Dementia Patients as Discursively Constructed in Taiwanese Newspapers: Taking United Daily News Samples as Examples

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Abstract
As the prevalence of dementia continues to rise, improving public awareness of this disease is of growing importance. Newspapers are among the most influential sources of information on dementia, with considerable power to reinforce negative stereotypes about it. Prompted by the scarcity of scholarly literature on portrayals of dementia patients in Asian contexts, the present study examined the relevant news coverage in one Taiwanese newspaper (*United Daily News*) during two years, 1999 and 2019. Specifically, it explored the linguistic features whereby people with dementia were represented, and the ideological implications of such discourse, in terms of role allocation and referential strategies. Among such implications are apparent increases over the past two decades in the discursive associations between dementia and aging, and between dementia and vulnerability; and this, in turn, seems to have boosted the incidence of ageist and otherwise problematic portrayals of dementia sufferers as a homogeneous social group. Given the study's findings that the sampled newspaper paints people with dementia in Taiwan in a mostly negative light, it raises concerns about discrimination and stigmatization that could be triggered as consequences of such coverage.

Keywords: Older People, Dementia, News Representations, Critical Discourse Analysis, Taiwan

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Background

Information about Dementia

Dementia refers to various progressive and irreversible syndromes that involve the loss of cognitive functions, including memory, communication, problem-solving, reasoning, and orientation in time and/or space, as well as changes in personality (National Institute on Aging, 2017; Banovic et al., 2018)**.** Dementia can be categorized into different types including Alzheimer's disease (AD), the most common type; Lewy Body dementia; vascular dementia; frontotemporal dementia; and mixed dementia (van der Filer & Scheltens, 2005; World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

While the main risk factor for dementia is increasing age (Lai et al., 2012; Phillipson et al., 2014), this does not imply either that the disease is a normal part of aging, or that it exclusively affects elderly people (WHO, 2018). Other risk factors for the disease include diabetes, smoking, mid-life hypertension, and mid-life depression (WHO, 2018).

Prevalence of Dementia

Due to medical advancements, life expectancy has risen, and this phenomenon has indirectly led to an increasing population of dementia patients (van der Filer & Scheltens, 2005; Fuh & Wang, 2008; Bishop & Yankner, 2010). Owing to the increasing number of elderly people in Taiwan, the population of dementia patients is expected to soar dramatically. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Health and Welfare (2020), its total population of dementia sufferers is expected to more than triple over the next forty years, to 880,000.

The global prevalence of dementia patients is estimated to grow at about the same pace: from nearly 59 million in 2020 to 152 million in 2050 (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2020). Moreover, Alzheimer's Disease International (2010, 2012, 2015, 2020) has expressed concern that actual rates of this disease keep growing faster than expected. In 2015, the same organization conducted a study of the regional distribution of dementia patients, which concluded that 49% were from Asia. As such, data on media portrayals of and public attitudes toward dementia from Asian countries including Taiwan may be disproportionately relevant to efforts to respond to the growing numbers of people with this condition.

Impact of the Media

People are constantly exposed to information derived from the mass media, which can be extremely influential on their world views. In particular, mass-media content can represent social groups in misleading ways that are nevertheless widely believed to be true (Graber, 1980). As Howitt (2013) pointed out, one feature of the mass media is its power to define reality for its audience, and thus affect their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes (see also Gerbner et al., 1986). Given that media portrayals of social groups could shape the ways we see them, when such messages are untruthful, it is reasonable to expect that the consequences could include discrimination or misunderstanding, which could then further influence our interactions with such groups (Wang, 1998).

Accordingly, this study takes older people living with dementia to be a social group, and focuses on Taiwanese news representations of that group as a potential source of misleading perspectives on it.

Literature Review

Various prior studies have investigated news representations of dementia. Kirkman (2006), for instance, found that in New Zealand newspapers from 1996 to 2002, AD was depicted as a stealer of patients' lives, and military metaphors were used to describe the disease as an enemy for people to fight against.

Clarke (2006), meanwhile, found that in American and Canadian magazine articles about AD published between 1991 and 2001, the voices of people with it were largely absent. In particular, there were few references to their desires or needs, which reinforced an idea that people with AD were absent, helpless, or did not deserve dignity. Subsequently, Kang et al. (2010) reported that in American TV news about AD, more attention was given to treatment, personal stories, celebrity connections, and policy rather than causes, signs, or diagnosis of the disease.

Kessler and Schwender (2012) studied visual representations of elderly people with dementia in German weekly news magazines published between 2000 and 2009, and found an increase in the number of such portrayals over the course of that period. Female and extremely old characters were preferred as models of this condition, and the images tended to be exaggerated in an overly positive direction. The authors speculated that negativity was avoided by these magazines so as not to stoke their readers' fear of developing dementia, but noted that such idealized portrayals could cause the public to underestimate the challenges of living with dementia.

Van Gorp and Vercruysse (2012) found that the most dominant images of dementia in Belgian public discourse utilized the "dualism of body and mind" (p. 1,277) to emphasize the presence of bodies with no minds, i.e., the loss of personal identity. Doyle et al. (2012) focused on qualitative change in Australian news reports on dementia over the periods from 2000/2001 to 2006/2007. Positive changes were evident in the use of less dynamic and sensationalized headlines and content, and less outdated, negative, and inappropriate language. Also, the examined news provided an increasing amount of useful information about what services for dementia patients were available. However, negative changes were also found: for instance, a greater emphasis on the illness, as opposed to the individuals who suffered from it. Medical content became more accurate, but more headlines more inaccurate, and/or less consistent with the content. The present study, like Doyle et al.'s (2012), attempts to identify changes over time, but in portrayals of older people with dementia, as opposed to dementia the condition.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA), which can uncover social structures and their functions via examination of oral and/or written discourse. In particular, CDA can be used to identify abuse of power and inequalities.

CDA of news reports about older people with dementia could help us decode cultural conceptualizations of them as a social group, and the ideological attributions to them. Such analysis of the nature of Taiwanese news messages regarding dementia is expected to enable the researchers to identify potential cultural discrimination against the elderly and those with dementia.

Data Collection

To achieve this study's main research goal, of identifying historical changes in how older people with dementia have been portrayed in Taiwanese news contexts, the researchers chose to collect data from a single paper, *United Daily News,* a very popular quality news in Taiwan. All of this publication's content is available in the database called United Knowledge Base, which contains about 12 million news items released from 1951 to 2020 (United Daily News Groups, 2020).

Two sampling years separated by a 20-year period were chosen. The examined data were searched in four randomly chosen months (see Tables 1 and 2 for details). The three keywords used to locate relevant articles were: chi-dai (癡呆 feeble), AD (阿茲海默症), and people with dementia (失智者).

Table 1. Sampling Months, *United Daily News*

Year of publication	Sampling months
1999	March, April, September, December
2019	February, June, September, November

Table 2. Total Article Numbers and References in *United Daily News*, by Sampling Year

Year of publication	Total article numbers/total references to people with dementia
1999	21 articles with 274 references
2019	51 articles with 2,094 references

Data Analysis

Van Leeuwen's (2008) CDA framework for interpreting media representations of social groups was employed. In particular, the two dimensions of that framework that were targeted in the present research were *role allocation* and *referential strategies*.

Role allocation, i.e., description of the actions of social actors, is further subdivided into *activation* and *passivation*. In this case, a finding of activation would imply that dementia patients were portrayed as active or dynamic agents in various activities. Passivation, on the other hand, would reflect depictions of dementia patients as subjected to certain actions and beneficialized of the actions as reported in the news. Further, passivation could be realized in the depiction of such a person with dementia as a "carrier in an effective attribute process" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 34), that is, someone given certain attributions in the news articles.

According to van Leeuwen (2008), referential strategies are likewise further subdivided into two types: genericization and specification. When dementia patients are generalized, they are not given specific names but portrayed as a general group. When they are specified, on the other hand, they are treated as individuals with names and/or personal identities. In such cases, because they are not simply assimilated into a social group with homogeneous characteristics, readers are likely to feel closer to them (Chen, 2015).

Findings

The present study's findings regarding historical change in news representations of older people with dementia in *United Daily News* between 1999 and 2019 can be divided into three patterns. Each is discussed in turn below.

Increasing Association with Older Age

The clearest pattern of change was an increasing association between people with dementia and reportage of their chronological ages. Specifically, advanced ages were cited almost five times more frequently in 2019 than in 1999 (Table 3), not only as older-age identity markers, but also by way of explaining or justifying the article subjects' dementia.

Table 3. References to Chronological Age, by Dataset

Periods	References to dementia patients' chronological older age
1999	4
2019	19

Moreover, address forms illustrative of older age, such as older woman, elderly woman, older man, and elderly man, were employed frequently in this context in 2019 (n=21), but not at all in 1999.

Such representational changes could arguably give readers the impression that dementia is only associated with older people, or that is more likely to occur at ages of 70 and above. The ideological effect of such a representational change could reinforce ageism and other forms of discrimination against older people, by creating a misleading impression that simply being old – rather than diabetes, smoking, mid-life hypertension, and mid-life depression (WHO, 2018) – is the main or only cause of dementia.

Growing Vulnerability

The second main pattern of representational change over time in *United Daily News* reports about people with dementia consisted of an increasing emphasis on their vulnerability, in light of the researchers' analysis of their activated and passivated roles in verbal processes (Table 4). Further evidence for this is provided by the use of adjectives and adjective phrases such as *worsening* (symptoms), *alone*, and *spaced out* (Table 5).

Table 4. Incidence of Activation and Passivation

	Receiving assistance	Given care	Found after getting lost	Cheated	Deprived of property
1999	3	29	7	0	0
2019	18	52	45	9	9

Table 5. Adjectives to Depict Dementia Patients

	Worsening (symptoms)	Mentally disordered	Alone	Abnormal (behavior)	Spaced out
1999	2	1	0	2	0
2019	9	1	7	2	5

Increasing Categorization into a Homogenous Group

Lastly, as compared with 1999, people with dementia were much more likely to be categorized as a social group rather than specified as identifiable individuals, e.g., via the use of their full names (Table 6). The incidence of genericization more than quadrupled between the two sampling periods, though interestingly, specification also grew slightly, from 2.9% to 3.4% of all mentions. This representational change indicates that people with dementia were increasingly seen as a homogeneous group, bearing perhaps only the features mentioned in Tables 4 and 5). Certainly, it was more difficult to identify their personhood in *United Daily News* items about them from 2019 than in such items from 1999.

Table 6. Genericization and Specification in References to People with Dementia

	Genericization	Specification
1999	35	1
2019	149	5

Discussion and Conclusions

The ways of depicting dementia sufferers in the randomly sampled *United Daily News* reports from 1999 and 2019 were mainly negative and derogatory, and this problem was worse in the more recent material. Growth over time was noted in depictions of vulnerability, the strong association of dementia with chronological age, and genericization; and this seems likely to have triggered negative attitudes among readers, possibly leading to discrimination against and stigmatization of people with dementia. In particular, the increasing emphasis on links between this health condition and older age may create a false public perception that the main risk factor for the condition is age (Bond et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2005; Mahoney et al., 2005; Cahill et al., 2015). These changes, as realized in the three patterns discussed in the Findings section, above, could further marginalize people with dementia in Taiwan, and even potentially boost discrimination towards older people who do not have dementia.

However, this study has been limited by its focus on just one type of mass media. Therefore, it is recommended that future research on this topic incorporate other forms of media such as films, TV programs, and/or social-networking sites.

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