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An evaluation of mixed methods (diaries and focus groups) when working with older people

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This paper considers the advantages and limitations of using mixed methods, diaries and focus groups in research with older people, specifically research investigating the interaction experiences of older individuals as customers, members and workers with public-, private- and community-based organisations. Drawing on the literature on mixed method integration, five distinct advantages were identified: development, completeness, expansion, offsetting and initiation. Two limitations were also noted: demands of the data collection on the participants and insufficient depth. Each is discussed in the context of the particular research project, with the suggestion that mixed methods be used in future research with older people.

Keywords: mixed methods; diaries; focus groups; older people

1. Introduction

The unprecedented phenomenon of population ageing, both numerical and structural, has prompted a burgeoning of research on the growing numbers of older people, particularly research that informs policy and practice. At the same time, funding for such research is increasingly emphasising the importance of ‘end-user engagement’, i.e. the involvement of policy-makers and older people themselves in studies conducted on or about them (Walker, 2007, p. 81). The reasons for doing so include a concern for human rights, as well as for the production of genuine, relevant and useful outcomes (Warburton, Carroll, Bartlett, & Kendig, 2009). While the degree and type of end-user involvement in the research varies considerably, the incorporation of end-users in the research design has become increasingly evident (Fudge, Wolfe, & McKevitt, 2007). Furthermore, acknowledgement that research dealing with specific groups should be adapted to their abilities, world-view or values is also being called for (Botha, 2010).

This paper draws on a research project investigating elders’ interactions with organisations. The aim of the paper is twofold: to document the advantages and limitations of a particular combination of methods, and to contribute to the ongoing debate about the value of end-user engagement and mixed methods research design, particularly in relation to the involvement of older people. To do this, firstly, the literature is used to identify the advantages and limitations of two qualitative methods – diaries and focus groups – and to consider the combined strengths of

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these methods in accommodating the particular needs of older people. Secondly, the way in which these methods were combined in the study is described. Thirdly, an evaluation of the mixed methods is presented, along with a tabular presentation of their value in creating new knowledge and their value to older people themselves.

2. The value of mixing qualitative methods

The literature indicates that research using mixed methods can be justified on several grounds, including: triangulation (corroboration of results from different methods studying the same phenomenon); complementarity (elaboration, enhancement and clarification of the results from one method with the results of another method); development (the results of one method helping to inform the other method); initiation (discovering paradoxes and contradictions that lead to a reframing of the research questions); expansion (seeking to extend the breadth and range of enquiry using different methods); offset (offsetting the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another); completeness (the combination of methods providing a fuller picture of the phenomenon under study) and to contribute to social change (Bryman, 2006, 2007; Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Mason, 2006; Mertens, 2011).

In addition, the literature indicates that methods can be ‘mixed’ in a variety of ways over the course of a research project, including sequentially where qualitative methods can be used to help develop quantitative measures, and in parallel where two methods can be used separately to inform the results (see Steckler, McLeroy, Goodman, Bird, & McCormick, 1992). Methods can be mixed during the data gathering stage, the data analysis stage and/or to inform the next stage of a research project (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Mertens, 2011). However, what is particularly important is that the methods are genuinely mixed or integrated and not acting largely or totally independently of each other (see Bryman, 2007).

While the literature focuses predominantly on a mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods with a definite tendency to assign qualitative methods a secondary role in this relationship (Hesse-Biber, 2010), a combination of qualitative methods can also be usefully employed, including ‘to privilege the lived experiences of individuals’ (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 467) and to generate ‘new ways of understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience’ (Mason, 2006, p. 10). Indeed, one of the key arguments for adopting qualitatively driven mixed method approaches is openness to the ‘multi-dimensionality of lived experience’ (Mason, 2006, p. 11). This openness to new possibilities and multiple perspectives contrasts with the argument of mixing methods to test or validate a particular perspective (e.g. structured interviews being used to triangulate administrative data).

The advantages and limitations of two qualitative methods, diaries and focus groups, employed at the data gathering stage of this research, are now considered.

2.1. Diaries

Diaries are records, and reflections, on personal experiences, behaviours and events (Milligan, Bingley, & Gattrell, 2005). They can be solicited i.e. constructed for a specific research purpose and completed by participants in the full knowledge that they will be analysed by researchers for that purpose, or unsolicited i.e. written for private purposes.
The focus here is on solicited diaries, which can take many forms: from completely unstructured formats or blank slates in which diarists can record full and detailed commentaries in their own words, to structured tick-box or survey-style formats or a combination of the two formats. Entries may be written in the diarist’s own time over a period of weeks or months, or recorded at set intervals during the day, for example as a log for the administration of medication.

As research instruments, diaries can provide a record of what the diarist rather than the researcher may consider relevant and important in their life (Symon, 2004). Diaries can also capture the immediacy and spontaneity of a particular experience, thereby facilitating the accuracy of future recall and minimising retrospection bias (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Symon, 2004). In addition, diaries can provide access to the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, including events that may be easily forgotten or overlooked (Corti, 1993), and sensitive issues, such as abuse, that may be difficult to broach using face-to-face research methods (Meth, 2003). Diaries can also become an early indicator of subsequent phenomena, e.g. a developing series of illnesses (Bolger et al., 2003).

While diaries have significant benefits as a source of rich data for social researchers, they also have downsides, in requiring significant literacy skills. Writing can also be a laborious chore for some people because of deteriorating health and eyesight problems (Milligan et al., 2005), while reading the handwritten material can also be a time consuming and difficult task for researchers (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001).

In relation to researching with older people, diaries can act as an important aide-mémoire enhancing researcher confidence in clarity of recall (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001), as well as offering participants the opportunity to reflect positively on their lives (Milligan et al., 2005). However, incomplete or inaccurate diary keeping can cause participants embarrassment and contribute to incomplete data-sets (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001).

2.2. Focus groups

Focus groups, defined by Krueger and Casey (2000, p. 5) as ‘a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment … with six to eight people and a skilled interviewer’, contrast with the private and individualised nature of diary-keeping. Focus groups are inherently public activities in which interactions and social exchanges among participants serve not only to enhance data quality through a conversational critique (Patton, 2002), but also to empower and validate the voices and experiences of participants (Madriz, 2000), including those who may feel they have nothing to say and others who may feel more comfortable in a supportive group than being interviewed on their own.

Although focus groups are an advantageous environment for the study of social practices, they have a number of limitations. For instance, the group format and the desire to include all voices can reduce the amount of speaking time per person and, as a result, data richness and depth may be lost. Agar and MacDonald (1995, p. 85) referred to this as ‘discovery without explanation’. Group dynamics can also present problems, with opinionated members likely to dominate discussion, members with minority views likely to refrain from speaking out (Patton, 2002), and the potential for disagreement and conflict often being present. It is argued that many of these
problems can be ameliorated through skilful moderation (Smithson, 2000). However, since interaction is a defining feature of focus groups, it is also important that conversations are not prematurely closed down. Instead, participants should have the opportunity to share ideas and develop their own communicative self-efficacy (Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot, & Weaver, 2006).

In relation to researching with older people, focus groups have proved helpful in identifying: the information needs of disabled elderly people and their carers (Barrett & Kirk, 2000), the use of computers among older people (e.g. Richardson, Weaver, & Zorn, 2005) and attitudes to mental illness (Quinn, Laidlaw, & Murray, 2009). Researchers running focus groups with elders are cognisant that poor hearing, limited vision, slowed information processing, overloaded working memory and environmental distractions can inhibit discussion and therefore participation (e.g. Barrett & Kirk, 2000). However, with careful moderation, significant useful information can be obtained through focus groups and the process of involving elders can be an empowering one for many participants (Stewart, 2003).

In summary, while diaries and focus groups have each proven useful in conducting research with older people, their combination is an underutilised method, yet one with the potential to overcome some of the weaknesses of the two methods used individually – the offset justification (Bryman, 2006). For instance, through the written record of a diary, researchers are able to learn about an individual’s experiences and reflections, whether or not those individuals have a voice in the group setting. Focus groups, on the other hand, can provide access to the commonalities of experiences and perceptions and, thus to the shared nature of social existence.

The extent to which a combination of these two methods provides a more comprehensive and richer picture of social experience than either would provide on its own is one of the areas explored below in relation to a study with older people regarding their interactions with organisations.

3. The research study

The purpose of this three year ongoing research project is to analyse the experiences and perceptions of elders and organisational representatives with whom they interact in a range of everyday encounters, such as in supermarkets, banks and community groups, and to use this information to develop a framework of practices and policies that will facilitate elders’ engagement with such organisations. The overall project adopted a mixed method approach with a multiphase research design, with each phase informing the following phase and building towards an intervention that aims to contribute to organisational and social change. The first phase consisted of several studies, with each study designed to capture information from different sources, for example from physically active, housebound and indigenous elders, as well as from representatives of organisations, such as supermarket checkout operators, bank tellers and social club organisers. The second phase would bring elders and organisational representatives (managers and front-line staff) together in a series of facilitated workshops to examine the findings from the first phase and collaboratively develop a framework of organisational practices that would be tested in the third phase.

This paper reports on one study conducted within the first phase of the project where the researchers sought to identify the interaction experiences of a small group of physically active individuals aged 65 years and older, and to map the
characteristics of and influences on the quality of those interactions. The aim was to build an evidential base of experiences using two methods appropriate to the lifestyles and characteristics of the participants. In particular, the researchers sought to understand the interaction experiences of individual elders, the degree to which those experiences might be shared and how those experiences were interpreted individually and collectively. At the same time the two methods provided the researchers with the flexibility to adjust their data collection methods to the needs and abilities of the individuals participating in the research. The next section outlines the ways in which these two methods were combined in practice.

4. Mixed methods: using diaries and focus groups with elders
Fifty-three elders, aged 65–96 years, were recruited from community, church, recreation and service organisations in Hamilton, New Zealand (a population of 130,000), through face-to-face presentations at members’ normal weekly or monthly meeting. Characteristics of the recruited participants are summarised in Table 1. The majority were 70+ years of age, female, European New Zealanders and just under half had a vocational or university education. The high proportion of female participants can perhaps be explained by higher female longevity rates in New Zealand (Population Ageing in New Zealand, 2010), older New Zealand women having significantly more social contacts than men and being significantly more involved in community organisations. Participation in community organisations is also significantly associated with both educational and income level (Koopman-Boyden & van der Pas, 2009, p. 181).

Participants were requested to keep a written record of their interactions with organisations in an observation log, or ‘Olog’, a combination of a structured observations schedule (e.g. Steadman, Donaldson, & Kalra, 2003) and an event-contingent diary (Bolger et al., 2003). Participants were also invited to discuss selected experiences, observations and reflections in a series of researcher-facilitated focus groups over a period of 6–8 weeks. These methods are discussed in more detail below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Participant characteristics by age.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (M = Maori; E = European)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voc/trade education</td>
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<tr>
<td>University education</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;$15,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>$15,001–$30,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>$30,001–$50,000</td>
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<td>$50,001–</td>
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<td>$ Not given</td>
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</table>
Participants were issued with Olog booklets containing 20 Olog templates, each template included 12 questions (10 structured and two unstructured, providing both quantitative and qualitative data). The 10 structured questions asked participants to indicate the type of interaction they engaged in (e.g. face-to-face, telephone, in writing); the purpose of the interaction; the role they played in the interaction (e.g. as a customer, volunteer, employee, member); the frequency of their interaction with the organisation and their actual, expected, and typical levels of satisfaction with this and similar interactions. In addition, elders were asked to consider if they were to undertake this activity again what their response would be (e.g. return to the same organisation, or a different branch of the same organisation, deal with a different person at the same branch, go to a different organisation, get someone else to do the deal for them or not do it at all). Two open-ended questions asked the participants to reflect on what contributed to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the interaction and also to give any other reflections on their interactions. A total of 498 observations were recorded in the Ologs by 53 elders over the period January to June 2010, and were of a quantitative and a qualitative nature.

During the period of Olog data collection, elders were also invited to discuss selected documented interactions in a series of three focus groups. These meetings took 3 h with a half hour break for morning/afternoon tea, both factors being designed not to overload the participants, and to enable them to socialise and enjoy a period of recovery from concentrated activity.

The first meeting outlined the parameters of the research to the participants along with their role and tasks. Ologs were distributed and training provided in their use. It was suggested that participants complete the logs as soon as possible after the interaction had occurred. A second meeting was held 1–2 weeks later. At this session, participants were invited to talk about their initial experiences with the Ologs and any misunderstandings or problems were discussed and resolved. Each individual was also asked to select from the Olog a positive and a negative interaction for discussion. Giving participants the option to choose their experiences for public telling enabled them to avoid disclosing potentially threatening or embarrassing material and, thus, to keep private those matters which they preferred to share only with the researcher. While such a method was used to overcome issues with privacy, it may have allowed potentially important but sensitive matters to be overlooked. Following the sharing of individual accounts, the group was invited to discuss the typicality of these interactions as well as the types of organisations in which they most often encountered positive or negative experiences.

A third and final meeting was held 4–5 weeks later, where participants were again invited to talk about their positive and negative interactions with organisations and to consider whether their age made a difference in how they were treated. This final session with each group was digitally recorded (with participants’ permission), and later transcribed. In all, 30 such sessions were held with a total of 53 elders (i.e. 10 groups of approximately five elders meeting on three separate occasions).

These two methods of data collection were not only employed concurrently, as is evident in many convergent parallel designs (Creswell & Clark, 2011), but were also mutually reinforcing and informing, as well as overlapping – that is, they were genuinely integrated (Bryman, 2007). Concurrence was part of the original research design but integration also occurred spontaneously when participants reported on
their observations. For example, in the focus group setting as well as participants sharing static accounts of historical events, their experiences became dynamic and subject to ongoing reflection and amendment as new insights occurred during the discussion, or as new diary entries needed to be created to reflect ongoing sagas. ‘I hadn’t thought to include that’ and ‘I’ll keep you posted on what happens next’ were common reactions which indicated not only the willingness of the participants to engage in the research exercise but also their willingness to share their stories with others.

Thus the Ologs provided access to a great number and range of observations and the opportunity to identify patterns across a range of organisation types, interaction types and participant roles. The focus group sessions further provided rich, contextualised data on a small number of selected experiences. Importantly, the combination of methods provided key insights into elders’ individual and collective experiences, thus contributing to the goals for this phase of the project.

### Table 2. The value of mixed methods: diaries and focus groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of mixed methods</th>
<th>Value to researcher/new knowledge</th>
<th>Value to older people</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Development. Provides different perspectives in that data collected in one method helped to inform the other method and ensure the validity (Greene et al., 1989)</td>
<td>Details recorded in the diaries informed the focus group discussions which were then grounded in actual experience rather than broad generalisations</td>
<td>Diaries served as aide-memoir to focus group discussions enhancing recall and precision and being particularly useful for those with memory and cognitive difficulties</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Completeness. Provided access to a more comprehensive understanding of participants’ experiences than either method on its own would have done (Creswell &amp; Tashakkori, 2007)</td>
<td>Diaries provided details from individuals of a relatively large number of different types of experiences. Focus groups provided access to a small number of rich, contextualised stories from the group. Thus both an individual and a group perspective were accessed</td>
<td>Keeping a diary gave each participant the opportunity to think about his/her interactions in a structured way and to build on that thinking in the focus group situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Expansion. The breadth and range of the inquiry were extended (Greene et al., 1989). The whole became bigger than the parts</td>
<td>Focus groups extended the individual’s experiences through collective sense-making, considerations of significance, and estimations of typicality</td>
<td>Participants had the opportunity to see how their experiences compared with others, as well as the opportunity to learn from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Offsetting. The weaknesses of one method were offset by the strengths of another method (Bryman, 2006)</td>
<td>The limitations of the structured data were compensated for by the richness and depth of the focus group discussions</td>
<td>Weak diary writing skills could be balanced by stronger oral skills in focus groups (and vice versa) enabling elders to participate fully in the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Initiation. More likely to uncover contradictions in the data through comparison of the data (Greene et al., 1989)</td>
<td>Focus groups noted contradictions and paradoxes in data collected, allowing for possible reframing of research questions</td>
<td>Allowed for greater confidence to put forward new or different perspective (or contradictions) in the focus group discussions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Evaluation of the mixed method integration of diaries and focus groups

Our review of the literature, particularly the work of Bryman (2006, 2007) and Greene et al. (1989) informed the evaluation of the mixed methods approach adopted in our study. Five key advantages with respect to new knowledge were identified: development, completeness, expansion, offsetting and initiation. These are now discussed in some detail.

5.1. Development

For the researchers, observations and reflections recorded in the Olog diaries provided access to accounts of actual experiences rather than to attitudes, perceptions and generalisations, and thus a core purpose of the study was achieved. For the focus group participants, the aide-memoir functionality of the diary allowed them to refer to the diary notes made at the time of each interaction and, thus, to discuss details of date, time and place with confidence. As a result, older participants were not embarrassed or frustrated by potential memory lapses nor were they distracted by attempts to recall details, but instead were able to focus on discussing the significance and the consequences of their experiences.

Thus, the results of the two methods helped to inform each other and ensure their validity, a characteristic of mixed methods which Greene et al. (1989) have labelled ‘development’ (see Table 2). The two methods also dovetailed sensitively to reduce some of the cognitive overload problems that can occur in research settings and particularly with older people (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001).

5.2. Completeness

From the structured questions in the Ologs, researchers were able to chart the types, frequencies and conditions that contributed to the quality of the interactions. This information, supplemented by the detail of focus group discussions, enabled the researchers to build a fuller and more elaborate qualitative picture of the contextual dimensions of those interactions (see Table 2). In the current research project, the diaries provided an individual and detailed perspective on interactions with organisations, while the focus groups added further context and elaboration and a sense of the degree to which the experiences were shared by older individuals. Together these two individual ‘strands’ of data gathering (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007, p. 108) worked to provide a richer and fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study than either would have done on its own.

An illustration of this point came from one of several Olog entries recording participants’ dissatisfaction with interactions in large warehouse stores, where the ensuing focus group discussion of such encounters provided insights into the diarised entries. The discussion revolved around participants’ general expectations of service developed from an earlier historical time, especially in small New Zealand towns, when storekeepers knew their customers individually and provided personal attention. As a more complete understanding of the incident and a fuller evaluation of the dissatisfaction evolved, participants came to the overall view that ‘self service is not service’.

Most participants seemed to value the additional perspectives provided by the focus group discussion, and the consequent development of their personal awareness often sparked a further interpretation of the situation. Such discussions
also provided the researchers with greater context and description than was evident in the Olog material.

5.3. Expansion
Discussing Olog entries in the focus group sessions brought the recorded incidents to life, allowing for poignancy and dramatic effect in the telling, with the interest of the group members encouraging further detail on the wider impact of the interaction. Often these sessions created opportunities for participants to support and learn from each other, especially in providing comparisons as a basis for further reflection. One participant talked about the circumstances in which she resigned from her role on a croquet club committee and consequently gave up playing the game she loved. The story was told in a few lines in the Olog, but in the focus groups members discussed at some length the detail and ways in which the situation could/should have been handled differently by the club organisers.

While this discussion could have taken place in an individual interview, the differences in perspective of the focus group members’ brought a wider context and reflection, a characteristic seen as that of ‘expansion’ by Greene et al. (1989), in that the breadth and range of the inquiry were extended (see Table 2). For older people, this particularly allowed them to draw on their life experience in contextualising the situation more realistically.

5.4. Offsetting
For the individual participant, the combination of these two methods, involving both writing and talking, enabled the disadvantages associated with one method to be countered by the advantages associated with the other. It is well recognised that writing diaries requires significant literacy skills as well as a degree of manual dexterity. Both can be hampered by deteriorating health conditions (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001; Milligan et al., 2005).

Two participants in the study struggled with completing their Olog entries. One participant found it much easier to talk in the focus groups than to write; the other found it difficult to write and also to hear in the group setting (two disadvantages not necessarily unique to these two methods). While both made their concerns known to the researcher at the outset, both refused the researcher’s offer to work one-on-one with them to write up the Ologs. However, both worked to overcome these difficulties by drawing on the combination of methods – the first participant offsetting her writing difficulties (in the diaries) with her oral fluency (in the group sessions), while the second participant overcame writing and hearing difficulties by being highly motivated to maintain the individualised Olog project, and by her enjoyment of the focus group interaction.

The concept of ‘offsetting’ can be used in this context (Bryman, 2006), where one methodological style offsets another, in this case the written and private style is offset by the oral and public format, and with regard to motivation the individual style is offset by a group or social style (see Table 2). Both of these benefits of the mixed methods of diaries and focus groups are particularly appropriate for research with older people.
5.5. **Initiation**

With the wider array of data presented by mixed methods providing the benefits of greater ‘completeness’, ‘expansion’ and ‘offsetting’, a further benefit can arise in that differences in experiences can be compared, quantitatively and qualitatively, by both the respondents and the researchers. In doing so, the occasional contradiction can occur and alternative ideas initiated.

For example, an analysis of the Olog data indicated that a small number of negative interactions were experienced by participants as members of community-based organisations. The focus group exchanges indicated that the emotional damage to participants resulting from some of these encounters contributed significantly to diminished well-being. Frequency counts across diary entries told part of the story – the possibility of age discrimination – yet many of the participants had not recognised this phenomenon. However, the focus group conversations provided a comparative context and thereby raised the awareness of participants. Thus the two methods together drew attention to the issue of possible age discrimination, a situation examined more closely in later phases of the research.

The idea that mixed methods are more likely to uncover contradictions by comparing the data has been referred to as ‘initiation’ (Greene et al., 1989), and is seen as a major advantage of mixed methods, especially in the development of new areas of research. Thus, the concept of initiation is particularly relevant where researchers have yet to initiate research or where issues are understudied (Nepal, 2010), such as the issue of ageism in elder–organisation interactions.

6. **Limitations of mixed methods: interweaving diaries and focus groups**

While the combination of methods had distinct advantages for both the researchers and the participants, it also had two key limitations. Firstly, the often quite demanding work involved in writing up Ologs and attending regular meetings may have deterred some potential participants. These same demands may also have contributed to the relatively high number of well-educated participants. For those who participated, the amount of data provided varied considerably, possibly because of fatigue, insufficient time commitment or other priorities. For instance, the number of entries recorded per person ranged from 4 to 35, while the quantum of description in the free text areas, level of detail and reflection, varied from very little to quite extensive. One outcome was that the voices of all participants were not heard equally, not just in the focus groups, but also through the medium of their diaries. Researchers need to look for additional and alternative ways to document the experiences of more participants, not only through the two methods used in this research, but also other qualitative and quantitative methods.

A second limitation of the diary-focus group method was that it provided insufficient depth in some of the data. In-depth material such as that provided by life histories, or the wider context as collected in large scale surveys was missing, and as a result, key insights into why individuals thought and behaved as they did were not identified. Efforts to ensure greater privacy of the Olog material by allowing participants to choose for themselves their positive and negatives experiences may have further contributed to a lack of depth in that controversial topics may not have been raised for discussion. The addition of a further form of data collection,
possibly one-on-one interviews, could have allowed for more in-depth discussion and a greater degree of privacy.

7. Conclusion
In this research project, the use of mixed methods – diaries and focus groups – successfully allowed for different forms of data collected through different methods to inform each other (development), while the greater depth and breadth of the data allowed for a greater ‘completeness’ of the observations. As well, the data richness allowed for the ‘expansion’ of the individual participant’s personal awareness and understanding of the phenomenon under examination. On the other hand, any weaknesses of one set of data could be ‘offset’ (at least partially) by the data gathered by the alternative method. The use of mixed methods in this research also allowed for contradictions to emerge (initiation), which became the basis for useful discussion and greater depth of understanding of the situation by the participants, and the re-examination of research questions by the researchers.

Finally, perhaps an overlooked benefit in the use of diaries and focus groups as mixed methods was the value of confidence building among the older participants. In successfully allowing for the occasional memory loss and the lack of hearing or confidence in front of a group, the diary and focus group mixed methods allowed for the greater involvement of the older participants, their greater confidence and a higher level of satisfaction and well-being in being involved in pursuing new knowledge. For example, one focus group participant said: ‘[The Olog] has made me realise that there are far more positive experiences than negatives. You remember the negatives … because they stand out’. This statement points to the value of record keeping both in aiding the recall of particular events and in quantifying such occurrences. Indeed, coming to the realisation that she was more often involved with positive encounters than with negative ones made this participant ‘feel better’ about her situation, while another participant commented that ‘It made me feel really good’.

These positive outcomes are reminiscent of Milligan et al.’s (2005) assessment that writing diaries enabled participants to reflect positively on their life experiences and Stewart’s (2003) evaluation that participation in focus groups can be empowering for older people. It is possible therefore, that the combination of these methods may be doubly beneficial for participants, and older people in particular, and in turn add to the authenticity of the research and the ‘empowerment of the participants’: with diaries enabling greater participant confidence when providing data through recall and written documentation (the ‘what’), and focus groups enabling a more supportive environment for delivering this (the ‘how’).

Future research conducted with older people could well consider the benefits of mixing qualitative methods such as diaries and focus groups but the limitations, including potentially high workload demands on participants, need to be acknowledged. This research indicates that a combination of qualitative methods can provide an engaging way of involving participants in the research process, along with providing access to useful data on everyday experiences and insights into their historical context and interpretation.
Acknowledgement

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Margaret Richardson is a research fellow in the Department of Management Communication, University of Waikato, and a member of a team investigating the notion of positive ageing. Her research includes the use and rejection of computers by older people, as well as the identification of the structures and practices that impact on older people’s capacity to participate in and with organisations. She has published articles in Research on Aging, Communication Yearbook, New Media & Society, Information Communication & Society and the Australian Journal of Communication.

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