Thinking Style and Health Behaviour:
A Dual-Process Approach to the Prediction of Preventive Health Behaviours.

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## Contents

List of tables ......................................................................................................................... x

List of figures ......................................................................................................................... xv

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. xvii

Declaration .............................................................................................................................. xix

Acknowledgement ..................................................................................................................xxi

Overview ................................................................................................................................ xxiii

Dedication ............................................................................................................................... xxiv

### CHAPTER 1. Introduction and literature review. ......................................................... 1

1.1. Preamble .......................................................................................................................... 1

1.2. Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 1

1.2.1. Dual-process models of cognition ........................................................................... 1

1.2.1.1. Type 1 processes ................................................................................................. 2

1.2.1.2. Type 2 processes ................................................................................................. 3

1.2.1.3. Mode of operation .............................................................................................. 3

1.2.1.4. The dual-process view of attitudes ..................................................................... 6

1.2.1.5. Individual differences in processing preferences ................................................. 6

1.2.1.6. Domain-specificity of processing ....................................................................... 14

1.2.1.7. Implications of processing type .......................................................................... 16

1.2.2. Dual-process explanations for health behaviour ...................................................... 19

1.2.2.1. A dual-process model applied to health behaviour ............................................ 21
1.2.2. Predicting health behaviour from personality ........................................23
1.2.3. Health behaviour .........................................................................................27
1.3. Aims of this research ..................................................................................32

CHAPTER 2. Overview of research methodology, samples, and measures ........35
2.1. Research design ..........................................................................................36
2.2. Study 1 (data for Chapter 3) .......................................................................36
2.2.1. Parent study method .................................................................................37
2.2.1.1. Procedure ...............................................................................................37
2.2.1.2. Measures ...............................................................................................39
2.2.1.3. Sample ..................................................................................................39
2.2.1.4. Trial results ..........................................................................................42
2.3. Study 2 (data for Chapters 4, 5, and 6) .........................................................42
## 2.3.1. Study 2 method

- **2.3.1.1. Power considerations.** .......................................................... 43
- **2.3.1.2. Procedure.** .......................................................................... 44
- **2.3.1.3. Measures.** .......................................................................... 48
- **2.3.1.4. Sample.** ............................................................................. 92

### CHAPTER 3. Thinking style as a predictor of men’s participation in cancer screening

- **3.1. Preamble** .................................................................................... 97
- **3.2. Statement of authorship** ............................................................. 99
  - **3.2.1. Principal author** ................................................................... 99
  - **3.2.2. Co-author contributions** ....................................................... 100
- **3.3. Published paper** ......................................................................... 102
- **3.4. Abstract** ................................................................................... 103
- **3.5. Introduction** ............................................................................... 104
- **3.6. Method** .................................................................................... 108
- **3.6.1. Materials** ............................................................................... 110
- **3.6.2. Data analysis** ........................................................................ 110
- **3.6.3. Measures** ............................................................................... 111
  - **3.6.3.1. Demographic items (baseline survey)** .................................. 111
  - **3.6.3.2. Frequency of GP visits (baseline survey)** ................................ 112
  - **3.6.3.3. Self-reported screening data (baseline survey)** ...................... 112
3.6.3.4. Observed screening data .................................................. 113

3.7. Results .................................................................................. 114

3.7.1. Structure of the REI .......................................................... 115

3.7.2. Association between thinking style and demographic variables .......... 118

3.7.3. Association between thinking style and prostate cancer screening ....... 119

3.7.4. Association between thinking style and colorectal cancer screening ...... 121

3.8. Discussion ............................................................................. 122

3.8.1. Implications ....................................................................... 124

3.8.2. Strengths and limitations .................................................... 125

3.8.3. Future directions ............................................................... 126

3.8.4. Conclusions ...................................................................... 127

CHAPTER 4. The REIm-13: a brief measure of thinking style .................. 129

4.1. Preamble .............................................................................. 129

4.2. Statement of authorship ....................................................... 130

4.2.1. Principal author ................................................................ 130

4.2.2. Co-author contributions ................................................... 131

4.3. Paper accepted for publication ............................................. 133

4.4. Abstract ................................................................................ 134

4.5. Introduction .......................................................................... 135

4.6. Method ................................................................................. 138

4.6.1. Design and participants .................................................... 138
4.6.2. Measures ...................................................................................................................... 139
4.6.2.1. Thinking style ........................................................................................................ 139
4.6.2.2. Personality .............................................................................................................. 141
4.6.2.3. Procedure .............................................................................................................. 141
4.6.2.4. Data cleaning and analysis .................................................................................... 142

4.7. Results .......................................................................................................................... 143
4.7.1. REIm-13 scores and test-retest reliability ................................................................. 143
4.7.2. Factorial Structure of the REIm ................................................................................ 143
4.7.3. Construct validity and reliability of REIm-13 factors .............................................. 145
4.7.4. Composite Scoring of REIm-13 Factors .................................................................... 147
4.7.5. Demographic and personality predictors of thinking style .................................... 147

4.8. Discussion ...................................................................................................................... 149
4.8.1. Limitations ................................................................................................................ 150
4.8.2. Future directions ....................................................................................................... 150
4.8.3. Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 151

CHAPTER 5. Health thinking style: A new scale shows incremental validity in predicting health behaviour ................................................................. 153

5.1. Preamble ....................................................................................................................... 153
5.2. Statement of authorship ............................................................................................... 155
5.2.1. Principal author ....................................................................................................... 155
5.2.2. Co-author contributions .......................................................................................... 156
CHAPTER 6. Health thinking style as a moderator of the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes and health behaviour: a dual process approach. .......189

6.1. Preamble ............................................................................................................189

6.2. Statement of authorship ......................................................................................196

6.2.1. Principal author ..............................................................................................196

6.2.2. Co-author contributions ..................................................................................197

6.3. Paper ..................................................................................................................198

Abstract ....................................................................................................................199

6.4. Introduction .........................................................................................................200

6.5. Method ................................................................................................................204

6.5.1. Participants and procedure ..........................................................................204

6.5.2. Measures .........................................................................................................204

6.5.2.1. Health thinking style. ................................................................................204

6.5.2.2. Explicit attitudes to 8 health behaviours.................................................205

6.5.2.3. Implicit attitudes to 8 health behaviours.................................................206

6.5.2.4. Physical activity .........................................................................................207

6.5.2.5. Diet quality .................................................................................................207

6.5.2.6. Smoking cessation ......................................................................................207
6.5.2.7. Screening behaviours ............................................. 208
6.5.3. Analyses ........................................................................... 208
6.6. Results ............................................................................... 209
6.7. Discussion .......................................................................... 218
   6.7.1. Implications ................................................................. 220
   6.7.2. Strengths and weaknesses ........................................... 221
   6.7.3. Future directions ........................................................... 222
   6.7.4. Conclusion ................................................................. 223
6.8. Chapter 6 supplementary materials ..................................... 224

CHAPTER 7. Discussion .............................................................. 231

7.1. Summary and synthesis of findings ..................................... 231
   7.1.1. Thinking style as a predictor of men’s participation in cancer screening ........................................ 231
   7.1.2. The REIm-13: a brief measure of thinking style. ................................................................. 232
   7.1.3. Health thinking style: A new scale shows incremental validity in predicting health behaviour ................................................................................................................. 232
   7.1.4. Health thinking style as a moderator of the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes and health behaviour: a dual process approach .......................................................... 234
7.2. Strengths ............................................................................. 235
7.3. Problems encountered and potential limitations .................. 236
7.4. Significance of this research ............................................... 238
7.5. Implications .......................................................................... 240
7.6. Further research .................................................................... 241
7.7. Conclusion........................................................................................................244

APPENDIX A. Study 1: Genspec baseline survey. ..............................................245

APPENDIX B. Study 2: Genspec endpoint survey. ............................................251

APPENDIX C. Study 2: HABIT study Promotion. .............................................253

APPENDIX D. Study 2: HABIT study T1 survey..............................................257

APPENDIX E. Study 2: HABIT study T2 survey..............................................307

APPENDIX F. Explicit attitude items. .................................................................319

APPENDIX G. Additional analyses using implicit attitudes. .........................325

APPENDIX H. Diet quality scoring. .................................................................353

APPENDIX I. Chapter 3 publication. .................................................................359

REFERENCES.......................................................................................................373
List of tables

Table 1 Sources of data from parent study .................................................................38
Table 2 Study 1 sample descriptive statistics at Baseline and Endpoint. ......................40
Table 3 Sources of data from Study 2 .....................................................................47
Table 4 Factor structure of the REIm-13 at T1 and T2 ............................................49
Table 5 Factor structure of the REIm at T2 ..............................................................51
Table 6 Scenario construction for healthy eating .....................................................59
Table 7 Scenario construction for smoking cessation ................................................61
Table 8 Scenario construction for physical activity ..................................................62
Table 9 Scenario construction for faecal occult blood test ......................................64
Table 10 Scenario construction for Pap smear ..........................................................65
Table 11 Scenario construction for mammogram .....................................................67
Table 12 Scenario construction for PSA test ............................................................68
Table 13 Scenario construction for digital rectal examination ..................................70
Table 14 Interpretation of ratings provided in response to partially structured attitude measure scenarios ..................................................................................72
Table 15 Descriptive statistics for time spent on implicit attitude pages ....................73
Table 16 Descriptive statistics for implicit attitude measures at Time 1 .....................74
Table 17 Descriptive statistics for implicit attitude measures at Time 2 .....................76
Table 18 Correlations and agreement of implicit attitude measures between Time 1 and Time 2 ........................................................................................................76
Table 19 Summary of correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes ....78
Table 20 Correlations between attitudes of the same type ........................................79
Table 21 Summary of univariate effects for prediction of behaviour and intentions from continuous implicit attitudes ...........................................................................81
Table 22 Summary of univariate effects for prediction of behaviour and intentions from dichotomised implicit attitudes ................................................................. 82
Table 23 Prediction of self-reported lifestyle behaviour from implicit and explicit attitudes. 84
Table 24 Prediction of self-reported lifestyle behaviour from implicit and explicit attitudes. 84
Table 25 Prediction of self-reported screening behaviour from implicit and explicit attitudes ................................................................. 85
Table 26 Prediction of self-reported screening behaviour from implicit and explicit attitudes ................................................................. 86
Table 27 Behaviour variables to be predicted by attitudes ................................................................. 88
Table 28 Descriptive statistics for health-related lifestyle behaviour ............................................. 89
Table 29 Descriptive statistics for screening behaviour ................................................................. 90
Table 30 Study 2 sample descriptive statistics at T1 and T2. ...................................................... 94
Table 31 Descriptive statistics ..................................................................................................... 114
Table 32 Pattern matrix for REI items.......................................................................................... 116
Table 33 Sample descriptive statistics ....................................................................................... 138
Table 34 The REIm-13.................................................................................................................. 140
Table 35 Internal consistency and average REIm-13 scale/subscale scores at T1 and T2.. 143
Table 36 Reliability estimates for REIm-13................................................................................... 146
Table 37 Correlations between REIm-13 variables, BFI-10 variables, and age. ....................... 148
Table 38 Conversion of items in initial pool for REI-Health ..................................................... 168
Table 39 Internal consistency of REI-Health subscales at T1 and T2........................................ 169
Table 40 Structure of REI-Health ............................................................................................... 174
Table 41 Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for REI-Health ................................. 175
Table 42 Predicting health thinking style and trait thinking style............................................ 176
Table 43 Predicting health-related lifestyle choices from health thinking style, trait thinking style, health importance, and demographics .................................................................178

Table 44 Predicting screening behaviour from health thinking style, trait thinking style, health importance, and demographics .................................................................181

Table 45 Descriptive statistics for continuous health thinking style and health behaviour variables ........................................................................................................209

Table 46 Descriptive statistics for categorical health behaviour variables .................209

Table 47 Descriptive statistics for implicit and explicit attitudes about health behaviour ...210

Table 48 Correlations between health thinking style and explicit attitudes about health behaviour ........................................................................................................210

Table 49 Correlations between health thinking style and implicit attitudes about health behaviour ........................................................................................................211

Table 50 Correlations between health behaviour and implicit and explicit attitudes ........212

Table 51 Prediction of lifestyle behaviours from attitudes and health thinking style ........213

Table 52 Scenarios used in the measurement of implicit attitudes about health behaviour ..224

Table 53 Prediction of smoking cessation from attitudes and health thinking style ..........226

Table 54 Prediction of FOBT screening from attitudes and health thinking style ..........227

Table 55 Prediction of female-specific cancer screening from attitudes and health thinking style ........................................................................................................228

Table 56 Prediction of male-specific cancer screening from attitudes and health thinking style ........................................................................................................229

Table F1 Sources for explicit attitude items and revisions undertaken: health-related lifestyle choices ........................................................................................................319
Table F2 Sources for explicit attitude items and revisions undertaken: screening behaviours
........................................................................................................................................321

Table G1 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about healthy
eating ........................................................................................................................................325

Table G2 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about smoking
cessation ......................................................................................................................................326

Table G3 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about being
physically active ..........................................................................................................................326

Table G4 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about using
FOBTs ..........................................................................................................................................327

Table G5 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about Pap smears
....................................................................................................................................................327

Table G6 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about
mammograms ...............................................................................................................................328

Table G7 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about PSA tests
....................................................................................................................................................328

Table G8 Correlations between explicit and implicit measures of attitudes about DREs ....329

Table G9 Prediction of diet quality from implicit attitudes about healthy eating ..............329

Table G10 Prediction of healthy eating intentions from implicit attitudes about healthy eating
....................................................................................................................................................330

Table G11 Prediction of years spent smoking from implicit attitudes about smoking cessation
....................................................................................................................................................330

Table G12 Prediction of quitting intentions from implicit attitudes about smoking cessation
....................................................................................................................................................331
Table G13 Prediction of physical activity from implicit attitudes about physical activity...331
Table G14 Prediction of physical activity intentions from implicit attitudes about physical activity

Table G15 Prediction of FOBT screening status from implicit attitudes about FOBT .......332
Table G16 Prediction of FOBT screening intentions from implicit attitudes about FOBT...333
Table G17 Prediction of Pap smear screening status from implicit attitudes about Pap smears ........................................................................................................333
Table G18 Prediction of Pap smear screening intentions from implicit attitudes about Pap smears ........................................................................................................334
Table G19 Prediction of mammogram screening status from implicit attitudes about mammograms ................................................................................................334
Table G20 Prediction of mammogram screening intentions from implicit attitudes about mammograms ................................................................................................335
Table G21 Prediction of PSA screening status from implicit attitudes about PSA testing...335
Table G22 Prediction of PSA screening intentions from implicit attitudes about PSA tests336
Table G23 Prediction of DRE screening status from implicit attitudes about DRE ........336
Table G24 Prediction of DRE screening intentions from implicit attitudes about DRE ......337
Table G25 Prediction of diet quality from implicit attitudes about healthy eating ...........338
Table G26 Prediction of healthy eating intentions from implicit attitudes about healthy eating ........................................................................................................339
Table G27 Prediction of smoking status from implicit attitudes about smoking cessation ...340
Table G28 Prediction of physical activity from implicit attitudes about physical activity....341
Table G29 Prediction of physical activity intentions from implicit attitudes about physical activity .........................................................................................................342
Table G30 Prediction of FOBT screening status from implicit attitudes about FOBT .......343
Table G31 Prediction of FOBT screening intentions from implicit attitudes about FOBT .344
Table G32 Prediction of Pap smear screening status from implicit attitudes about Pap smears ........................................................................................................................................345
Table G33 Prediction of Pap smear screening intentions from implicit attitudes about Pap smears ........................................................................................................................................346
Table G34 Prediction of mammogram screening status from implicit attitudes about mammograms ........................................................................................................................................347
Table G35 Prediction of mammogram screening intentions from implicit attitudes about mammograms ........................................................................................................................................348
Table G36 Prediction of PSA screening status from implicit attitudes about PSA testing .349
Table G37 Prediction of PSA screening intentions from implicit attitudes about PSA tests 350
Table G38 Prediction of DRE screening status from implicit attitudes about DRE ..........351
Table G39 Prediction of DRE screening intentions from implicit attitudes about DRE .....352
Table H1 Scoring for diet quality measure ........................................................................................................................................353

List of figures

Figure 1. Overview of studies providing data for this thesis..................................................35
Figure 2. Participant flow........................................................................................................109
Figure 3. Latent structure of thinking style $[\chi^2(33) = 171.28, p < .001, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .09, 90\% CI [.07, .10]]$. ..................................................................................................................118
Figure 4. Demographic predictors of thinking style $[\chi^2(62) = 224.83, p < .001, CFI=.93, RMSEA=.07, 90\% CI (.06, .08)]$. ..................................................................................................................119
Figure 5. Demographic and thinking style predictors of self-reported prostate cancer screening by PSA and DRE [$\chi^2(110) = 298.07, p > .001$, CFI=.92, RMSEA=.06, 90% CI (.05, .06)]. ............................................................................................................................................................................ 121

Figure 6. Confirmatory factor analysis model for the REIm-13. ....................................................................................................................... 145

Figure 7. An illustration of the hypothesised interactions: health rationality moderates the effect of explicit attitudes on health behaviour, and health intuition moderates the effect of implicit attitudes on health behaviour. Health rationality does not interact with implicit attitudes, and health intuition does not interact with explicit attitudes, nor do the two health thinking style variables or two forms of attitudes interact..... 193

Figure 8. Simple slope diagram for health rationality x explicit attitude interaction in the prediction of diet quality ........................................................................................................................................................................... 215

Figure 9. Simple slope diagram for health intuition x implicit attitude interaction in the prediction of diet quality ........................................................................................................................................................................... 215

Figure 10. Simple slope diagram for health rationality x health intuition x explicit attitude interaction in the prediction of diet quality ........................................................................................................................................................................... 216

Figure 11. Simple slope diagram for health rationality x health intuition interaction in the prediction of physical activity ........................................................................................................................................................................... 217

Figure 12. Promotional flyers. ........................................................................................................................................................................... 253

Figure 13. Promotional poster. ........................................................................................................................................................................... 254

Figure 14. Promotion in email sent to Foundation 49 newsletter subscribers ........................................................................................................................................................................... 255

Figure 15. Promotion on the Facebook pages of Council of the Ageing South Australia and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. ....................................................................................................................... 256
Abstract

Dual-process theories propose that cognition involves two different forms of processing: rapid, autonomous, associative type 1 processing, and slower, resource-intensive, more deliberative type 2 processing. Individual differences have been identified in the degree to which people rely on each type of processing, and a measure called the Rational-Experiential Inventory has been used to quantify these preferences — known as thinking style — as two independent variables. People who are high in experientiality tend to listen to their gut feelings and intuitions (i.e. type 1 processing) whereas those high in rationality are more likely to enjoy and value thinking hard (i.e. type 2 processing). Given the differing strengths of both types of thinking and the robust associations between some personality variables and health behaviour, it is worthwhile investigating the implications of thinking style for health behaviour. The aims of this project were to determine whether self-reported health behaviour was predicted by thinking style, whether it was better predicted by health-specific thinking style, and whether the influence of attitudes over behaviour is moderated by thinking style.

The first study made use of a subset of participants from a previous project (n = 585, all males, mean age 61.4 years) to explore the effect of thinking style on male-specific cancer screening behaviour. Rationality explained a small amount of variance in self-reported participation in digital rectal examinations ($r = .11, p = .016$). In the second study, $N = 992$ adults (54.1% female; mean age 46.5 years) completed an online survey, $n = 510$ of whom took part in a follow-up survey. A short form of the Rational-Experiential Multimodal Inventory was devised and validated, with acceptable results. Next, the short form thinking style items were translated to pertain to the health context, and this measure of health thinking style also demonstrated adequate reliability and validity. Moreover, health thinking
style demonstrated incremental validity over trait thinking style in the prediction of self-reported health behaviour: health rationality predicted variance in diet quality ($\beta = .17, p < .001$), faecal occult blood test participation ($\beta = .20, p = .001$), and pap smear participation ($\beta = .14, p = .008$), while health intuition predicted variance in faecal occult blood test participation ($\beta = .20, p = .001$). Finally, limited evidence was found to support the proposal that health rationality moderates the influence of explicit attitudes — and health intuition moderates the influence of implicit attitudes — over health behaviour. However, results diverged from expectations: moderations operated in an unexpected manner and both health rationality and health intuition moderated the prediction of diet quality by explicit attitudes.

This suite of results suggests that thinking style can explain some variance in health behaviour, and aligns with previous suggestions that people alter their thinking style depending on the domain. Health thinking style shows promise as a health psychological measure that can enable better understanding of health behaviour. The results also show that the interaction between thinking styles and attitudes in regards to health behaviour may be more complicated than previously thought.
Declaration

I 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.

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I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.
Published work:

Chapter 3.


Chapter 4.


Clare McGuiness

Signed: 

Date: 27 January 2017
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The research undertaken prior to candidature that produced the dataset used in Study 1 was funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC Project Grant number 1026510: Optimising men’s uptake of FIT screening for bowel cancer: a population based randomised controlled. 2012. Turnbull D., Wilson, C., Flight, I., Zajac, I.).
Overview

The thesis begins with a review of the literature and a thorough description of the concepts and variables around which the research revolves. The Introduction chapter concludes with statements of the aims of the research. Following this, the methodology of the research is described in more detail than could be included in the papers for publication. Next, four research papers are presented with preambles situating them with regards to the overall aims. I begin by testing for a link between thinking style and cancer screening behaviour in Chapter 3, and in Chapter 4 I prepare for subsequent work by creating a brief form of a recent thinking style measure. In Chapter 5 I use this short measure as a basis for the development of a scale to measure health thinking style, and I investigate its incremental validity in predicting health behaviour. Finally, in Chapter 6 I bring attitudes about health behaviour into the picture, and explore the ways in which they interact with health thinking style in predicting behaviour. The Discussion chapter summarises and integrates the findings, acknowledges the studies’ limitations, discusses their implications and provides suggestions for future research.

References for all chapters are collected at the end of the thesis. Likewise, all Appendices are to be found at the end. Table and figure numbering are continuous throughout the document.
Dedication

For Dan and Natalie.