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The Sociology of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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Abstract

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and traditional medicine (TM) are important social phenomena. This article reviews the sociological literature on the topic. First, it addresses the question of terminology, arguing that the naming process is a glimpse into the complexities of power and history that characterize the field. Second, focusing on the last 15 years of scholarship, it considers how sociological research on users and practitioners of TM/CAM has developed in that time. Third, it addresses two newer strands of work termed here the 'big picture' and the 'big question'. The big picture includes concepts that offer interpretation of what is happening at a societal level to constrain and enable observed patterns of social practice (pluralism, integration, hybridity and activism). The big question, 'Does it work?', is one of epistemology and focuses on two developing fields of critical enquiry - first, social critiques of medical science knowledge production and, second, attempts to explain the nature of interventions, i.e. how they work. Finally, the article examines the role of sociology moving forward.

Keywords: complementary and alternative medicine, traditional medicine, medical sociology, CAM practitioners,

Full text

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