

Researching long-term care for older people using the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method

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Abstract

The method of Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services is presented in the article as the basic method for researching the needs of different groups of people and as ground for the development of responses (services) in communities. It is one of the basic research methods used in a holistic and hermeneutic approach to the development of social work theory and practice. The method is a combination of qualitative research methods, techniques and approaches mainly including grounded theory, ethnography and action research, which, depending on the research aims, is further complemented with a set of methods from quantitative research methodology. The decision about the choice of research methods and procedures combined within the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method depends on each individual research situation and the aims and objectives of the concrete research project. Depending on the aim and objectives of the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services, one of the methods can be prevalent or all methods can be represented in an equal share or in combination with other social scientific research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, which is presented in this article with the examples of three studies on long-term care in Slovenia.

Keywords: mixed methods, triangulation, social work, long-term care, needs assessment

1. Introduction

In social work the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method (hereinafter RANS) was developed on the basis of a manual developed by the World Health Organisation for the needs of research into risky practices among vulnerable population groups (Stimson et al., 1998).¹ It is based on the mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative research

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¹Original manuals were designed to support the research of harm reduction strategies in the intravenous use of drugs and risks experienced by sexual workers. The method was named Rapid Assessment and Response (RAR). The method in this paper is called the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method (RANS) because, in Slovenia, it was developed at the Faculty of Social Work of the University of Ljubljana. For over twenty years, it has also been evolving as a method of assessing needs for long-term care and planning the processes of deinstitutionalization in which new services play important role in providing long-term care (Flaker et al., 2019).

and triangulation of sources (e.g. combination of ethnographic and demographic data). In combining methods and resources RANS enables us to focus on multiple levels (individual, systemic and cultural) of the understanding of the research problems, allowing for rapid capturing and analysis of data, as well as facilitating the planning of rapid and urgent interventions in the community. Besides the rational use of resources and time, at the same time mixed methods research does not compromise the quality of research work but, quite the contrary, it provides a more reliable and comprehensive picture of the research problem. Focusing on the practical value of findings including the action potential of the research process, RANS corresponds to the principles of research in social work.

The aim of the article is to present the key characteristics of RANS in the research of long-term care for older people, which has been gaining ground as a specific area of social work (Beltran & Miller, 2020; Mali, 2019; Mali & Grebenc, 2021; Perry et al., 2020). Due to its pragmatic nature and methodological adaptability to different research contexts in order to achieve the largest possible applicative effects, the scope of the usefulness of this method is much broader than other methods and not specifically related to social work, but extending to the wider area of social and medical sciences. Its pragmatic nature shows at the three levels of social action: micro-level (the level of individuals participating in research), meso-level (community or local environment and long-term care organisations working in the environment) and macro-level (policy level, i.e., policy measures for changes in long-term care). The aim of the method is to achieve the applicative effects of transversality and connectivity at all levels, because this, in turn, also triggers effects in the theoretical understanding of research phenomena. The usefulness of this method makes the basis for new theoretical knowledge vital to achieve better answers to the needs and ground the development of new and better practices.

The four sections of the article present the specific characteristics of RANS in the research of people's needs for long-term care as the method that captures the complexity of their lives in a holistic and participatory way. Section 2 describes the research specificities of the RANS method, which are related to action research to ensure developmental and innovative changes in the community. The method's basic principles presented in Section 3 are explained through three concrete studies of long-term care in Slovenia. Triangulation and mixed methods approach are presented in Section 4, while Section 5 synthesises the findings regarding the RANS method in terms of its usefulness in the research of long-term care.

2. Presentation of the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method

In Slovenia, RANS was developed at the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana as the basic method for researching the needs of different groups of people and as the basis for the development of responses in communities. For at least the past 20 years it has been developed as the method of the assessment of needs for long-term care, and planning the processes of deinstitutionalisation (Flaker et al., 2019). It has become one of the basic research methods in social work, enabling a holistic and hermeneutic development of theory and practice in some of its basic fields (Danchev & Ross, 2014). It is a combination of qualitative research methods, techniques and approaches, mainly including grounded theory, ethnography and action research. Depending on the research aims it is further complemented with methods from the set of tools and approaches in quantitative research methodology. The decision about the choice of research methods and processes to be combined within the RANS method depends on each individual research situation and on the aims and objectives of the concrete research project. Depending on the aim and objectives of RANS, either one of the

methods can prevail or they can all be represented to a similar extent or in combinations with additional, both qualitative and quantitative, methods of social science research. Therefore, it involves a fairly flexible research approach which includes mixed methods research.

The central concept of research with RANS includes hermeneutic understanding of the needs of people who need long-term care and shaping responses to their needs. The hermeneutic circular process of perceiving reality and developing knowledge, typically used in social work (Flaker, 2012; Longhofer & Floersch, 2014), shows itself in different aspects. To mention a few: (i) that the theory of social work is shaped from the concrete practice of social work, which at the same time is developed on the basis of the theory of social work; (ii) the distress of people, individuals and groups is understood as stemming from existing social conditions which can be identified through researching concrete people's "lots in life"; people's needs for long-term care are defined through researching the world of the users of long-term care services, and at the same time their world is understood and researched on the basis of people's needs for long-term care.

The complex design of the RANS method is especially useful in long-term care, as we shall illustrate with concrete examples in the continuation. Social work needs research methods that can be directly and concretely used to create solutions that work (Alston & Bowles, 2003). Such methods will enable social workers not only to detect and describe people's needs and distress, but to discover responses to their needs during research, allowing us to put forward and design concrete proposals to create solutions to concrete needs, and enable positive changes in the community (Phinney et al., 2016). A specific characteristic of RANS, not only important in long-term care and social work, but also in other fields of social and medical science research, is its orientation to action and the search for concrete solutions for problems in accordance with people's needs, desires and interests. The pragmatic nature of this method lies in its enabling action, activating the community and all those whom individual phenomenon concerns, as well as facilitating common discussion and agreement about the priorities of joint action or the action of individual actors (Flaker et al., 2019).

Its effects in practice are scientifically grounded, which is why this method has the characteristic of action research. Mesec (2006) defines action research as research changing society with new knowledge, theory and findings, while at the same time defining changes in it. The result is action, change at the practical level encouraged by the participation of all those who participate in research. In social work this method is used according to the social work principles of including the user perspective and the development of the community. Alston and Bowles (2003) point out that this involves the cooperation and inclusion of all the participants in research, both the researchers and the researched, to jointly create a theory based on the reflection of their practice, and at the same time create change in the environment, where their practice takes place. We cannot speak of RANS, when there is no action and participatory research. In other words, RANS is more than just combining methods and research techniques: it is the way people work together in the processes of changing and developing the community and creating meaningful, useful and efficient ways of meeting people's needs, desires and interests.

The second characteristic of this method is that it enables the overview of the extent of a phenomenon in a chosen research area. It is used to establish the incidence and distribution of a phenomenon in national and local contexts, and the causes for its occurrence, as well as to conduct research typical of epidemiological research in medical science. In a wide variety of research phenomena and environments RANS initially serves to examine what is already known about a phenomenon in an environment, what data about the phenomenon and the environment are available, and how existing data can be used. At the same time it

helps us establish where further research is needed and how to increase knowledge about a phenomenon to be able to assess the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon and recommend adequate measures (Flaker et al., 2019). Each individual research situation requires the assessment of data that is needed, which existing data can be used for the study and how it can be included in the RANS context. Rapid assessment and response requires an analytical review of the existing facts recorded in statistical data, reports, studies and other documents. At first sight these data perhaps do not seem directly related to the research field in which RANS is used, but they are important to understand the context and placement of newly acquired data (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). This is why the existing data is always assessed with regard to the research aim and objectives. This approach usually saves time and money or helps start fieldwork more quickly and analytically.

We can decide to include and use statistical data and quantitative research methods within RANS at different stages of research: not only at the beginning of the research, but also later, when we see it is possible or it makes sense to analyse the existing numerical data about a certain phenomenon (such as data from the statistical data bases and other research data bases), or to relatively quickly acquire new numerical data through a quantitative study (e.g. about the number of potential service users). Acquisition of statistical and numerical data is primarily important from the aspect of the understanding of the demographic and economic characteristics of the environment in which needs arise; assessing the extent of the relevant phenomena and trends (such as, population ratios by gender, age, work activity, daily migration, social vulnerability and poverty); the extent and trends of needs (such as the number of older people who need help with certain daily chores); the assessment of the resources in the community (e.g. the available spatial capacities of the municipality, data on sponsor resources and donations available for the development of long-term care). Numerical data can also help us assess certain risks and obstacles in planning long-term care (e.g. data on the traffic safety of older people in a municipality, domestic violence, the number of the beneficiaries of social benefits) (Mali & Grebenc, 2021).

The RANS method comprises knowledge coming from two so called data pools, namely, the pool of available and existing data (e.g. available statistical databases, research reports, internal statistics of institutions), and the pool of newly acquired data obtained in the field and in contact with research participants. Fieldwork plays the key role in the action component of RANS, and fieldwork data also helps us obtain the ethnographic picture of the community and people's needs. Empirical field research focuses on acquiring knowledge of the manifest characteristics of the research problem. We try to understand how people live, what specific life situations they experience, and most importantly, how they respond to and cope with them (Mesec, 2006). Ethnographic research involves getting to know people's habits, life courses and customs including cultural characteristics in the broader context, and the values and norms guiding people's lives in a narrower context.

The purpose of this method is twofold. On the one hand assessment includes needs (extent, type, intensity, characteristics etc.), and on the other it includes responses (those we know and are available, and those that still need to be developed for which we need action — changes). Needs assessment is mainly the analytical assessment of the situation and the available resources. This is the basis for creating the guidelines for new and required resources. Moreover, RANS helps us shape research-based proposals for necessary interventions that can be implemented through adequate planning.

Taking this as its research starting point the RANS method is undoubtedly developmental, because it encourages innovation and helps promote development at the level of individuals, community and society (Flaker et al., 2019). Its potential ranges from the improvement of

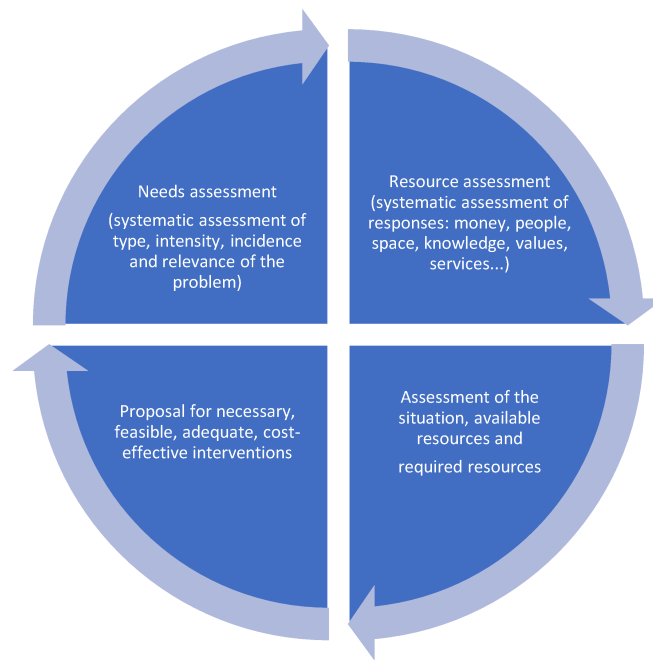


Figure 1: Needs and resources assessment in RANS

the quality of life at a completely personal level (such as the improvement of the quality of living, self-fulfilment and meeting personal interests and desires, respect for the person's uniqueness and assertion of human rights) to encouraging important changes in different spheres of society (social, cultural, economic and political) (Lynch, 2014). It is from the aspect of change and development of the community and society as a whole that the effects of the method can be numerous and heterogeneous.

Because RANS is a method oriented to the holistic and participatory research of people's needs in their everyday lives, researchers cannot avoid addressing human life in all its complexity. This attitude, with regard to research, directly connects researchers to the numerous and diverse aspects of life (such as cultural, social, societal, economic, environmental, geographic, political); with vast and constantly changing knowledge about life (e.g. people's everyday and experiential knowledge, knowledge from different scientific disciplines and expert knowledge of numerous professions and fields of expertise, values and ideas about the meaning of life); and with complex structures of social organisation at the local and global levels (e.g. forms and characteristics of formal and informal ties between individuals and communities, and connections between economic and political subjects).

3. The principles of the Rapid Assessment of Needs and Services method and their use in the research of long-term care for older people

Flaker et al. (2019) list and describe the key characteristics of RANS that were also used in our studies of long-term care needs at the local level. Because these characteristics are what distinguishes RANS from traditional social science research and marks it as a specific research method, they can be called the principles of research with RANS.

The first study of needs indicators, commissioned by the Municipality of Ljubljana in 2004 (Flaker & Grebenc, 2005), included the making of three maps of needs: the map of needs for older people; children and women who are victims of violence; and young people who have dropped out of the school system. These maps then served as the base for grounding

the needs indicators. After the project was concluded the Municipality of Ljubljana prepared a new strategy of social and health care based on the results of the study. The other two studies, in which we used RANS for long-term care needs, were carried out in two small municipalities in Slovenia, Straža and Žirovnica, located in the South and North-West of the country respectively. In both municipalities the research aim was to design a development plan for care services for older people in the community, based on which strategy for the development of long-term care services in these municipalities was adopted (Mali & Grebenc, 2019).

The research characteristics connecting all three studies and showing the principles of research according to the RANS method include: rapidity, cost-effectiveness, the use of existing data, action research, as well as investigative and dialogic orientation.

As its name indicates, one of the characteristics of RANS is *rapidity*. In social sciences the time used for research usually depends on the duration of projects and studies, which is determined by the funders and commissioners. In long-term care research time is extremely important because changes planned for this group of people can critically influence the courses of their lives (Leichsenring et al., 2013). Moreover, in needs research time is an important component because some needs are related to the momentary and acute situations that people experience, which require emergency interventions to keep or improve their quality of life. If research continues indefinitely, the proposed changes can be unreal and also unfeasible, jeopardising one of the basic characteristics of RANS, i.e., its orientation to action. Our RANS projects (in the municipalities of Straža and Žirovnica) showed that a clear timeline was needed in research, because this was the only way for the mayors to be, in turn, able to define the timeline for the implementation of the proposed changes at the local level. It is an illusion that research can be accelerated simply by relying on RANS as opposed to traditional empirical research, if there is no firm commitment in the local community to put the research results into practice. Instead, a clear time plan is needed, and, of course, we need to stick to that plan.

Rapidity is also related to other characteristics of this method including the most often mentioned, *cost-effectiveness*, because analysing the existing data saves cost and time, which is needed for collecting new empirical data. Avoiding extensive and lengthy techniques enables giving priority to cheaper sources of information (Flaker et al., 2019). Cost-effectiveness is attractive for the representatives of local authorities wishing to acquire good quality data in a short amount of time and cheaply, to introduce changes, in particular in long-term care, which has been a topic in Slovenia for over two decades (Gregorčič & Kajzer, 2021), and still lacks the adequate legislative and financial support. The state's stepmotherly attitude to the systemic introduction of long-term care services has been increasingly coercing local communities—the municipalities—to take their own initiative in introducing such services. RANS has proven to be a very useful method for communities which are aware that to reach the goals of long-term care the introduction of changes needs to be addressed analytically.

We have already mentioned *the use of existing data*. They can really save time and money, but in long-term care at least one other aspect is important. With no long-term care systemically and legislatively in place at the national level this leaves the impression, both in Slovenia and elsewhere, that Slovenia does not have any long term care at all. This is not true. For many years some key components of long-term care have been used (and developed) including material resources (assistance and attendance allowance) and forms of home-based help and services (Gregorčič & Kajzer, 2021). Demographic changes, showing in the increased number of older people, demanded numerous projects involving help, studies and analyses of the situation, mainly in social and health care (Hrast et al., 2020), with occasional

projects emerging in other fields, such as the economy, agriculture and education (Mali & Grebenc, 2021). Accordingly, the Municipality of Ljubljana prepared a map of services including programme and service providers available to older people in Ljubljana (lists of current services and types of services they provide) (Mali, 2013). The map of services included organisations specifically designed for older people (such as care homes, Home Care Institute, day care centres, pensioners' associations), as well as services for different population groups whose users also include older people (such as social work centres, primary health care centres, non-governmental organisations, humanitarian organisations etc.).

The question of needs for long-term care services is the topic reaching many spheres of society, and directly or indirectly concerning many aspects of the everyday lives of people in a certain community, thus it is important that these numerous factors and circumstances are also reflected in the research and planning of responses. The more a certain environment (local community or municipality, region, the state) is willing and decides to understand the question of long-term care as a community task which can connect different resources and numerous actors in the local community (Bernard & Rowles, 2013), the more complex and holistic can be the plan of responses to older people's needs in a concrete municipality. This means that taking into account a given situation² will enable the responses to the long-term needs of people to be placed in the context of a local community's vision of development (such as the activation of the local community in the creation of responses to needs, the promotion of the local economy, respect of ecological principles and potential for self-subsistence). Moreover, the effects of RANS's potential for action are shown in the cumulative and mutual processes of needs fulfilment in the community, when, for example, services designed for a group of older people are also beneficial to other residents in the community (i.e. age friendly community) (Scharlach & Lehning, 2016) or when service users concurrently become the source of support for others. RANS is a method which, when used as an *action method*, encourages the development of the community as a whole, while enabling the researched group (in our case older people) to influence their definition of everyday life issues, situations and types of needs that they consider relevant to them, as well as to shape responses to them.

The inclusion of community and the intensity of working together in the local environment also depend on the research plan and the willingness and possibilities of the local community to work with the researchers. The direction and intensity of research with the RANS method is usually defined at the beginning of research. Initially, the sponsors or initiators of the research (such as the interested public) should harmonise their expectations. It is important to make a plan and define the research steps, check data sources and make an agreement with the participants about their role and tasks (Alston & Bowles, 2003). At the very beginning we try to detect as many relevant sources as possible and record the relevant key informants. In introductory meetings in the initial phase of RANS it is important to talk to the body who commissioned the study (for example the municipality) about the data they can provide. For an optimum course of research and quality research results it is important to include the largest possible network of actors of long-term care in the local community. In the municipality we need to find out which organisations are working in the field of long-term care or are related to work in this field in order to create the map of services in the community, access the list of existing data, as well as make the initial contacts in the community.

In RANS, especially in long-term care, collecting new data is extremely important. It is important to be present in the field to obtain the clearest possible picture about how people

²By making demographic and ethnographic maps of needs in the community.

live, what their habits are, and how the community in which they live works (Mali & Grebenc, 2019). When conducting research in the Municipality of Straža, we, the researchers, were not familiar with the culture of the environment and how the community worked in general. We visited the community a number of times and made contacts with people from both the municipal authorities and the representatives of different organisations that had contacts with older people, which was beneficial for us (Mali & Grebenc, 2021). Their representatives were our key informants, when making contacts with people to conduct the interviews. For example, first the secretary of the parish Caritas unit personally invited some older people to participate in the research and, when they agreed, gave us their telephone numbers so that we were able to contact them. Then, the researchers who were qualified to conduct the interviews, arranged visits directly with the interviewees, and while conducting the interviews became acquainted with their town, and even explained to some of these people's neighbours, when they had a chance, why they came from Ljubljana to this part of Slovenia; they also openly spoke about the aim of their visit at a local café located in the centre of the municipality, etc. We chose this kind of approach, because according to Flaker et al. (2019), an important part of the RANS process is to obtain a picture of the diverse perspectives, interests and activities of people participating in the research problem.

The central guideline of the method is the *investigative orientation*. On one hand, this is implied in the researchers' position as such: locals participating in the research expect us to be inquisitive, curious, looking for new knowledge and asking all kinds of questions. On the other hand, this attitude may cause participants to withdraw and perhaps, inaccurately, represent the characteristics of the phenomena under study. In the short time available this can be quite disruptive for the research. It can lead us to false conclusions or misguided proposals. To resolve this predicament it is important that researchers "act like detectives". It is also beneficial for the research team to include researchers who have sound knowledge of the researched community. For example, when we worked in the Municipality of Žirovnica, in the meetings with the representatives of the municipality, as well as in the focus group with the representatives of the actors in long-term care, we were repeatedly assured that the people in their community were well-connected with each other and their co-existence was based on neighbourly help and care. However, we had our doubts about this, because when we visited the municipality we found neither a place nor an institution that looked like a meeting place for the locals, neither did we see them getting together and socialising (Mali & Grebenc, 2021). In the research team meeting we shared our doubts with the whole team, a part of which also included researchers who lived in this municipality. They confirmed our observations and together we decided to take into account our own research findings.

It is the continuous *dialogue* taking place during research between the researchers and the community that enables reflections about reality. Fixed ideas, stereotypes and personal beliefs can create a very different picture of an environment than that recognised by visitors. As researchers tend to be less familiar with the everyday life of a local community, our questions directly interfere with the fixed modes of acting and beliefs. Not only do the almost automatised and routinised everyday practices tend to become self-understood and act like unwritten rules that do not need to be challenged, furthermore these blind spots and grey areas also represent the biggest obstacles when looking for better solutions (Mesec, 2006). Ageism and fixed ideas about the inability of older people on the one hand, and the ideas of institutional responses as the only possible solution, along with the distance existing between the experts and the community on the other are the source of recurring beliefs that older people need to be patronised and that institutions are the only and most appropriate places for those who need support in everyday life. This perspective is even more obvious when we

speak about the needs of people with dementia, the chronically ill or those people who cannot move independently (Beresford et al., 2007). This is why some people's kneejerk reaction, when asked about what they think should be done with regard to care for older people, tends to be, build another care home. It is only when we pay attention to the everyday life of a community, to the desired courses of its day, and individual activities, values and expectations that numerous dimensions of life become visible, and diverse possibilities of adapting to people's needs in their usual living environment are indicated. Therefore, what people no longer think about and take as obvious and only possible becomes concealed and invisible. The invisible can also be something which the community has never even asked itself about, because of the lack of knowledge about it, and most often because it involves the phenomena to which either society is less sensitive or they take place in intimate, hidden places (such as problems with addiction, violence against older people, abuse in institutions) (Bernard & Rowles, 2013; Biggs & Carr, 2016). The RANS method allows us to shed light on issues which people are not aware of or which seem self-understood and seemingly unimportant, but really are of key importance for the change of attitude towards a certain group of people, the development of humane professional practices, and progression in knowledge.

4. Triangulation in research and mixed methods research

Triangulation in research is a term most often denoting the combination of qualitative and quantitative research in social sciences. In the past decades it has gained importance, because it is considered to be increasing the validity of results acquired in social science research. The main purpose of triangulation is to acquire a more holistic and in-depth view of the reality of the world. Through triangulation, researchers try to identify different views of the researched phenomena and problems and, thus, ensure more reliable conclusions as well as deeper credible results (Hilla Brink, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

While there are different definitions of triangulation, triangulation can be considered a simultaneous or sequential of more than one research procedure, method, data source or technique of data collection as well as the combination of different theoretical views or researchers (within one discipline or coming from different disciplines) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The combining and mixing of methods takes place in several ways and at multiple levels, and enables the triangulation of data and triangulation of interpretations. Based on multiple perceptions, triangulation increases the possibilities of data saturation and reduces blind spots and bias in research. Furthermore, in keeping with its principles and procedures, RANS is a method which undoubtedly includes the elements of triangulation. The question is, however, whether RANS's aims reach beyond triangulation. Besides achieving the validity and reliability of research results, and meeting elevated research criteria, research in social work aims to foreground the practical use and value of the results (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Mesec, 2006). This means that research data and procedures serve to invent new responses, increased knowledge, release action potential as well as the potential to mobilise the community.

It is the very use of multiple data sources that is the central characteristic of RANS (Flaker et al., 2019). From the first moment on and during the course of research, RANS focuses on the collection of data and information from a variety of resources, both existing and previously analysed as well as newly acquired in the field, with the help of people whom the research problem concerns. In particular we are looking for saturated, rich data, because it enables a rapid acquisition of an integrated knowledge of the research phenomenon's characteristics, giving proposals for change and taking action. This is an extremely complex field of research, the purpose of which is to improve individuals' living conditions. Our research can critically

influence people's lives, so it is necessary from an ethical point of view that conclusions and proposals are scientifically grounded and validated by key informants, as well as clear and concrete, so they can be used by the community (Danchev & Ross, 2014). RANS does not only involve gaining a better understanding of a certain problem or phenomenon and focusing on triangulation as a strategy for achieving a greater reliability and validity of results; it also includes the planning of change and taking action as its integral components. Is RANS then action research with an element of triangulation, or are its characteristics different? In the continuation we will try to give answers to this question with concrete examples from our own research.

Flaker et al. (2019) only focus on triangulation in RANS to give a few starting points for the presentation of its different operations, including the use of mixed methods, multiple data and sources. In this respect RANS comes closest to the description of triangulation by Denzin (1978) who defined four types of triangulation:

1. *methodological triangulation* (also known as the triangulation of procedures) includes the simultaneous use of different methods (or at least more than one method) in one study or sequential use of one or several methods in one study or a repeated use of a single method at different occasions in one study;
2. *data triangulation* defines the use of multiple data sources (quantitative or qualitative) collected either with different methods or with a single method;
3. *investigator triangulation* defines cooperation between multiple researchers having different views of and approaches to the research problem, thus contributing to the analysis and interpretation of data;
4. *theory triangulation* defines multiple theoretical perspectives based on which researchers form different hypotheses, theses and research questions, and interpret the results.

Methodological pluralism encompassed in the idea of triangulation is particularly adequate for the types of research which require researchers to cope in diverse research situations (Kopač & Hlebec, 2020), while insisting on respecting meticulous scientific criteria and research ethics. Research of the everyday world does not take place in controlled or predictable settings. It is always subjected to numerous expected and unexpected factors. Triangulation is an attempt at responding, and a way of adjusting social science research to scientific requirements on one hand and the limitations of research practices on the other. It can also be considered planned insistence on scientific criteria, but not without reflecting on and making decisions about the meaningful use of certain methods, techniques, theories, approaches and procedures.

The main purpose of needs research using the RANS method is to achieve an in-depth and holistic understanding of the needs of a certain group of people in their concrete environment. This is only possible by designing research instruments and using procedures which meet the plurality of opinions in everyday life. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, methodological triangulation enables the perception of views from different perspectives, which helps obtain more exhaustive and comprehensive results (Neuman, 2003). Methodological triangulation allows us to combine techniques within a single methodology (e.g. we use different quantitative questionnaires for the collection of one type of data) or to combine different procedures or methods stemming from different methodologies (e.g. combining qualitative and quantitative procedures, and using techniques of data collection such as interviews, focus groups and quantitative questionnaires) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Here we have to call attention to one of the biggest errors that occurs in the understanding of triangulation. Denzin's original idea of data triangulation is often replaced by method

triangulation in the practical application of triangulation (Lobe, 2006). This error is mainly caused by the erroneous paraphrasing in indirect sources and by simplification. Common misunderstandings about triangulation also arise from the use of combination and mix as synonyms. Denzin (1978) understood triangulation as the combination of methodologies. The author explains that the purpose of triangulation is not to mix data and “throw data in the same basket”, regardless of how we have acquired them. Triangulation always involves the comparison between data acquired through different methods and techniques. Data gathered with a certain method also have to be processed within this method. Only then can they be mutually compared. This is why, in his opinion, triangulation of data is an act in which different collected data acquired with different techniques or procedures are mutually compared to reveal how data collected in different ways are similar to or different from each other. Usually, large similarities will indicate a higher reliability of the collected data or conclusions, while discrepancies and differences will indicate that at least one collection of data is incomplete or incorrect (Weyers et al., 2008). The comparison of data in research is believed to increase the reliability of the results. In the case of revealed incongruences, these phenomena should be further explained. This certainly requires additional data collection and analysis, i.e., additional research (and most often new costs).

Triangulation of data can take place in various ways. Weyers et al. (2008) describe three examples: (i) triangulation of routinely collected data (for example, with interviews or surveys among users) cross-checked and commented by independent sources; (ii) an example of data triangulation, when the collected data and research results are commented on by users or other key informants (this is how we conducted data triangulation in all of our studies using RANS); (iii) an example, where the data collected was verified by researchers in the review study using an independent source or when field data was compared to the existing official data.

The combination of methods and techniques is of key importance for the research undertaken according to the RANS principles, because research takes place simultaneously at several levels of society. We are not moving only at the micro level (the level of individual), the meso level (the level of the community and organisations) and macro level (the state and society), but also within social action in different contexts, such as “social, cultural, religious, political and historical” (Flaker et al., 2019). This is why it is important to use different methods of social research in one study. For example, RANS at the Municipality of Ljubljana included three methods and techniques of collecting empirical material:

- interviews (using structured and semi-structured questionnaires) with informants (representatives of the target group and service suppliers);
- observation by participation (fourth year students’ journals from study practicum placements in care homes and day-care centres operating in the Municipality of Ljubljana) and in focus groups in the supervisory meetings;
- *ad hoc* information (information that the members of the research team acquired in *ad hoc* meetings with older people living in Ljubljana, information acquired in the meetings with professionals, such as, conferences and training, information in the media, etc.) (Grebenc, 2014).

These methods helped us acquire five different data collections to analyse, and obtain five separate needs assessments: (i) the assessment of the needs of older people living in the community, (ii) the assessment of the needs of the users of the services of Home Care Institute in Ljubljana, (iii) the assessment of the needs as perceived by professionals in community nursing service and home-based personal care workers, (iv) needs assessment based on students’ journals in practicum placements, (v) a collection of *ad hoc* information

about older people's needs.

Interviews with older people provided an insight into the usual courses of the day of different groups of older people, the existing assistance in the community, and typical situations in which people need long term care. The list of needs for long-term care services was complemented with the needs assessment by professionals who at the same time informed us about the advantages and disadvantages of existing social and health care services. For the additional verification of results we used data from the analyses of students' practicum journals and reflections from focus groups. Throughout the research we paid attention to information "offering itself" to us, which either corroborated or complemented the collected data or revealed potential gaps in the research. Sometimes field information was verified by *ad hoc* conversations from the field, when we were in doubt about how to interpret it (for example, we consulted with an older person with experience or a professional highly competent in a specific area of work).

Field material was complemented with other multiple sources:

- information from the existing information systems: such as health, police, social (we asked the Ljubljana Police Directorate to give us data about the number of older people who were victims of criminal offences);
- collection of existing statistical and qualitative data (Statistical Yearbook of Ljubljana, Central Population Register);
- acquisition of data from archives of services and institutions (internal documentation of the Home Care Institute).

Besides data existing strategic documents at the level of the state, the EU and international institutions are of key importance when trying to understand the vision and macro-environment (systems, policies), such as: the national programme of care for older people, long-term care, health care, and the development of local communities.

From the aspect of RANS, triangulation of data is important from several aspects: it helps increase the reliability of results in terms of covering the whole heterogeneity of the phenomenon and providing insight into the scope and trends of needs for long-term care. Methodological triangulation (when data are collected with several methods within a single study) is important in acquiring the clearest and most in-depth possible picture of these needs. If we do not focus only on professionals' narratives, but choose to combine them with the methods of research conducted among users and relatives, this provides separate procedures of acquiring the descriptions of the situations of needs. Their comparison will then show whether a community is well acquainted with the situation in the field or if there are needs that are completely overlooked. Consequently, the picture is complemented by both, the sources acquired in the field (interviews) and those that have already been published or recorded (statistical data, documents, newspaper articles, online forums etc.). Therefore, both types of triangulation (of methods and data) are in the function of grounding and understanding needs (why and how they emerge, how people experience them, what they think about them), the assessment of the scope of the phenomenon and the making of an exact and holistic picture of the needs in the community. In RANS, triangulation is used for professionals to remain not only focused on a part of needs in the community, but to be able to detect the needs of the entire population of older people in need of long-term care. For example, it is not enough to only conduct research among people who use the services of social work centres, because we do not acquire information about the needs of people who are not looking for services provided by the centres or are not familiar with them.

From the aspect of RANS, the decision to use triangulation presumes a clear identification of the relevant and key informants who, importantly, co-create the complementary picture of

needs for long-term care services in the community. Triangulation, as used in RANS, focuses on the deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon. In this respect it is important to create the combinations of sources and methods in which informants (people) or types of message (data) are mutually and meaningfully complemented, rather than remaining in a single communication environment, group or discourse.

5. Conclusion

RANS is never just an exercise in research, because research using RANS interferes with people's everyday lives. Instead, it aims to encourage the community to shape important and useful goals and visions.

Thus, we can conclude that RANS allows for a mixed methods approach, it is more than just triangulation in research, and that the making of any research design should prioritise action research. Methodological and data triangulation are an inseparable part of RANS and are used in all the research of needs carried out in the community. It is only possible to understand people's needs by carefully considering the different factors in society that influence people's everyday lives. We cannot speak of RANS if we do not plan changes in the existing system of long-term care, give concrete proposals and solutions for change, and shape clearly set strategies for putting in place long-term care.

Notably it was by using RANS in our research that we succeeded in asserting the principles of long-term care in local communities, despite the fact that at the systemic (macro) level, long-term care in Slovenia is still underdeveloped. Therefore, triangulation is the research rule of our research strategy, helping us to achieve data saturation, the grounding of conclusions, and the shaping of useful and concrete proposals. At the same time, triangulation is a principle enabling us to work according to the research ethics in social work based on the paradigm of user participation, normalisation of everyday life, empowerment and dialogue.

We do not see research with the RANS method as a rigid use of research techniques, but primarily as a constant and careful consideration of the research steps in terms of their value for the users. The central focus lies on the aspects of action research and the usefulness of research data for the development of responses in the community. The scientific legitimacy and validity of research are provided through evidence-based conclusions and transparency in managing the entire research process. This includes the detailed tracking of the research process and the verification of results at any time. Thereupon, this enables us to meet all the key criteria for providing the validity of results. According to these criteria, as summarised by Amerson (2011), conclusions (findings) are only proven by using several data sources (triangulation), maintaining consecutive data processing and the grounding of conclusions, and enabling key informants to review and confirm the data they contributed.

In this paper, we wanted to highlight the specifics of the method and its application, as well as the benefits and opportunities for research in long-term care. This does not mean that we should not also be critical of the method. In particular, we must pay attention to the shortcomings in further research, in which we will use RANS to enable its further development.

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