Making sense of differences between medical schools through Bourdieu's concept of 'field'

Reference:
Brosnan C. Making sense of differences between medical schools through Bourdieu's concept of ‘field’. Medical Education, 44 (7): 645-52

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Tags
Clinical domain
General

Educational domain
Curriculum
Teaching and learning
Assessment
Program evaluation
Education research

Background

This is a mind-expanding paper that illustrates a particular sociological approach to analyzing societal phenomena. The author points out that med ed journals are filled with humdrum positivist studies of the effect of something on individuals in a single institution, work that has many limitations (generalizability, home school biases, narrow scope). What about exploring and comparing the context of medical education institutions that these studies are set in? How do medical schools compare from a sociological view?

Purpose

The author, from King's College London, reviews how French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "field" can be applied to examining medical or medical education institutions. Brosnan goes on to illustrate this approach by comparing UK med schools.
Type of paper

Other: Sociological Analysis

Key Points on the Methods

The author guides us through "field theory": think "arena" or "game", in which players compete for resources of all kinds (prestige, research funding, top students, top faculty, biggest library collections, etc.). Bourdieu’s approach allows for an analysis of how medical schools compete or differentiate themselves, and for what resources, and for what results. This technique can be applied to any societal competition.

Key Outcomes

In this particular analysis of UK schools, Brosnan finds that the UK schools are polarized into two distinct groups. Group 1 is the research intensive group of 4 schools, which uses the basic-science oriented entrance exam, attracts elite and upper class students, and produces more research...It also gets negative ratings from General Medical Council on its curriculum. Group 2 uses different entrance criteria, different exams, is much more aligned with the GMC's curricular approach and has an ethos of producing clinicians to serve population needs.

Key Conclusions

The author concludes that Bourdieu's field approach is an extremely useful lens to compare medical education institutions. The UK schools' relative focus on different resources may explain the resistance of the top 4 to curricular reform.

Spare Keys – other take home points for clinician educators

This is an outstanding paper for the clinician-educator's library, giving us a few gifts:

1. It reminds us that the med ed literature is severely restricted in the questions asked and methodologies used
2. It introduces an example of a methodology from sociology: Bourdieu's "field", a powerful way to consider context, competition, and contrasting players
3. It reminds us to consider other lenses that can help us answer questions (eg Bolman & Deal's view of organizations, Rogers' diffusion of innovations, curriculum theories, etc)
4. The UK school analysis triggers thoughts of the value of accreditation systems in terms of driving curriculum change
5. It offers another tool in the CE toolkit for implementing change: field analysis may reveal powerful forces that were previously invisible.

This paper is a keeper!