Illness and Health as Constructions:

Narratives of Sangoma\(^1\) Nurses

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ABSTRACT This study involved a group of isiZulu-speaking nurses who were also traditional healers or isangoma\(^2\) within the South African amaZulu culture. The paper explored traditional healing beliefs and practices through the perspectives of this group of traditional healers who were also formally trained nurses. The narratives shared by the nurses, referred to as ‘sangoma-nurses’, revealed that their ‘cultural’ training and experiences dominated the manner in which they understood many of the illnesses that presented at the hospital. Working through the lens of social constructionism and through narrative analysis, the paper reveals that much of their views on ill health, even within the ‘biomedical’ defined hospital space, articulated by and large through the lens of their cultural worldviews, rather than the training they underwent as nurses. Findings reveal that the sangoma-nurses, in large part, struggled to straddle their dual positionality; as so called ‘western’ nurse and traditional isangoma and were often compelled to ‘suspend’ their traditional beliefs while at work.