

Prevention, Responsibilization, and Control: A Sociological Analysis of Nursing Practices and Medical Approaches to Dementia

Niklas Petersen

Summary of the dissertation

This dissertation analyzes contemporary scientific and media discourses on dementia, as well as medical and nursing approaches to dementia in long-term care facilities, within the context of the activation and responsibilization of aging, the medicalization and pharmaceuticalization of cognitive impairment, and the economization of care. The study examines which political rationalities and scientific paradigms shape current discourses on dementia and prevention, how stakeholders negotiate contemporary health policy approaches to dementia, and how nursing staff in Germany interpret scientific knowledge on dementia and translate it into care practice within the organizational conditions of long-term care facilities. Empirically, the dissertation focuses on the one hand on approaches to dementia prevention – that is, attempts to delay cognitive decline through activation – and on the other hand on the medical and nursing management of advanced dementia, particularly the use of psychotropic medication to control dementia-related behaviors.

The dissertation consists of four scientific publications:

Media and scientific discourses on dementia

Niklas Petersen & Silke Schicktanz (2021). 'The Experts' Advice: Prevention and Responsibility in German Media and Scientific Discourses on Dementia. *Qualitative Health Research*, 31(11), 2005–2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211014844>

Stakeholder perspectives on dementia prevention and responsibility

Niklas Petersen, Mattia Andreoletti, Alessandro Blasimme, Cynthia Lazzaroni, Annette Leibing und Silke Schicktanz (2026). Disentangling Responsibility: Perspectives on Dementia Prevention from Stakeholders in Canada, Germany, and Switzerland. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 48, (1) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.70126>

Prevention and activation in dementia care

Niklas Petersen (2024). Fate or fault? Nurses' perspectives on dementia prevention in German care facilities. *SSM – Qualitative Research in Health* 6, 100468 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2024.100468>

Psychotropic drugs and control in dementia care

Niklas Petersen (2026). Between compassion and control: nursing ethos, professional responsibilities, limited resources, and the use of psychotropic drugs in dementia care. *SSM – Mental Health*, 8, 100568, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2025.100568>

In *Prevention and Responsibility* (Petersen & Schicktanz, 2021), discourse analysis was used to examine which prevention approaches, concepts of disease, and ascriptions of responsibility shape medical, nursing science, and media debates. The study shows how dementia discourses reflect the rationality of activating health and social policy, which seeks to transform the maintenance of health into a matter of self-care. *Disentangling Responsibility* (Petersen et al., 2026) examines how stakeholders from healthcare, science, policy, and patient advocacy view the growing importance of prevention in health policy and dementia research, which epistemic and normative arguments they use to support different prevention approaches, and how they negotiate the relationship between state and individual responsibility.

Fate or Fault? (Petersen, 2024) and *Between Compassion and Control* (Petersen, 2026) reconstruct how nursing staff interpret medical knowledge and nursing recommendations for dealing with dementia and how they integrate them into care practice within the limited scope for action available in long-term care facilities. The management of dementia—on the one hand oriented toward addressing the individual needs of those in need of care and preserving their autonomy and cognitive resources, and on the other hand driven by the need to contain dementia-related behaviors in order to protect the collective and maintain organizational stability within the care facility—is discussed in the context of the dialectic of mobilization and control in the active society.

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