Towards the Camisation of Health? The Countervailing Power of CAM in Relation to the Portuguese Mainstream Health-Care System

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my PhD research was to answer the following primary research questions: Is the relationship between complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), the medical profession and the State changing in Portugal? If there has been a change, how and why has such a change occurred? Two CAM therapies, acupuncture and homeopathy, were chosen as case studies. The main sources of data were in-depth individual interviews and documents. The research sample (n=41) was made of three groups of interviewees: (1) 20 traditional CAM practitioners, (2) 10 orthodox medical doctors not committed to CAM and (3) 11 orthodox medical doctors committed to CAM.

My PhD research drew on a neo-Weberian perspective of professions which emphasises the power relations between related occupational groups who seek to gain or maintain power and status in their field of work. This research also made extensive use of the concept of ‘countervailing powers’ (Light, 2010), as it attempted to illuminate the influence of CAM practitioners in the attitude of powerful players within Portuguese health-care, such as the State and health corporations (e.g. pharmaceutical companies), towards CAM.

On the basis of my PhD research, I argued that the relationship between CAM, the medical profession and the State has changed in Portugal over the last 16 years. I introduced a concept that helps to explain CAM practitioners’ recent countervailing actions within the Portuguese mainstream health-care. This concept is ‘camisation’, a process through which everyday human problems are transformed into health problems which are treated in CAM terms and within a CAM framework. Although the main driver of camisation has been CAM practitioners, I also show how the Portuguese State, the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry have all been active collaborators in this process, whilst maintaining different interests and constantly bargaining and negotiating to maximise their power and status within the field of health-care.