

**Comparative optimism about falling  
amongst community-dwelling older South  
Australians: A mixed methods approach**

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## ABSTRACT

People aged  $\geq 65$  years (older people) have a higher chance of falling than other age groups. However, based on qualitative research, older people do not believe that falls prevention information and strategies have personal relevance. This suggests that older people believe that falls are more likely to happen to other older people than themselves, that is, they might be comparatively optimistic about their chance of falling. It is important to understand comparative optimism about falling as it is a consistent reason given by older people for not participating in falls prevention activity. This thesis used a mixed methods design with a sequential strategy to investigate community-dwelling older people's comparative optimism about falling.

Three studies were undertaken, using semi-structured interviews, cognitive interviews and telephone interviews to collect data. The semi-structured interview study, guided by the tenets of grounded theory, aimed to develop an explanation of why older people might be comparatively optimistic. A sampling frame (age, sex and direct and indirect history of falling) was used to guide recruiting respondents. Older people ( $N = 9$ ) were interviewed about their chance and other older people's chance of falling. Interviews were analysed using the constant comparison method. The cognitive interview study investigated potential problems in survey items in order to refine them for the telephone interview study. Items were developed to measure older people's comparative optimism about falling. Older people ( $N = 13$ ) were cognitively interviewed, and interviews were content analysed. The telephone interview study aimed to determine whether older people were comparatively optimistic about falling, and whether the direct and indirect experience of falling was associated with

comparative optimism. A random sample of older people ( $N = 389$ ) living in South Australia were telephone interviewed (response rate = 75%).

The semi-structured interview study identified that it was a ‘threat to identity’ for respondents to say they had a chance of falling because of intrinsic risk factors.

Respondents used strategies to maintain or protect their identity when discussing their chance of falling in the future or their reasons for falling in the past. In the cognitive interview study, respondents reported difficulty in rating their chance of falling, as they believed falls were unexpected and unpredictable. They reported difficulty in rating other people’s chance of falling, as they believed they did not know other people their age, did not have enough information and/or did not know the answer. In the telephone interview study, most respondents believed they had the same chance (42%), or a lower chance (48%) of falling in the next 12 months, than other older people. Having fallen in the last 12 months was significantly associated with a lowered comparative optimism, but knowing other older people who had fallen was not associated with comparative optimism.

This is the first quantitative study to report that the majority of a representative sample of community-dwelling older people were comparatively optimistic about their chance of falling. Self-presentation concerns about having a chance of falling support the core category to emerge from the semi-structured interview study.

Messages such as ‘you can reduce your risk of falls’ may be ignored by older people. Alternative messages should promote identities that are relevant to older people, such as being independent, mobile and active, but these messages should be tested in further research.

## STATEMENT PAGE

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma 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.

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