

**‘Mind Your Mind’: Representations of dementia risk-
prevention in news and digital media**

Michael Lawless

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School of Psychology
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Adelaide

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	6
Declaration.....	10
Acknowledgements	11
Thesis structure.....	13
Thesis format.....	15
Publications.....	16
Under review.....	16
Chapter 1	18
1.1 Preamble	18
1.2 Defining dementia	19
1.3 Dementia, neuroplasticity, and risk-prevention.....	24
1.4 Dementia: Discourses of risk, self-responsibility, and agency	27
1.5 Health communication in traditional and online media.....	31
1.6 Aims of the research.....	33
1.7 Chapter summary	35
Chapter 2	36
2.1 Discursive psychology	36
2.2 Analytical approach in this thesis.....	40
2.3 Sources of data.....	42
2.4 Chapter summary	46
Chapter 3	48
Abstract.....	51
3.1 Introduction	52
3.2 Method	58

3.3 Results	60
3.4 Discussion	74
3.5 Conclusion.....	77
Chapter 4	78
Abstract.....	81
4.1 Introduction	82
4.2 Method	88
4.3 Results	91
4.4 Discussion	105
4.5 Conclusion.....	108
Chapter 5	110
Abstract.....	113
5.1 Introduction	114
5.2 Method	120
5.3 Results	124
5.4 Discussion	136
5.5 Conclusion.....	140
Chapter 6	141
Abstract.....	144
6.1 Introduction	145
6.2 Method	152
6.3 Results	156
6.4 Discussion	167
6.5 Conclusion.....	171
Chapter 7	173
7.1 Thesis overview.....	173

7.2 Summary of studies.....	174
7.3 Implications of the findings	183
7.5 Future directions	198
7.6 Concluding remarks.....	203
References	205
Appendix 1: Transcript of 7.30 broadcast, ‘Can exercising your brain keep Alzheimer’s away?’ (November 19, 2014).....	230

Abstract

This thesis presents a discourse analysis of representations of dementia risk and prevention in news and digital media. Dementia presents a major public health concern in many countries with expanding elderly populations, and is associated with significant costs to individuals, families, and societies. Currently, there is no known cure for any type of dementia. Public health efforts relating to the primary prevention of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease have focused on increasing awareness of a range of risk and protective factors. Such efforts have involved encouraging participation in a range of health and lifestyle practices, including diet, physical activity, social activity, and cognitive activity (e.g., reading, playing board games, learning a musical instrument, brain training). Claims about the possibility of cognitive enhancement and dementia risk-prevention via modification of lifestyle-related risk factors have attracted considerable media attention. However, scientific evidence for the effectiveness of engaging in such practices in terms of decreased dementia risk is mixed. Claims regarding the nature of brain plasticity in later life have also been questioned.

Data in this thesis comprise a sample of Australian newspaper articles, material published on the websites of dementia organisations, and posts in a Facebook conversation about dementia risk and prevention. The studies presented in the four analytical chapters of this thesis explore how media representations routinely construct engagement in brain enhancement and dementia risk-prevention activities as a normative course of action, and how such representations work to position audience members as individually responsible for risk-management. The analysis focuses on

the discursive resources and rhetorical practices routinely deployed in newspaper articles, the websites of dementia organisations, and social media to construct and manage such issues.

Study One examines representations of the topics of dementia risk-prevention, cognitive enhancement, and neuroplasticity in a sample of Australian newspaper articles. Specifically, the analysis focuses on constructions of the concept of neuroplasticity as a scientific breakthrough, with promising health implications for the prevention of cognitive decline and dementia. Promissory representations of neuroplasticity and its related technologies are argued to contribute to constructing the normativity of participation in practices that are claimed to enhance cognitive performance in older age and prevent the onset of dementia.

Study Two builds on the results of the first study by examining the construction of advice about cognitive enhancement and dementia risk-prevention in Australian newspaper articles. The analysis describes two routine advice-giving formulations that were repeatedly used to represent the development of age-related cognitive decline and dementia as consequences of individual action. It is argued that such advice formulations serve to attribute responsibility and blame for the development of dementia to individuals and their practices. Conclusions offer reflections on how social norms and expectations about brain health in old age are constructed and treated as accountable in news media.

Study Three examines online health information about dementia risk and prevention published on the websites of eight non-profit dementia organisations. The

analysis focuses on the repeated positioning of audience members as being at-risk for developing dementia and as individually responsible for dementia risk-management. It is argued that this positioning serves to warrant related proposals about participation in cognitive enhancement and dementia risk-prevention practices, and establishes a moral identity in which an ethic of self-responsibility and risk-management is central.

Study Four explores how a Facebook Page is used as a platform for the exchange of information and advice about dementia prevention and risk-management. Specifically, the analysis explores the routine framing of requests for information or for advice on the official Facebook Page of a popular Australian TV current-affairs program. Problem descriptions that included reference to notions of family history, genetic predisposition, or personal experience of dementia symptoms served to warrant posters' requests for information or advice. Such posts constructed self-monitoring, 'at-risk' identities in relation to dementia risk-management. Implications of the findings for health communication, health promotion, and identity management on social media platforms are explored.

In the concluding chapter, implications of the results are discussed. Specifically, I consider how such media representation can contribute to the prescription of actions, as well as 'at-risk', self-monitoring, or responsible identities in relation to brain health and dementia risk-management. Implications for health promotion, health and social policy, and service provision are also discussed. The findings presented in this thesis contribute to developing understandings of how contemporary representations of the health issue of dementia can work to promote an

ethic of self-responsibility for brain health in older age. The findings also provide insight into the health and illness identities that are routinely made available in relation to issues of cognitive ageing and dementia risk-prevention.

Declaration

I, Michael Lawless, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I acknowledge that copyright of published works contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signature:

Date: 19/11/17

Michael Lawless

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“Instant gratification takes too long”

(Carrie Fisher 1956-2016)

And so I wrote this thesis.

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Thesis structure

Chapter 1 reviews relevant literature in order to provide context for the analyses presented in subsequent chapters. Specifically, I provide background on the following topics: (1) the health issue of dementia and its impact; (2) the concept of neuroplasticity and the possibility of brain enhancement and dementia prevention via modification of lifestyle-related risk factors; (3) neoliberal approaches to health, particularly notions of individual responsibility for health and illness; and (4) health communication in print and digital media (websites and social media). In this Chapter, I also introduce the aims of the research.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the methodological and analytic approach used in this thesis. The Chapter describes the methodology in detail and provides an explanation of why the chosen analytic approach is suited to the research questions addressed in this thesis. I also outline the sources of data and describe how the data was collected.

Chapters 3-6 present the findings of the four studies, presented in manuscript form. Each of the studies addresses one or more of the aims described in Chapter 1. Although the manuscripts included in this thesis comprise a body of work that addresses the overall research aims, each manuscript is considered a study in its own right, and includes a separate introduction and method section.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter of this thesis. This Chapter provides a summary of the analytical chapters in this thesis and considers implications of the

findings for health promotion, health policy, and support services. More broadly, I consider implications of the findings for contemporary cultural understandings of brain health and dementia risk-prevention in Western society. In addition, I discuss limitations of the research and offer directions for future investigation.

A list of references for all Chapters is provided at the end of this thesis (p. 205), followed by an Appendix section that contains material relevant to the analyses presented in Chapter 6 (p. 230).

Thesis format

This dissertation is formatted as a ‘thesis by publication’, which is permitted by the guidelines set down by the University of Adelaide Graduate Centre¹. This thesis therefore comprises a collection of published research papers and under-review manuscripts, constituting a body of work that focuses on constructions of the topic of dementia risk-prevention. I chose this format for several reasons. First, I wished to share my research with peers by publishing my work in journals at the earliest opportunity. Second, the peer review process allowed me to receive criticism from experienced peers in the fields of qualitative health and psychological research. Finally, the format provided me with the opportunity to examine how the topics of dementia risk and prevention are constructed and negotiated in various public areas, and consider prevalent themes and issues present in these different contexts.

This thesis consists of four manuscripts that are formatted according to relevant journal publication guidelines. Currently, two studies have been accepted for publication and two are under review. Analytical chapters reflect the order in which the manuscripts were authored, not the chronological order of publication. Although each chapter includes an introduction and defines its own method, I have provided an introduction chapter and an overarching methodology chapter to: situate this project in the context of previous research; provide a rationale for the analysis presented in this dissertation; and rationalise why the analytic approaches used in this thesis are suited to the topics under investigation.

¹ <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/graduatecentre/handbook/07-thesis/>

Publications

Work contained in this thesis has been published elsewhere, or is currently under peer-review:

Chapter 4: Study Two

Lawless, M., & Augoustinos, M. (2017). Brain health advice in the news: Managing notions of individual responsibility in media discourse on cognitive decline and dementia. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 14(1), 62-80.

Chapter 5: Study Three

Lawless, M., Augoustinos, M., & LeCouteur, A. (in press). 'Your Brain Matters': Issues of risk and responsibility in online dementia prevention information. *Qualitative Health Research*.

Under review

Chapter 3: Study One

Lawless, M., Augoustinos, M., & LeCouteur, A. 'This revolution, real plasticity': Constructions of promise and scepticism in news discourse on neuroplasticity and dementia risk-prevention.

Chapter 6: Study Four

Lawless, M., Augoustinos, M., & LeCouteur, A. Dementia on Facebook: Requesting information and advice about dementia risk-prevention on social media.