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Unravelling stereotype, unanticipated sociality:
Breast cancer treatment at a public healthcare facility in post-apartheid Johannesburg

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Abstract

This dissertation presents an ethnographic account of a socially diverse, public breast cancer clinic in Johannesburg. The findings of this qualitative research radically challenge the unproblematised and overdetermined use of the categories of race and gender in existing literature concerning this disease. The growing breast cancer epidemic in South Africa affects all demographic categories of women including young women. Yet, previous research frames this as a racialised and gendered crisis. Black women have been depicted as ignorant "problem patients" who resist biomedical treatment, and all women are described as having a particular relationship to their breasted bodies and a deep fear of mastectomy. Departing from these stereotypes, this ethnography reveals unanticipated data showing, firstly, that race, class, age and level of education did not determine women's relationship to breast cancer and biomedicine. Secondly, socially diverse women commonly experienced breast cancer as a life-threatening disease that evoked confrontation with existential concerns regarding suffering, death, family, and faith. Due to these commonalities, an intimate and powerful sociality existed amongst women at this clinic. Thirdly, within this sociality, women accepted mastectomy as a necessity in creating a healthy body. Breastlessness was normalised and women generally were reluctant of breast reconstruction, thus destabilising the conceptual relationship between breasts and gender. This dissertation's deconstruction of the use of hegemonic social categories is a significant intervention in a context where these categories are often viewed as absolute determinants of social and health phenomena, and therefore prompts more nuanced approaches to understanding experiences of illness in post-apartheid South Africa.