

*Existential Reflections of South African Women with
Breast Cancer*

By:

Louise Claire Moodley

0411566T

Supervisor: Dr. Vinitha Jithoo

A Research Project being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Masters of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.**

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree for **Masters of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology** at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

Louise Claire Moodley

06 day of September, 2011

DEDICATION

*This dissertation is dedicated to all
the women who have faced
breast cancer and
defeated it.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my dad, for instilling in me the drive to succeed very early on in my life. You are my mentor and have cultivated in me a vision for my future. Thank you for your guidance and wisdom.

To my mum, for always being my shoulder to cry on and my best friend. You were always there with words of encouragement in my times of need. Thank you.

To D lcio, for your love, understanding and patience. You have been with me through my academic journey and your enduring support means the world to me. Thank you.

To the rest of my family and my dearest Samantha, your understanding and constant love is so much appreciated. I love you all dearly.

To all the participants in my research, thank you for taking the time to partake in my study. My heart-felt appreciation to all.

To the MACCs 2010, for all your support, you have made a very difficult year a little easier to bear. Thank you for the midnight calls and the early morning smses and all the wonderful treats.

And to my supervisor, Dr. V. Jithoo, for your patience and understanding. Thank-you for pushing me even when I thought I had no more fight left. I appreciate all your hard-work and guidance and for it I feel that I am a better researcher.

ABSTRACT

The period following a breast cancer diagnosis has been described as a time of reflection and inward search for existential meaning. The purpose of this study was to explore how South African women dealt with suffering, the possibility of death and found meaning in their diagnosis and ensuing treatment and its termination. This sample comprised of eight South Africa women between the ages of 30 to 57 years, diagnosed with breast cancer, and who had terminated active oncology treatment. The design of the study was qualitative. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to examine the existential issues facing the respondents. The data was analysed using Patton's principles of Thematic Content Analysis (1987) which reduced the narratives into three key themes namely: existential reflections, existential meaning and role of culture. Physical and emotional suffering was experienced as an outcome of participants' treatment and ensuing circumstance. This suffering was understood as the price that one must pay in order to survive cancer and thus most participants assigned positive connotations to treatment in order to ascribe meaning. As treatment affected every aspect of participants' lives, there was a need to greatly revise and re-evaluate ones' values and purpose in life. In addition, participants expressed deep regret and guilt over the manner in which they had lived their lives before their diagnosis. This seemed to initiate a bargaining process which resulted in more intrinsically fulfilled women. Participants seemed to engage in many strategies in order to defeat their cancer and continue on with their lives; these strategies were mainly controlled by hope and positivity. This was greatly associated with the meaning participants made from their experience. Two predominant elements were utilised to make meaning: religion and spirituality, and purpose in life. There seemed to be an interconnectedness between helping others and helping oneself that was derived from spirituality and religion and ones' perceived purpose in life. All aspects of meaning making and adjustment seemed to heavily influence by one's cultural affiliations and beliefs. From this study, it is evident that South African women engage in meaning-making activities and successfully negotiate these in order to achieve meaning and adjustment to having breast cancer. This research suggests that once a comprehensive understanding is developed of the range of existential concerns that South African women experience, we will be better able to provide resources that are more adequately suited to assist with their experienced difficulties and this may result in improved levels of adjustment and quality of life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Rationale	3
1.2 Research Aims	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
2.1 Psychological Perspective.....	9
2.1.1 Existential Meaning and Adaptation	9
2.1.2 Existential Concerns.....	16
2.2 Cultural Perspective	22
2.3 Conclusion.....	29
Chapter 3: Methods	30
3.1 Research Questions	30
3.2 Procedures.....	30
3.3 Participants.....	31
3.4 Research Instruments	32

3.5 Data Analysis	33
3.6 Self-Reflexivity.....	34
3.7 Ethical considerations	35
Chapter 4: Results	37
4.1 Existential Reflections of Breast Cancer	37
4.1.1 Existential Suffering.....	37
4.1.2 Values in life	43
4.1.2.1 Hope and Positivity.....	44
4.1.2.2 Need for control and Normality	46
4.1.2.3 Redefinition of values.....	48
4.2 Existential Meaning	49
4.2.1 Defeating Cancer	50
4.2.2 Quest for Meaning and Purpose.....	51
4.3. Role of Culture.....	55
Chapter 5: Discussion	58
5.1 Existential Reflections	59
5.2 Existential Meaning	62
5.3 Role of Culture.....	65
5.4 Conclusion	68
5.4.1 Limitations	69
5.4.2 Implications for Future Research	70

References.....	72
------------------------	-----------

Appendixes

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate.....	78
Appendix B: Information Cover Sheet	79
Appendix C: Interview Consent Form.....	80
Appendix D: Audio-recording Consent	81
Appendix E: Consent for the use of direct quotations	82
Appendix F: Interview Schedule	83