Giving Dementia a Face? The Portrayal of Older People With Dementia in German Weekly News Magazines Between the Years 2000 and 2009

Eva-Marie Kessler1 and Clemens Schwender2

1Department of Psychological Ageing Research, Institute of Psychology, Network Aging Research, Heidelberg University, Germany.
2Fachgebiet Medienmanagement, Hochschule der populären Künste, Berlin.

Objectives. We investigated photographic depictions of older people with dementia in news magazines according to their frequency as well as observable characteristics of the characters.

Method. We examined all 2,604 photos appearing in articles identified using the key words “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” published in the four major German weekly news magazines between 2000 and 2009. According to the body text and/or the legend, 154 characters with dementia were identified. Trained judges rated the age and gender of each character as well as the emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context of the characters.

Results. Visual representations of characters with dementia linearly increased across time (both in terms of absolute and relative figures). Women were shown more often than men. Young–old and old–old characters were depicted equally often. Characters were mostly depicted as having positive emotions and good functional health. A large majority of characters were shown in individualized contexts and together with social partners. Only 2 social partners displayed negative emotions, and he/she was a “helper” in less than one third of cases.

Discussion. Despite the overall low frequency of photos of older people with dementia, dementia seems to have “acquired a face” across the past decade. Although our analysis revealed a heterogeneous portrayal of older people with dementia, “positive” representations clearly prevailed.

Key Words: Alzheimer’s disease—Dementia—Gender stereotypes—Mass media—News magazines—Old-age stereotypes.

The media might be a central source of information about dementia for the majority of people, particularly as only some parts of the population (e.g., 44% in the United States) have a family member and/or a friend with dementia (MetLife Foundation, 2011). (Respondents in this study were asked about friends or family members with Alzheimer’s disease [AD]. However, we assume that laypeople generally do not differentiate between AD and other forms of dementia. We therefore refer interchangeably to dementia and AD.) In the article, we complement “real-life” research on dementia by investigating the portrayal of people with dementia in German weekly news magazines. With very few exceptions (Clarke, 2006; Kirkman, 2006; Segers, 2007), media representations of dementia have not been systematically investigated.

Photos are the main entry points into reading (Garcia & Stark, 1991). In the current study, we used photos published in German news magazines between the years 2000 and 2009 in order to analyze how often photos of older people with dementia (PWD) appear. Furthermore, we used a set of observable indicators in order to analyze how PWD are depicted, including their emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context. These indicators are part and parcel of a dementia-specific concept of quality of life (QOL; e.g., Lawton, 1997; Ready & Ott, 2003). In addition, age and gender of the characters were assessed.

Overall, this study aims at objectively and systematically evaluating how German news magazines portray people with dementia. Throughout our investigation, we consider photographic portrayals of PWD in relation to (negative) subjective representations of dementia, objective data on people living with dementia according to gerontological research, and the business interests of the media industry to achieve wide media coverage.

Negative Subjective Representations of Dementia

Recent surveys have indicated that dementia arouses a great deal of negative emotions (Anderson, Day, Beard, Reed, & Wu, 2009). Dementia was the second most feared condition after cancer in the United Kingdom and the United States (Alzheimer’s Research Trust, 2008; MetLife Foundation, 2011). The negative perceptions of dementia seem to be associated with beliefs about subjective well-being when living with dementia. For instance, people older than 75 years reported wanting to live only a few days longer when forced to imagine that they had developed dementia (Lawton, 1999). Adult respondents with no family

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history of AD expected to experience very high levels of emotional stress if they were to develop AD (Werner, 2002). Caregivers and doctors tend to rate people with dementia as more depressed than people with dementia rate themselves (Teri & Wagner, 1991). Our study investigates whether these highly negative subjective representations of a life with dementia are also reflected in media representations of dementia in Germany.

Objective Data on People Living With Dementia
“Real-world” gerontological evidence on life with dementia provides an interesting point of comparison for media portrayals of dementia. Epidemiological research indicates that prevalence rates for dementia are higher for women than for men and increase exponentially with age (e.g., Lobo et al., 2000). About 1.07 million moderately or severely demented people were estimated to live in Germany in 2002, according to a study using a large sample of the German Sick Funds with 2.3 million people; about 69% were women (Ziegler & Doblhammer, 2009). Based on results from large-scale epidemiological field studies, 930,000 elderly people in Germany were estimated to suffer from dementia at the end of 1996 (Bickel, 2001). Population projections have expected the number of older PWD to further increase in the next decades, both in Germany and at a global level (Ferri et al., 2005; Ziegler & Doblhammer, 2008). Overall, the population of older PWD has substantially grown in the course of population aging.

Unsurprisingly, data concerning the QOL of PWD indicate a great deal of interindividual variability. Most PWD also have other chronic health conditions, which often result in major functional limitations as dementia progresses (Bynum et al., 2004). Even though depressive states and apathy are frequent among PWD (Lueken et al., 2007; Skoog, 1993), a majority of PWD normatively show more positive emotions than negative emotions across all stages of dementia (Kruse, 2010).

In Germany, the majority (68%) of PWD live at home and are cared for by their children (in-law), followed by partners and nursing services (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2008). Sixty percent of caregivers (for older people in need of support in general) are women (Motel-Klingebiel, Wurm, & Tesch-Römer, 2010). Caregivers often face high prevalence rates of psychopathological strain (Etters, Goodall, & Harrison, 2008).

Media Representations of Dementia as Products of the Media Industry
Media representations of people living with dementia have to be considered in light of the business aims of the media industry. In recent years, there has been an enormous increase in dementia-related research that may interest many readers, including older people, relatives and friends of PWD, or people professionally engaged in dementia care. Furthermore, an increasing number of people are “coming out” and publicly describing their personal experiences with dementia, such as prominent figures like the English writer Iris Murdoch and Richard Taylor, author of the book Alzheimer’s, From the Inside Out. Such personal accounts of life with dementia seem likely to attract readers’ interest and attention far more than either medical or statistical accounts of dementia. As news magazines aim to meet the interests of their target audience, it seems plausible that news magazines may also be involved in the process of popularizing dementia as well as “giving dementia a face.”

At the same time, a few of sociological studies tentatively suggest that a focus on deficits dominates the discourse on dementia in the media (Clarke, 2006; Kirkman, 2006). Accordingly, dementia is shown as a fearsome and costly disease. With regard to age and gender representations of PWD, one study found that two third of characters in movies dealing with dementia between 1970 and 2004 were women; almost all characters were in their seventh or eight decade (Segers, 2007).

Current Study
We investigated the frequency of articles as well as photographic depictions of PWD in German weekly news magazines between the years 2000 and 2009. Furthermore, trained judges rated the characters with dementia in the photos according to sociodemographic characteristics (age and gender) and to an additional set of observable characteristics, including their emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context. The latter four indicators represent central dimensions of QOL in multidimensional measurement approaches to QOL in PWD (e.g., Becker, Kruse, Schröder, & Seidl, 2005; Lawton, 1997). We also investigated whether news magazine representations quantitatively and/or qualitatively changed over the 10-year interval.

We derived our hypotheses from a consideration of normative negative subjective representations of dementia, objective data on people living with dementia, and the goals of the media industry. We hypothesized that the number of characters with dementia—along with the number of articles on dementia and the number of photos with characters with dementia—linearly increased from 2000 to 2009 (Hypothesis 1a). Furthermore, we expected that in articles concerning dementia, the number of characters with dementia—relative to the total amount of photos shown in the same articles—linearly increased over the past decade (Hypothesis 1b), in other words, that dementia has increasingly “acquired a face.” Based on epidemiological data and previous research on media representations of dementia, we hypothesized that women and old—old characters would be overrepresented in news magazine photos of PWD as compared with objective figures (Hypothesis 2).
Given the preponderance of negative subjective representations of dementia and a deficit-oriented media discourse on dementia, we expected that PWD might be disproportionately portrayed as having negative emotions and low levels of physical functioning, being in hospitals or institutions, and being alone and/or dependent on helpers who are shown in a negative mood (Hypothesis 3a, undirected). Moreover, it is also possible that portrayals have changed over time, although it is unclear in which direction. We explored whether the portrayal in terms of the observable characteristics changed between the first and the second half of the investigated time period (Hypothesis 3b, undirected).

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of articles and photos identified using a full text search with the keyword “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” in the archival databases of four German weekly news magazines (Die Zeit, Der Stern, Der Fokus, and Der Spiegel) between 2000 and 2009. All selected news magazines cover political, social, and economic topics. Compared with daily news, they provide more background information and opinion, thereby contributing to the formation and change of public opinion. Articles include primarily photos specifically taken for the news magazine rather than stock photography. The four news magazines were selected because of their large circulation; they are the four largest news magazines in Germany, with a circulation of at least 500,000 (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e. V., 2011). The selection of news magazines covers a wide spectrum of political viewpoints, including liberal, social-democratic, and conservative. The audience is typically rather higher than lower educated (Meyn, 2004).

Every article with at least one of the key words was selected for further analysis. This procedure resulted in \( N = 708 \) articles, with 2,604 photos. Two independent judges (women aged 29 and 30 years) then selected the photos that portrayed at least one person with dementia according to the legend and/or the article text. Interrater reliability was \( \kappa = .97 \). This selection process resulted in \( N_F = 122 \) photos in \( N_F = 71 \) articles (\( F \): “frequency sample”). Excluding photos shown multiple times (\( n = 13 \) photos in \( n = 11 \) articles) resulted in a subsample consisting of \( N_C = 109 \) photos shown in \( N_C = 60 \) articles (\( C \): “character sample”).

As one photo can show more than one character, the first author then identified and numbered all characters in each of the \( N_C = 109 \) dementia photos. Characters appearing in a crowd or otherwise not individually identifiable were excluded. The two judges were then instructed to identify whether each character was portrayed as having dementia or not according to the legend and/or the text body. Interrater reliability was \( \kappa = .92 \). In total, \( N_{CD} = 136 \) characters with dementia (\( CD \): character with dementia) and \( N_{CSP} = 89 \) characters without dementia (\( SP \): “social partner” of a character with dementia) were identified in the character sample (when including photos shown multiple times: \( N_{F,SP} = 154 \) characters with dementia and \( N_{F,SP} = 95 \) social partners).

**Coding Procedure**

Six pairs of independent judges coded the characters in the photos for gender, age, emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context. All judges were women and between 28 and 38 years old. (We could not rule out the fact that the judges’ age and gender influenced their estimation of characteristics of the older characters and therefore decided to employ judges from the same age and gender group. At the same time, studies on age stereotypes [e.g., Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994] have shown that young, middle-aged, and older adults as well as women and men basically share similar representations of old age. We thus believe that ratings from older and male judges will not fundamentally differ from that of our judges.) All judges had a masters degree in psychology and were working as clinical psychologists at the time of the rating. (The advantage of choosing clinical psychologists as judges was that professional expertise in clinical psychology involves rich knowledge about emotional expressions as well as the ability to evaluate psychological information as objectively as possible.) The judges were recruited from a clinical training program and received €65 for participating in the study. The judges were all blind to the hypotheses of the study. To avoid activating the raters’ subjective representations of old age and dementia, they were only told that the study was about photos of people in magazines. A follow-up study showed that none of the judges had assumed that the study was about portrayals of dementia. The rating of each dimension was conducted separately by one pair of judges. Each judge was presented a printout of the photos and a coding sheet.

**Measures**

A first pair of judges (Pair 1) rated the characters with dementia according to gender (male, female) and age (younger than 60 years, 60–80 years, or older than 80 years). Judges were instructed to base their age judgments primarily on the faces of the characters to avoid contextual confounds that may have led to younger or older age estimations. In addition, judges were trained to assess emotional expressions (Pair 2), physical functioning (Pair 3), physical surroundings (Pair 4), and whether the social partner was a “helper” (Pair 5). Training was based on a manual and lasted 1.5–2.5 hr. The judges were trained to apply stipulated definitions for each dimension and were given examples of idealized characters for each category of a dimension. The judges practiced to rate characters from
photos not used in the study until interrater consistency was established.

Social partners were also assessed for gender (Pair 1), emotional expressions (Pair 2), and age-group (Pair 5). Judges coded information as “missing” due to absent information in up to 22.8% of the cases (see Results). This is not surprising as photos sometimes only show a small fragment of a scene. Reliabilities ranged from $\kappa = .75$ to $.97$. Table 1 displays the reliabilities for all measures.

**Emotional expression.**—The judges (Pair 2) coded whether a character (both characters with dementia and social partners) displayed positive, negative, apathetic, or neutral emotional expression. Positive affect included pleasure and contentment (typically indicated by smiling, lifted cheeks, contraction of the orbicularis oculi) as well as interest (eyes wide open, lifted eyebrows). Negative affect included sadness (frowning, eyes turned down, eyes drooping), worry/anxiety (lines across forehead, eyes wide, tight facial muscles), and anger (drawing eyebrows together, narrowing eyes, pursing lips). Apathy included lack of interest and emotional indifference as indicated by a droopy mouth together with unfocused gaze/eyes half open. Emotional expression was coded as “neutral” if the expression could not be described as any of the other three categories. The coding was based on two measures designed to measure the range of emotions in PWD, namely, the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Affect Rating Scale (Lawton, von Haintsma, & Klapper, 1996) and the Heidelberg Instrument for the assessment of QOL in people suffering from dementia (Becker et al., 2005).

**Physical functioning.**—The judges (Pair 3) coded the functional health status of the character as very low (person shown with life-supporting equipment), low (person shown in recumbent position together with signs of frailty and immobility, e.g., an emaciated person in a nursing bed with grab handles), moderate (person sits or stands, but uses technical and/or social support such as a wheelchair/cane or is held by another person while standing/walking), or high (person sits or stands, no signs of functional impairment, e.g., person carrying a bag or walking on the street).

**Physical surroundings.**—The judges (Pair 4) coded the environmental context as private, medical, in public, or institutional. The environmental context was coded as “private” if the character was shown in an individualized room with personal belongings (e.g., a person on a couch before a wall with photos, a person in a rocking chair before a bookshelf); “medical” if there were signs of a hospital or a medical practice (e.g., a person next to medical equipment or in front of a reception desk); “in public” if the character was shown in a public setting such as a supermarket, a street, a fitness studio, or on a train; and “institutional” if the context was an indoor nonindividualized living environment (no signs of personal belongings, e.g., a person lying in a standard nursing bed).

**Social context.**—The judges (Pair 5) decided whether the social partners (i.e., characters without dementia) were “helpers.” A character was coded as a helper if he/she was shown feeding, backing, and washing the character with dementia, or if he/she was dressed as a physician, nurse, or other professional caregiver (e.g., a person wearing a lab coat). In addition, judges assessed the social partners’ gender (Pair 1), age (0–19 years, 20–59 years, or older than 60 years; Pair 5), and emotional expression (Pair 2).

**Statistical Analyses**

We used the frequency sample, including photos that appeared multiple times ($N_F = 122$ photos, depicting $N_{FD} = 154$ characters with dementia and $N_{FSP} = 95$ social partners), to calculate the frequencies of appearance of photos in articles and characters in photos. (One photo can show more than one character [with and without dementia]. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between number of photos and number of characters on photos.) To test the hypothesized linear (absolute and relative) increase of dementia depictions from 2000 to 2009, we used regression analyses. We used the character sample, which excluded the photos appearing multiple times, to analyze the characters’ age, gender, emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context including characteristics of the social partners ($N_C = 109$ photos, depicting $N_{CD} = 136$ characters with dementia and $N_{CSP} = 89$ characters without dementia. (We relied on the frequency sample in order to cover the quantity of dementia depictions. The character sample was used in order to equally weigh the photos when investigating the overall quality of representations. One article featuring $n = 14$ characters with dementia was identified as an outlier in the box plot diagram. In the regression analysis, we replaced this outlier by the mean score of the photos with characters with dementia across all $N = 60$ articles [$M = 2.3$]. The same article did not significantly differ in terms of sociodemographic and other observable characteristics.) We used chi-square tests to investigate the frequency distribution of categories across each of the observable indicators.
RESULTS

None of the observed dimensions differed significantly between the first time interval (2000–2004) and second time interval (2005–2009). Therefore, we report the results for the complete time period.

Frequency of Appearance

**Absolute frequency.**—In contrast to our hypothesis, the number of articles with “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” as key words did not linearly increase between 2000 and 2009, \( B = 1.43, \beta = .28, t(9) = 0.81, ns; R^2 = 0.08; F(1,8) = 0.65, ns \); nor did the overall number of photos in the articles, \( B = 6.57, \beta = .34, t(9) = 1.01, ns; R^2 = 0.11; F(1,8) = 1.03, ns \). However, as expected, the number of photos depicting characters with dementia increased linearly within the investigated time interval: \( B = 1.75, \beta = .71, t(9) = 2.83, p = .022; R^2 = 0.50; F(1,8) = 8.13, p = .022 \). As depicted in Figure 1, there was also a linear increase in the number of characters with dementia depicted on the photos: \( B = 2.38, \beta = .786, t(9) = 3.60, p = .007; R^2 = 0.62; F(1,8) = 12.95, p = .007 \).

**Relative frequency.**—In order to make sure that the increase in the number of (photos depicting) characters with dementia were not driven by an overall increase in the number of photographs published in the same articles, it was important to calculate relative frequencies in addition to absolute frequencies. For each article, we calculated the ratio of the number of photos depicting characters with dementia to the total amount of photos. As expected, there was a trend that the average relative number of photos of characters with dementia linearly increased across the 10-year interval: \( B = 0.007, \beta = .599, t(9) = 2.117; R^2 = 0.36; F(1,8) = 4.48, p = .067 \). Similarly, we calculated the ratio of the number of characters with dementia to the total amount of photos for each article. As shown in Figure 2, the average relative number of characters with dementia linearly increased: \( B = 0.008, \beta = .638, t(9) = 2.34; R^2 = 0.407; F(1,8) = 5.50, p = .047 \). As you can also see in this figure, the average relative number of characters with dementia per year ranged between 0.7% and 14%.

Distribution Across Observable Indicators

Table 2 gives an overview of the assessed dimensions, the coding categories, and the frequency distributions across the categories.

**Gender** of the characters with dementia was rated in 96.3% of the cases. There were significantly more characters categorized as women than as men in the sample of characters with dementia: \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 131) = 8.313, p = .003 \).

**Age-group** of the characters with dementia was rated in 91.9% of the cases. Judges rated nearly as many characters with dementia as “between 60 and 80 years” as “older than 80 years”: \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 121) = 0.074, ns \). Only 2.9% of the characters were rated as “younger than 60 years.”

**Emotional expression** was coded in 77.2% of the cases. The emotional expression of the characters with dementia was not distributed equally across the four categories, \( \chi^2(3, N_{CD} = 105) = 32.56, p \leq .001 \). Specifically, the most frequent emotional expression coded was positive, followed by neutral and negative. Judges rated the emotional expression of 3.7% of the characters as apathetic. Follow-up analyses indicated that characters with dementia were judged to...
display positive emotional expression significantly more often than either negative emotional expression, \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 79) = 7.56, p = .006 \), or apathy. \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 79) = 30.08, p \leq .001 \).

Physical functioning was coded in 86.8% of the cases. The functional health of the characters with dementia was not distributed equally across the four categories: \( \chi^2(3, N_{CD} = 118) = 105.05, p \leq .001 \). Specifically, the most frequent category of functional health was high, followed by moderate, low, and very low. Follow-up analyses indicated that the highest category of physical functioning was depicted significantly more frequently than the remaining categories together: \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 118) = 8.678, p = .003 \).

Physical surroundings.—Physical surroundings were coded in 94.1% of the cases. The environmental context of the characters with dementia was not distributed equally across the four categories: \( \chi^2(3, N_{CD} = 128) = 139.06, p \leq .001 \). Specifically, the most frequent category of physical surroundings was private, followed by public, institutional, and medical. Follow-up analyses showed that characters were depicted significantly more often in private contexts than in the remaining three categories together: \( \chi^2(1, N_{CD} = 128) = 18.0, p \leq .001 \).

Social context.—Across all of the photos, characters with dementia were shown with an average of \( M = 1.53 \) social partners. A total of 34 (25%) characters with dementia were shown without a social partner. When a social partner was shown, he/she was not a helper in 68.9% of the cases. That is, only a significantly smaller percentage of social partners were classified as a helper: \( \chi^2(1, N_{SP} = 87) = 15.74, p \leq .001 \).

Gender of the social partners was rated in 88.9% of the cases. Social partners were significantly more often women than men, \( \chi^2(1, N_{SP} = 80) = 14.45, p \leq .001 \). Age of the social partners was coded in 89.7% of the cases. Social partners’ rated age was not distributed equally across the three categories, \( \chi^2(2, N_{SP} = 78) = 39.31, p \leq .001 \). Specifically, social partners were most frequently 20–59 years old, followed by characters older than 60 years and those 0–19 years old. Follow-up analyses indicated that social partners were categorized as belonging to the middle age-group (20–59 years) significantly more often than the oldest group (>60 years), \( \chi^2(1, N_{SP} = 71) = 13.54, p \leq .001 \). Furthermore, social partners were categorized as belonging to the oldest group significantly more often than the youngest group (0–19 years), \( \chi^2(1, N_{SP} = 71) = 33.38, p \leq .001 \).

Emotional expression of the social partners was coded in 78.2% of the cases. The emotional expression of the social partners was not distributed equally across the four categories, \( \chi^2(2, N_{SP} = 105) = 35.41, p \leq .001 \). Specifically, the most frequent emotional expression coded was positive, followed by neutral. Only two social partners displayed negative emotional expression. Follow-up analyses revealed that social partners were judged to display positive emotional expression significantly more often than negative emotional expression, \( \chi^2(1, N_{SP} = 79) = 4.90, p = .026 \).

**DISCUSSION**

Besides personal experiences with PWD, media representations might likewise influence subjective representations of life with dementia. Subjective representations of life with dementia, in turn, may constitute a major factor in how people interact with PWD, how they plan their future, how they interpret evidence of age-related cognitive changes, or how they exploit social and health care resources. Therefore, it is important to study media representations of dementia both in terms of quantity and quality. In order to investigate how nonfictional mass media portray PWD, we examined all 2,604 photos appearing in articles identified using the key words “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” published in the four major German weekly news magazines between 2000 and 2009.

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**Table 2. Frequency Distributions Across Coding Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Results (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)*</td>
<td>&lt;60</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60–80</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;80</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional expression*</td>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical functioning*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>19.9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical surroundings*</td>
<td>Private</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medical</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In public</td>
<td>17.7</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social partner b</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper no</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No information</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>0–19 years</td>
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<td>No information</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* Percentages are based on \( N_{CD} = 136 \) characters with dementia. Percentages are based on \( N_{SP} = 89 \) characters without dementia.
Increasing Visibility of Characters With Dementia

Surprisingly, articles with “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” as key words did not increase over time. However, visual representations of PWD linearly increased over time, as indicated by an increase in the absolute number of photos depicting characters with dementia (as well as of characters with dementia depicted in these photos). There was also an increase in the relative number of photos and characters with dementia (i.e., relative to the total amount of photos), ensuring that this effect was not driven by an overall increase in the number of photos published in the same articles. Overall, our findings suggest that dementia has “acquired a face” over the investigated time interval.

The increasing number of photographic characters with dementia in German news magazines in the past decade parallels the rising number of PWD in reality. Based on population estimates and projections (e.g., Bickel, 2001; Ziegler & Doblhammer, 2008, 2009), it can be argued that the number of PWD has increased over the same time period, both in Germany and at the global level. Our results also suggest that dementia is increasingly being depicted as a phenomenon affecting individuals. It seems that PWD, as opposed to dementia as a medical diagnosis, have become more prominent in German news magazines over the course of the past decade. This trend is in line with the increasing visibility of people living with dementia in other forms of media (e.g., as authors of books about their personal experiences). This trend is also in line with the increasing number of empirical studies having investigated subjective perceptions of dementia by those directly affected (e.g., Steeman, de Casterlé, Godderis, & Grypdonck, 2006). The increasing number of photographic characters with dementia may reflect changes in societal attitudes toward old age and dementia, rather than being a pure reflection of epidemiological reality. Topics concerning demographic change including the aging population seem most likely to have gained publicity.

Importantly, despite the result that the number of photographic characters with dementia has increased during the past decade, we must consider that only \( N_F = 122 \) photos of PWD appeared across a 10-year period in the four weekly news magazines with the largest circulation in Germany. That is, a photograph of at least one person with dementia appeared in only about 1 of 20 issues (based on about 2,120 issues in total). Our results have also shown that even articles identified using the key words “dementia” and “Alzheimer’s” only rarely include photographic depictions of PWD. In 2007, about 1.07 million moderately or severely demented people live in Germany (Ziegler & Doblhammer, 2009). Our results suggest that PWD constitute a less visible segment of the population in German weekly news magazines, which is in line with the heavy underrepresentation of older people (without dementia) compared with reality as well as other age-groups across media genres (e.g., Kessler, Rakoczy, & Staudinger, 2004; Kessler, Schwender, & Bowen, 2010; Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylaenne-McEwen, & Thimm, 2006).

Preponderance of Female and “Old–Old” Characters With Dementia

The much higher frequency of female characters with dementia compared with male characters (about 2:1 ratio) matches actual gender differences in dementia prevalence according to epidemiological data; in Germany, about 69% of PWD are women (Ziegler & Doblhammer, 2009). Our results also correspond to earlier studies that found that female characters with dementia are overrepresented in movies (Segers, 2007). Also in line with reality, dementia was depicted as a phenomenon of old and very old age. The equal distribution between “old–old” and “young–old” characters found in our sample roughly represents reality (prevalence rates of dementia exponentially increase with age, but at the same time, mortality increases). Only two characters with dementia were judged as middle aged, in line with very low prevalence rates of early-onset dementia (Lobo et al., 2000).

In contrast to our findings, research has consistently demonstrated that men and young–old individuals tend to be overrepresented compared with reality in media portrayals of older people (without dementia; Kessler et al., 2010). In the case of dementia, journalists may make use of the gender and old-age stereotype of the incompetent and vulnerable old woman (Kite & Wagner, 2002) as an efficient tool to help readers get a very first understanding of the central topic of the photograph. In other words, older women, relative to older men, may be a more effective visual tool for communicating a central subject matter of articles on dementia. Alternatively and in the light of the characters’ positive depiction in central QOL dimensions (see next section), news magazines may draw on a second dimension of the gender stereotype, namely, that of warmth (Kite & Wagner, 2002). Journalists may assume that depicting “warm” characters attracts readers’ interest and/or evokes fewer negative emotions, which may be particularly important when presenting a potentially “depressing” topic. Interestingly, we found that also for the caregivers, actual gender differences were also more strongly pronounced compared with reality (Motel-Klingebiel et al., 2010).

Potential-Oriented Representations of Characters With Dementia

In contrast to changes in quantitative representations, photos of PWD did not qualitatively (i.e., in terms of emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context) differ between the first and second half of the investigated decade. Although the analysis showed a heterogeneous portrayal of PWD, “positive” (potential-oriented) portrayals clearly dominated in the trained judges’
reliable evaluation of four observable characteristics (emotional expression, physical functioning, physical surroundings, and social context). According to these evaluations, characters with dementia were mostly shown as having positive or at least neutral emotions and being in good functional health. About two of three characters were shown in private individualized contexts rather than in institutional settings such as a nursing home or hospital. Interestingly, about three of four characters with dementia were shown together with a social partner. About half of the social partners displayed positive and only two displayed negative emotions and he/she was a helper in less than one third of the cases. The results of the coding procedure suggest that the majority of characters with dementia were shown as living an autonomous as well as socially integrated life. Overall, the majority of portrayals suggest that QOL in dementia is high, both objectively (i.e., socially engaged, living privately) and subjectively (i.e., experiences positive emotions).

Surely, the majority of these depictions reflected only early stages of dementia. Later stages of dementia that are characterized by high levels of psychopathology, functional impairment, and dependency were rarely portrayed. Furthermore, emotional–motivational problems of PWD such as depression and apathy are underrepresented compared with gerontological findings (Lucken et al., 2007; Skoog, 1993), even if we acknowledge that positive emotions tend to outweigh negative emotions in PWD (Kruse, 2010). High levels of caregiver burden, as indicated by negative affect, were almost completely omitted from the portrayal. This is an interesting finding given the large body of research on caregiver stress (Etters et al., 2008).

Kirkman (2006) argued on the basis of qualitative analysis of news magazines in New Zealand that the media is “a powerful transmitter of stereotypes.” In her study of Canadian news magazines articles, Clarke (2006) identified “the absence of a person with the disease as a person with a voice, with needs and desires” as one of the most notable findings (p. 269). In contrast to these findings, the portrayal of PWD in German news magazines was clearly less negative and may even exaggerate the current reality of living with dementia in a “positive” direction. The current findings suggest that not only are older people without dementia shown in a positively biased way (as vital, productive, and socially integrated; Kessler et al., 2004, 2010; Zhang et al., 2006) but also older PWD. Media seems to present the positive outcomes that are potentially possible when promoted through favorable medical, psychological, environmental, and social interventions.

Media producers might make use of counterrepresentations to subjective negative representations of dementia in order to grab the attention of the readers. Positive depictions stand out because they are “hopeful.” Alternatively, one might argue that journalists might shy away from showing overly negative images of PWD that may arouse fear in the reader who may thus avoid reading the article. Given that dementia arouses a great deal of negative emotions, journalists may avoid using photographic depictions of PWD based on the assumption that these pictures will remind readers of their own vulnerability and finitude.

How Might These Depictions Affect Readers?

We would like to suggest that the increasing frequency of appearance of PWD makes living with dementia less of a taboo. For people affected with the disease as well as their relatives, the portraits of PWD may contribute to the feeling that their situation is represented in the public. Furthermore, the sharp contrast between news magazine portrayals and subjective representations of QOL with dementia may encourage readers to think differently about dementia. Currently, metaphors like “the living dead” have been commonly used to describe people in the advanced stages of dementia (Aquilina & Hughes, 2006). Similarly, PWD are often described as living in an isolated “dementia world” and unable to participate in social life (Sabat, 2006). The potential-oriented media depictions of PWD may help media consumers to recognize that living with dementia does not necessarily have to result in isolation and dependency and thus may help to mitigate concerns about developing dementia.

However, positively biased portrayals of PWD can also have negative consequences if they lead to underestimations of the challenges of living with dementia. Overly positive portrayals of living with dementia may ultimately leave people unprepared (psychologically, financially, and otherwise) to deal with the inherent losses that accompany the dementia process. Furthermore, the idealized world of news magazine photography may lead policy makers and members of society to reduce efforts to create contexts that increase QOL for people living with dementia.

Limitations

The generalizability of our findings may be somewhat limited, as our sample of news magazines may represent particularly German media traditions and/or German attitudes toward dementia. Further research is needed to investigate cultural differences in the media representations of older PWD. Furthermore, our results are clearly limited to our specific sample of German weekly news magazines with the largest circulation. Their media representations of dementia probably differ from those of other types of print media such as yellow press newspapers. Another limitation of our study is that the judges in this study were women and relatively young in comparison with the subjects under investigation. How portrayals of older PWD are perceived by men and by older judges requires empirical testing.

Future research should investigate whether and how visual representations of dementia systematically differ from text-based material on dementia. Texts may be better
suited to communicate the leading symptoms of dementia such as memory loss, and other signs of psychopathology. Possibly, texts are thus more likely to transport deficit-oriented representations of dementia. Future studies are also needed to investigate how visual depictions of PWD differ across other forms of mass media (e.g., daily newspapers, movies, cartoons). Such an analysis would be helpful given the varying target audiences and goals of different forms of media.

Finally, the relationship between media consumers and media portrayals of dementia—which is surely complex and bidirectional—warrants further empirical study. For instance, how do media portrayals of PWD potentially affect subjective representations of dementia as well as psychological and physical outcomes? In the current study, the judges were blind to our hypotheses. Future studies should test how media representations are rated by people who are informed in advance that the people in the photos are living with dementia.

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Correspondence
Correspondence should be addressed to Eva-Marie Kessler, PhD, Department of Psychological Ageing Research, Institute of Psychology, Network Aging Research, Heidelberg University, Bergheimer Straße 20, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany. E-mail: kessler@nar.uni-heidelberg.de.

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