individuals affected by the events under investigation, and those they are 'pitted against', such as public agencies, trade unions or professional bodies. These issues affect whose voices and concerns are heard and addressed by the inquiry (Edwards & Edwards, 2004).

Frameworks of interpretation

Despite the concerns with a legal approach, it is usually considered to be a rigorous and unbiased method for establishing facts (Thomas et al., 2024; Thomas & Cooper, 2020). However, while it is well-suited to investigate discrete events, a legal approach is less suited to explore complex structural issues. The law's focus on individual responsibility (its 'methodological individualism') may obscure systemic pressures or ideologies that

contribute to institutionalised adverse behaviours or give rise to failings that are more institutional than individual (Thomas et al., 2024; Thomas & Cooper, 2020). Lacking reflexivity about these epistemological commitments, and without broader historical, sociological or ethical scrutiny, inquiries risk reinforcing the status quo by, for example, depending on individualised explanations of failure such as poor planning, error or ‘bad apples’ (Thomas et al., 2024). Williams (2023) also questions the epistemological commitments of inquiries, arguing that inquiry practices prioritise ‘fact-finding’ over ‘truth-finding’. He argues, ‘Legal norms do not necessarily capture the extent of the questions that should be asked if a deeper understanding is to be achieved’ (Williams, 2023, p. 398). When dominant ideas about knowledge – such as ‘facts equal truth’ and ‘truth is singular’ – are embedded in inquiry practice, the experiences of subordinated groups may be excluded, although inquiries rarely consider this (Williams, 2023). Even where discrimination and racial politics are at the heart of the scandal, inquiries can perpetrate inequities and even, as Peplow puts it, reinforce colonial legacies: ‘By marginalising certain voices and limiting the inquiry’s scope, response to the uprising was [...] characterised as a “crisis of law and order”, utilised to legitimise an increasing militarisation of the British police rather than tackling wider socio-political issues and racism’ (Peplow, 2024, p. 323).

Although inquiries often examine issues of organisational failure, dysfunctional teamwork, or poor leadership, reports rarely refer to theory or research on these issues. Walshe (2019) has observed that such reports are strikingly atheoretical, involving no reference to relevant academic sources. Yet, theories are crucial to the ability to generalise from a specific case. Consequently, he argues, inquiries often cover similar ground and reach similar conclusions to previous inquiries (Walshe, 2019). However, it may be that inquiries rely on unarticulated theories. Brown (2000) has argued that interpretations of evidence align with prevailing understandings of how people and organisations behave. Some inquiries even hold seminars on relevant topics, delivered by experts in the field (Kennedy, 2001). Goodwin (2018, 2019) has argued that theories of organisational failure implicitly make their way into inquiries and find expression in the recent emphasis on culture and the use of concepts such as ‘drift’ as a way of explaining events. Pointing to the tension between individual and system-oriented explanations, Renå and Christensen (2020) have suggested that, implicitly or explicitly, explanatory frameworks *are* adopted and that these play an important role as to which lessons are drawn from the crisis.

Learning and change

As a way of learning from disaster, accident or scandal, inquiries’ recommendations have been subject to much criticism. A prominent concern is the lack of learning, as indicated by the repetitive themes within the recommendations (Dingwall, 1986; Powell, 2019; Walshe & Higgins, 2002; Williams & Kevern, 2016). Dingwall (1986, p. 489) has stated that ‘this very recurrence suggests that these inquiries are actually failing to make any lasting impact on the everyday practice of the occupations and organisations under scrutiny’. In the context of healthcare, Williams and Kevern (2016) have suggested two possible reasons for this: either organisations are unable or unwilling to implement the changes, or the recommendations are in a form that prevents them from being effectively implemented.

Boudes and Laroche (2009) have laid the blame firmly with the inquiry, casting doubt on whether inquiry reports provide recommendations that can be implemented in practice. But some of the issues may also be structural. Eburn and Dovers (2015) point out that even similar events take place in different contexts, so that: 'The lessons learned from the response to one fire may not be transferable to the next fire, and even less so to the next disaster if it is a flood' (Eburn & Dovers, 2015, p. 497). The notion of context-specific learning is not unique to disaster inquiries. A similar point is made by Goodwin (2019) regarding healthcare inquiries, where broad themes and concepts (e.g. culture) recur in the findings and recommendations, sometimes at the cost of hiding more granular, context-specific differences.

Questions have, therefore, been asked about the format and practicality of the recommendations, their purpose (symbolic or practical) and unintended consequences (Powell, 2019; Williams & Kevern, 2016), the growing number of recommendations made (Burgess, 2011), how they are communicated (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002), and at whom the recommendations are aimed (Powell, 2019). In addition, Salter (1990) has drawn attention to the context in which recommendations are made, arguing that the government – and what they will accept – becomes a silent member in the negotiations, which limits the scope of the recommendations.

The limitations of inquiries in implementing change have also been noted. There is no requirement for governments to act on their recommendations, and no formal review mechanism even when governments accept the recommendations (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002). Factors that have been shown to affect implementation are the duration of the inquiry, whether the inquiry reports to the same government, the political environment, and interests of professional groups (Stutz, 2008). Stark (2020) found that inquiry recommendations were not implemented where recommendations were presented to front-line services without due consideration of local delivery capacities, or when implementation required such modification to the proposed policy that it was substantially changed in the process. Thus implementing inquiry recommendations can require changes to operating norms and procedures, which are unlikely to occur without legal enforcement (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002) or adequate resources (M. Williams & Kevern, 2016). Given this, Stark and Yates (2021) have suggested that inquiries are principally *advisory* bodies, not direct policy tools, and that they are better conceptualised as agenda-setting mechanisms that initiate new policy processes. While pointing to ways to strengthen the legitimacy of recommendations, Stark and Yates urge consideration of the limited degree to which inquiries can change policy, and ultimately conclude that those running inquiries 'can only hope that meaningful action ensues once their report leaves the inquiry room' (2021, p. 359). Nonetheless, Stutz (2008) found that some inquiry chairs go to considerable lengths to explore the feasibility of the recommendations by consulting with individuals and institutions who would be responsible for implementing them and planning for their implementation.

The limitations noted above have led some to argue that inquiries produce change in more indirect ways, with inquiries helping to redefine the problem, inform public understanding, shift opinion (Brunton, 2005; Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Resodihardjo, 2006), and by repeatedly highlighting specific concerns, galvanising the need for action (Goodwin, 2019). Stimulating such changes, however, can require a strong chair, a liberal interpretation of the terms of reference, innovative procedures, a political and

financial context agreeable to reform (Resodihardjo, 2006), and considerable time (Brunton, 2005). Inquiries can effect change in more unpredictable and counterproductive ways, too. Warner (2006), for example, has described how the repeated inquiries into homicides by people with mental health problems shaped social workers' responses to risk, increasing defensive practice with the aim of avoiding becoming the subject of the next inquiry.

The role of inquiries can also be thought of in more symbolic terms (Renå & Christensen, 2020; Resodihardjo, 2006; Williams & Kevern, 2016), acting as an indicator of society's concerns (Corby, 2004). Rather than failed attempts at change, inquiry findings and recommendations have thus been said to 'fulfil a complex social and rhetorical function not confined to, or even primarily for, the purposes of bringing about change' (Williams & Kevern, 2016, p. 3). Williams and Kevern suggest that recommendations are the first part of a complex process that relies upon a variety of social and cultural institutions to bring about change. Accepting that inquiries are not a standalone process, highlights the role existing regulatory agencies must play in learning from inquiry findings and in implementing their recommendations (Williams & Kevern, 2016).

Evolution of inquiries

In line with constitutional and social trends, there have been many changes to inquiries – in terms of their form, procedures, reporting formats, staffing, and the extent of public participation (Brunton, 2005; Ireton, 2023). Burgess (2011) has noted that, in the UK, inquiries only took on their modern form in the 1960s. Before then, they were largely concerned with internal matters of state, such as war, state security and policing, and, despite their title, 'public inquiries' were not very public in character. Reflecting the cultural and political transformation of the 1960s, inquiries became more open to public scrutiny and more oriented towards risks that affect the public (Burgess, 2011; Walshe & Higgins, 2002). Amid these shifting societal expectations, concerns arose around the powers of inquiries to compel testimony without legal safeguard and the reputational damage (often to government ministers) that might ensue (Ireton, 2023). Consequently, the 'Salmon Principles' were adopted which aimed to provide protection for those participants likely to face criticism (Ireton, 2023). These principles, however, also introduced more adversarial elements into the inquisitorial process and the role of legal representatives increased (Ireton, 2023). Nevertheless, the shift toward openness continued, exemplified by the Ely Inquiry (1969) which marked a first for NHS inquiries that exposed failings in care rather than protected staff, and initiated change rather than supporting 'business as usual' (Hilton, 2019).

As Greer and McLaughlin (2017) have explained, the contemporary context obliges inquiries to be more transparent in their workings and methods, to hold open hearings, and to maintain active websites to publish evidence for public scrutiny. Doing these things helps to establish the inquiry's impartiality, thoroughness and accountability. Compared to other forms of investigation, inquiry proceedings are also more explicitly focused on the demands of those directly affected by the events under investigation with, for example, formal consultation processes becoming more common, and on ensuring their participation throughout proceedings (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Ireton, 2023; Penhale & Manthorpe, 2004), in some cases making specific accommodations for

‘vulnerable participants’ (see Ireton and Ratcliff (2024) on adjustments to procedure in the Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry). Consequently, Peplow positions inquiries as ‘a form of discourse with authorities that engages with local communities rather than simply encroaching upon them’ (Peplow, 2018, p. 133).

In addition to inquiries’ shifting focus, then, their procedural formality has begun to relax too (Brunton, 2005), and there have also been changes in the remit, investigative powers, resources, technological capacities, and relationships with the criminal justice process (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017). These shifts have led Burgess (2011, p. 5) to suggest that inquiries are ‘an instrument whose ‘time has come’, as a rare instrument of traditional governance open to public concern’. At the same time, Greer and McLaughlin (2017) have pointed out that a culture of deference that may have characterised the public response to inquiries in the past has fundamentally shifted. Now, inquiries are immediately subject to intense media scrutiny, which may question the chair’s credibility, the suitability of the inquiry panel, and the appointment process. Those not meeting public or media expectations face such adverse publicity that they may step down (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017). Ireton (2023) reads these challenges as resulting from the confusion over the primary purpose of an inquiry created by multiple, incremental changes to procedure over time and which have led, Ireton suggests, to expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

What we do and do not know about inquiries

Social science literature on inquiries is fragmented, with studies from disciplines including political science, management science, organisation studies, science and technology studies, criminology, law and health. The articles reviewed here were focussed on the British context, with some discussions from European, Australian and Canadian national contexts. Across these contexts, we found consensus that inquiries occupy an important place in contemporary society. Indeed, inquiries are becoming more frequent and the level of (public and governmental) commitment to inquiries as a means of responding to issues of public concern, and as a tool for investigating and managing misconduct, organisational failure and disaster, shows no sign of subsiding. Despite the growing role of inquiries, Burgess (2011), Schlembach and Hart (2022) and Peplow, (2018) have suggested that inquiries have attracted relatively little intellectual attention, and that the social science literature remains comparatively niche. We agree with Critch (2024) that the problem is more that there has been little *integration* of ideas and critique *across* disciplines.

The key concerns of the existing literature centre around the role that inquiries play in the political management of risk, sensemaking and critique of inquiry procedures, qualities and characteristics, and inquiries’ effectiveness in learning and change after disaster or misconduct. There is also some discussion of how inquiries are evolving. The gaps in understanding we have identified are, first, around *learning and change*. Accepting that inquiries are essentially *advisory* bodies, we contend that there is more to be learnt about how they contribute to change. We do not, as yet, have a thorough understanding of *how* inquiries inform change, locally and nationally, or *how* they intersect with regulatory frameworks, shape public debate and political agendas. Second, *how inquiries are evolving* – and what this says about contemporary society – is also worthy of further

study. Here, research largely focuses on statutory inquiries. Far less is known about non-statutory inquiries. In many cases, inquiries are commissioned initially on a non-statutory basis and later converted to statutory inquiries. Much could be learnt from comparative analysis and examination of the circumstances where a non-statutory inquiry sufficed and where a statutory inquiry was deemed necessary.

Third, and most importantly in our view, while there has been considerable attention on inquiry procedures, virtually all of this critique comes from an *external* perspective; most of what we know is extracted from inquiry reports themselves. Stark (2019) has interviewed inquiry chairs and assisting lawyers with the aim of understanding how those involved in constructing the recommendations viewed the process of policy learning and change. Still, *little is known about the internal workings of inquiries*. We lack a detailed understanding of *how* inquiries are run, *how and on what basis* decisions are made as to form and procedure, and *what* effects these decisions have on the experience of participants.

We identified only two studies that sought to address this gap and provided some insight into the priorities of those internally involved in the inquiry. Schlembach and Hart (2022) have examined the Brook House inquiry, interviewing the chair after the opening statement, discussing and clarifying points from the statement, as well as her planned organisation of the inquiry. They also interviewed non-governmental employees who were actively involved with the inquiry as witnesses. Schlembach and Hart found that perceptions of a satisfactory outcome were closely linked to perceptions of procedural rigour and equity. While a wider public may view legitimacy as arising from political independence and the appointment of senior judges as inquiry chairs, those involved in the inquiry were more concerned with procedures they saw as fair, participatory and thorough (Schlembach & Hart, 2022). The second study explored inquiry teams' perspectives on the aims and outcomes of public inquiries (Vincent et al., 2020). Participants in this study questioned the need for an inquiry to be led by a judge, suggesting that other experience – medical for example – might be more appropriate, particularly if the appointed person was skilled in providing emotional support. Participants also suggested that public hearings were inappropriate in some circumstances, and that people harmed by events being investigated might prefer a private hearing (Vincent et al., 2020).

Research of this kind – that goes beyond what can be gleaned from inquiry reports and aims to learn about inquiries from the inside – is exceedingly limited. These two studies provide valuable insights into the perspectives of participants, and point to the scope for further study – how are inquiries experienced by those involved, and what are the human consequences associated with them? There is, however, some commentary from chairs of previous inquiries. For example, Geoffrey Howe (1999), Chair of the Ely Inquiry, took issue with departures from accepted procedure that occurred in the Scott Inquiry into the sale of arms to Iraq. Presenting his views and those of 13 other chairs of mental health inquiries, Prins (2004) has provided an inside view on the benefits of holding an inquiry in private. Doing so allows for sensitive and emotive evidence to be given and for witnesses to feel less constrained and anxious, as private inquiries are comparatively less intimidating and juridical than public ones. Prins (2004) also sheds light on the arbitrary appointment process of chairs, and the delicate balancing act chairs face between meeting relatives' wishes to see people held accountable and fairness to witnesses. These first-hand commentaries are essential and would benefit from further research.

For workers whose practice is scrutinised in an inquiry, there are no first-hand accounts. Observers have, though, noted the stress that they experience and the detrimental effects on working environments (Melia, 2004; Prins, 2004). Staff appeared to feel under constant threat of litigation or disciplinary action, hostilities and blame grew, and divisions occurred as wrong-doers were identified (Melia, 2004). Many who underwent disciplinary action lost their jobs; others – not found guilty of professional misconduct – suffered such stress that they were unable to work (Melia, 2004). These personal, career and reputational costs are, however, largely undocumented.

Another area of relative silence concerns harmed members of the public. Inquiry chairs have expressed concern at the lack of support that members of the public receive and questioned whether inquiries are the cathartic experiences that they are assumed to be (Vincent et al., 2020). The few personal accounts that do exist support these concerns. Some found that inquiries compounded and prolonged grief (Ryan, 2019), and added further distress (Edwards & Edwards, 2004). Edwards and Edwards (2004) described an insensitive process that excluded them from virtually all aspects of the inquiry and took no account of their questions, concerns, or points of view. In other words, inquiries sometimes seem to replicate the processes of exclusion and dismissal that form such a prominent theme in their findings of institutional failings. Accounts such as these open a window on the personal cost of involvement in an inquiry, but they are few and far between. We do not know how typical or idiosyncratic these experiences are.

Limitations

We acknowledge this review is not without limitations. Whilst our searches were systematically conducted and studies were screened in a methodical manner, we do not claim to have conducted a systematic review. Given the diversity of disciplines, approaches, and framings, we opted for a narrative approach which allows a more interpretative approach and a more open-ended consideration of which studies might be relevant. For example, we did not want to exclude international literature a priori, or to assume that the same terminology and distinctions would apply as in the UK (e.g. ‘public inquiry’ as opposed to ‘royal commission’). Therefore, we preferred to read for relevance and include studies where we could be confident they related to the focus of our review. We appreciate that this approach has introduced a greater degree of judgement into the selection of studies than other forms of review with stricter search parameters and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Our aim to synthesise learning from multiple and diverse fields of social science was certainly ambitious, and it has been challenging to do justice to all these disciplines in one review. There will inevitably be omissions – our review is thorough, not exhaustive. Therefore, although coverage may not be as comprehensive as with a systematic review, our aims were to provide a broad overview of the predominant issues and a rich conceptual discussion which are better suited to a narrative approach.

Conclusion

Inquiries are driven by public concern of a kind that is not satisfied by other means of investigation and redress. *We do not understand what people value about inquiries, or what personal, human costs are involved and for whom.* Existing literature suggests that

an inquiry's openness to the public is central to their value; reassuring the public in general, and affected individuals in particular, that matters are being properly and thoroughly investigated. But this openness brings its costs and stresses, and openness to or for some may not be openness to or for others. Unless we know what people value about inquiries, how they are experienced by different participants, and the consequences arising from variations in approach, inquiries may operate in ways that cause unnoticed, unexpected and unintended harms, or diminish their value. We suggest there is thus a need to learn about inquiries from the inside; to learn about the expectations different participants have, to learn what rationales inform decisions about process and conduct, and to understand their after-effects, in regulatory *and* human terms.

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