University of Victoria | Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

CASSANDRA LYNN BROWN

MSc (University of Victoria, 2012)
BSc (Queen's University, 2008)

"Linking Social, Psychological and Lifestyle Factors to Cognitive Decline in Aging: Pathways and Challenges to Optimal Function"

Department of Psychology

Tuesday, December 11, 2018
12:30 P.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B021

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Andrea Piccinin, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Mauricio Garcia-Barrera, Department of Psychology, UVic (Member)
Dr. Karen Kobayashi, Department of Sociology, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Wendy Thornton, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Fayez Gebali, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

The possibility that lifestyle factors may delay or accelerate cognitive decline in aging has garnered significant attention and a considerable body of research has formed. However, investigating the relations between social engagement and cognitive function in aging have been somewhat equivocal in their findings and there is a lack of understanding of the mechanisms by which social engagement may impact cognitive function and the role of factors limiting social engagement. The aim of this dissertation was to build on current understanding of how specific aspects of social relationships relate to cognitive functioning in older adulthood and how these aspects are affected by challenges and barriers to social participation. This dissertation is comprised of three studies addressing several specific research questions. Study one (Chapter 2) examined whether relations with cognitive performance over time differ for structural aspects of social relationships (social network and social contact) versus functional/subjective aspects of social relationships (loneliness and social support) and whether the associations are between cognitive performance and stable, "trait-like" components of social relationships or fluctuating "state-like" components of these constructs, using autoregressive latent trajectory modeling of data from the Health and Retirement Study. Study two (Chapter 3) used a multilevel modeling approach to examine whether the spouses/partners of individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or dementia experience a within person decline in cognitive performance and whether changes in structural and functional/subjective aspects of social relationships interacted with a spouses' diagnosis of memory disease to predict within person change in cognitive performance. Study three (Chapter 4) investigated whether rejection sensitivity, social avoidance, and fears of negative social evaluations were predictive of lack of social participation and loneliness in a sample of Vancouver Island older adults. These factors have previously been investigated in younger adults as risk factors for loneliness and social withdrawal, but social isolation in older adulthood is often attributed to lack of social opportunities. This dissertation demonstrates the importance of considering precise aspects of social relationships, including barriers to social participation, and their relations to cognitive functioning.