

Suzana Tomašević

Doctoral student, Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana

Teaching assistant, Faculty of Law, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek

METHODS OF SOCIAL WORK WITH OLDER PEOPLE AT DIFFERENT PROVIDERS OF SERVICES FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN CROATIA¹

Abstract

The demographic data from the last census (2021) in the Republic of Croatia show that the proportion of older people in the total population will increase, as already predicted. With a larger number of older people, the likelihood of needing help with activities of daily living in later stages of life increases, especially among the population of 80 years and older, which leads to an increase in the number of services for the older people. With the development of social services for older people, different methods and approaches are being developed to meet the needs of older people in the community in which they live. During the doctoral studies at the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana, the author gained new insights into working with older people that had not previously been researched in Croatia. The aim of this paper is to examine whether there are methods for working with older people that are used by different service providers for older people in Croatia. The article presents the methods of social work used by various service providers for older people and how they are based on concepts of social work with older people. The study used a qualitative approach with the interview method and the data was processed using the qualitative analysis method. The study involved 12 people who work in institutions and associations that provide services for older people. The results show that different methods of social work are present in the practise of working with older people and that the concepts of social work with older people are represented by service providers in which older people actively participate in the design of activities and services.

Keywords: older people; concepts of social work with older people; service providers; working methods

¹The research was funded by the Faculty of Law of Josip Juraj Strossmayer College in Osijek within the internal project IP-PRAVOS-25 “The role of social work in various institutional and non-institutional forms of care for older people”.

Introduction

According to the latest data, experts predict that the number of older people in the world will exceed one billion by 2030 and even 1.6 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2023). In the European Union, the number of people over 80 has already doubled between 2002 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2023), confirming the fact that demographic change can be considered a civilisational achievement for the first time in human history (Mali and Grebenc, 2019). The development of different forms of care for older people throughout history is a reaction to social and demographic changes in society. The intensity of the development of services for older people often depends on the political will of the state to recognise the need to develop care for older people and on the strong will of the community to propose and create new forms of care. In the Republic of Croatia, care for the older people has become a public issue in recent decades, and instead of the traditional informal way of care for the older people, an increasing development of the formal way of caring can be observed (Jedvaj, Štambuk and Rusac, 2014). The development of new services for older people opens up new possibilities for the deinstitutionalisation process and has a direct impact on the reduction of institutional forms of care (Grebenc, 2014, p. 135). The first beginnings of the development of care for older people were recorded in the fifties of the twentieth century, when a significant increase in the number of older people was observed in Croatia. Since the middle of the last century, the ageing of the population has been considered a constant challenge for social policy, which most experts only began to address in the 1990s (Šučur, 2003). Until 1990, care for older people was concentrated in homes for older people located in larger cities (Šučur, 2003). Non-institutional care was at the beginning of its development and most care services for older people were left to the family (Laklija and Dobrotić, 2009, p. 59). At the end of the 1990s, Croatia began the process of deinstitutionalisation. The focus was on expanding the service network for all user groups and reducing the institutionalisation of people who need support with everyday activities in their own homes. The Ministry's plan was to support as many services as possible for users in their own homes in order to reduce institutionalisation (Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, 2018). After the 1990s, the answer to the lack of care options for older people was found in the growth of providers of services for older people and the expansion of non-institutional services (foster care for older people, family homes for older people², day care for older people and home care services). From 2000 until today, services

² Family homes for older non-institutional form of accommodation run by a family member who provides services for 5 to 20 older people in a family home. The new Social Welfare Act (NN 156/23) will abolish this form of care and it is expected that family homes will be converted into private homes.

for older people have developed in Croatia, with a lack of transparency in terms of the prices of services, the criteria for placement in a home for older, lack of public application, etc. (Dobrotić, 2016, p. 33). According to the latest data from the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2021), most counties have some kind of accommodation capacity for the older people (private or public) and the statistics show that 3.68% of the older people are accommodated in homes for older people. At the time of writing, home care is being implemented as a project activity at all levels of the local and regional community and it is assumed that such a service is currently available to all older people. The expert group that developed a comprehensive plan for the development of services for older people concluded that the capacity of services is insufficient and is associated with uneven regional development. The recommendations of the National Plan with regard to the sustainability of social services are aimed at improving the legal framework, the transparency of funding, the digitalisation of the system and the development of a uniform assessment methodology (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2021). Recent studies (Penava Šimac, Štambuk and Skokandić, 2022, p. 206) point out that each country should take into account the cultural and social context in which older people live when developing services for older people, but we do not yet have precise data on this. Croatia's accession to the European Union opens the space for the development and revitalisation of existing services for older people, financed by projects under the European Social Investment Plan (Babić and Baturina, 2016). According to the latest data, in Croatia there are 3 state homes for older people (under the jurisdiction of the state), 45 decentralised homes for older people (under the jurisdiction of the counties), 121 private homes for older people and about 379 family homes for older people (Ombudsman's report, 2021). Exact information on the number of day care centres for older and home care providers is not known. The development of care for older people should include formal, informal, and combined forms of care for older people (Hlebec, Srakar and Majcen, 2019), and these different forms of care should be based on the concept of social work with older people. Previous studies (Mali, 2013b) see the increase in the number of older people as an opportunity to explore new ways of working and living with the older population.

Methods in social work are not static and immobile; they are supplemented and changed over time (Flaker, 2003). They are defined as specific techniques and approaches that social workers use when working with users (Teater, 2011), i.e. everything a social worker does in direct contact with a user (Chukwz, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017). Theories help to predict or understand certain phenomena, and methods determine what to do in situations in which one is confronted with certain phenomena (Teater, 2011). In practical work, social workers identify facts that they associate with a certain theory without often realising it (Knežević, Miljenović and

Branica 2013, p.46) and act according to the facts they have identified (they use different methods). Theories in the field of social work methods should offer a range of possibilities and not a network of ideas in which social workers become entangled. Therefore, it is important to choose a relevant theory that is best suited to a particular situation (Lub, 2019). With the increase in the number of older people, space has opened up for considering a critical approach to social work, where social workers, together with older people and other professionals, can change the discourse on ageing in society and institutions and thus influence the development of care for older people (Duffy, 2017). Demographic change has shown that it is necessary to accelerate the development of services for older people that are based on the needs of older people and not on assumptions about general needs in old age. Services for older people have not yet been researched in Croatia, especially in terms of social work methods of working with older people. The fact that the exact number of services for older people and whether they are equally available in all parts of Croatia is still unknown. It is interesting that in the National Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion for the period from 2021 to 2027, the Government of the Republic of Croatia emphasises the greatest development challenge for civil society, which is reflected in the lack of additional knowledge and skills that would enable it to continue working and developing (Marković, 2022).

The aim of the study is to gain at least a partial insight into the working approaches of various service providers for older people who apply to participate in the study. The data on the different approaches to working with older people will provide insight into the existence of concepts of social work with older people.

Social work methods and concepts of social work with older people

Concepts of social work with older people should be based on society's obligation to care for its older members in such a way that they can continue to live in the environment in which they have spent most of their lives (Mali, 2012, p.61). In 1991, the United Nations defined principles for older people that should guide all member states. These include the principles of independence, dignity, participation, care, and self-fulfillment (United Nations, 46/91). The authors Burack-Weiss and Brennan (1991) have defined concepts on which work with older people should be based, namely seeking strengths, promoting maximum functioning, promoting the least restrictive environment, promoting ethical practises, treating older people with dignity and respect, respecting cultural differences and working with a systems perspective. At the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, these principles are further articulated as follows: partnership, power perspective, anti-discriminatory orientation, social network, and community care and represent a specific area of social work with older people (Mali, 2009). The concept of partnership implies the equal participation of users and social workers in the work process, the perspec-

tive of power refers to the mobilisation of users' resources and power, especially their knowledge, possibilities, resources, etc. The practise of anti-discrimination aims to counteract prejudice, undesirable relationships and inappropriate treatment of others. For older people, the influence of the social network is of great importance and is defined as a two-way process that should be taken into account when working with older people. Community care is related to the process of deinstitutionalisation, where services for older people are based on their actual needs (Mali, 2011). Concepts of social work with older people can be implemented through social work methods (Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003, p. 100). There are various definitions and classifications of methods in social work in the literature. Some authors explain methods as procedures that must be carried out to achieve a certain change (Pincus and Minahan, 1973, p. 90), as a sequence of actions that we carry out in order to achieve the objectives (Flaker, 2003, p. 8) or as specific procedures and techniques that help to achieve tasks and goals (Teater, 2011, p. 1), in which all the basic elements of social work are manifested and realised (Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003, p. 100). Methods represent everything the social worker does with the user (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017).

Social workers use various methods in their work with older people in order to achieve a specific goal and thus demonstrate competence in their work. As the profession of social work has developed, so have the methods of working with users, which confirms the claim that social work is a profession that should be flexible and provide answers to specific life situations (Zaviršek, Zorn and Videmšek, 2002). The first division of methods in social work was into basic and auxiliary methods, with basic methods including work with an individual, work with a group and work in the community. The auxiliary methods included cooperation and coordination, the method of professional development, the method of research in social work and administration (Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003). Lymbery (2005, pp. 27-33) lists the needs of older people where he recognises the need for social work intervention. The needs include the following areas: illness, disability, and physical frailty; dementia, depression and other cognitive impairments; working with carers, transition and change, grief and loss; abuse and protection; and confronting and challenging oppression.

McDonald (2010) distinguishes between different areas of work with older people in which social workers use different methods: working with individuals, working with families and groups, and working with communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social work methods were developed in response to the current situation in working with older people, e.g: online methods, walking appointments, volunteers, etc. (Brennan, Reilly, Cuskelly and Donnelly, 2020). Over the last decade, researchers have emphasised the importance of developing social work methods to influence the development of services for older people that meet their needs (Mali,

2013b; Mali, 2019; Mali and Grebenc, 2019). Some authors divide the methods of social work into primary (which refer to direct work with the user) and secondary (which refer to indirect work with the user) (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017). Direct methods include working with an individual, working with a group and working in the community; indirect methods include social action, administration, and research in the field of social work.

This paper identifies concepts of social work with older people based on the presence of direct and indirect methods of social work in various service providers for older people.

Methodology

When we talk about methods in social work, they are approached through social work theory, with each specific theoretical approach advocating a particular approach to work (Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003; Knežević, Miljenović and Branica, 2013). With the increase in the number of older people in the world, there is a need for research on methods of working with older people in order to define a specific area of social work - working with older people. There are several reasons for this: increased life expectancy means a growing number of older people in retirement, who will play an important role in ensuring social balance in the future; social workers will work directly with older people regardless of their field of work; the importance of synergies between general and specialised social work and the greater involvement of older people in social work (Mali, 2013b). The aim of this study is to examine the existence of methods of social work with older people used by different providers of services for older people. Accordingly, the following questions were asked in this study: What methods are used in working with older people in social work practise? Which of the methods used in working with older people are based on concepts of social work with older people?

The data obtained from this research will contribute to the research being conducted as part of the PhD studies at the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana. For a more comprehensive and better understanding of the relationship between methods and concepts of social work among different service providers for older people, a qualitative research approach was chosen that allows access to individual experiences (Lamza Posavec, 2021, p. 61). The research strategy in this study is based on a qualitative approach (Mesec, 1998) and enables insights to be gained into the methods of working with older people and their connection with the concepts of social work with older people. A semi-structured interview (Lamza Posavec, 2021) was used for the research, which covered specific topics (direct and indirect methods of working with older people and concepts of social work with older people) with sub-questions for further clarification of specific phenomena, methods, etc.

The sample of respondents is convenience (Lamza Posavec, 2021). Various providers of services for older people were included in the study: public and private homes for older people and associations, which cooperates with the Faculty of Law in Osijek by organizing a practical course for students of all years as part of their social work studies. During their education, students of undergraduate and post-graduate social work programmes in Osijek take part in practical courses every academic year, which are organised in institutions and organisations that cooperate with the programme. This study included 9 institutions and associations with which the faculty cooperates and which are active in working with older people (three public homes for older people owned by county, five associations providing home services and day centres for older people, and one private home for older people). From the institutions and associations mentioned above, 12 people (11 women and 1 man) took part in the study: five social workers, the director of a home for older people, three presidents of associations for older people (a retired educator, a retired nurse and lawyer) and three coordinators in associations (lawyer, economist and caregiver). The age of the interviewees ranged from 25 to 73 years and their experience in working with older people from 1.5 to 35 years. The interviews were conducted with experts from various profiles live and via the Zoom application in March and April 2023 and the data collected was processed using the qualitative analysis method (Mesec, 1998). Before the start of the study, all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, the protection of their identity, the method of data processing and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time. All respondents voluntarily agreed to participate.

The limitation of the conducted research lies in the sample, which refers to the available service providers and cannot be identified and generalised for all service providers on the territory of the Republic of Croatia. Conducting the interview enabled direct contact with service providers in the area where services for older people are provided, which may affect the increased subjectivity of the interviewees in relation to working with older people.

Results

Research has shown that there are various direct and indirect methods in working with older people, and the intensity of their use depends on the needs of the older people and the service provider. The concepts of social work with older people are reflected in social work methods that actively involve older people in the work, methods in which older people are not passive participants. The research findings are presented in two sections: Methods of social work with older people in different service providers for older people and Methods of social work based on concepts of social work with older people.

Methods of social work with older people at various providers

The interviewees stated that in their direct work with older people, they work with individuals and usually solve the everyday difficulties faced by older people on an individual basis, offering them help and finding solutions to get out of the situation they find themselves in. In homes for older people, social workers have scheduled time to work with older people and in most cases, older people come to the social workers for help and support. *“From some trivial things (...) to the exercise of some of their rights or the solution of problems or some basic things of life.”* (P2) Working with a person is mainly about providing help and solving difficulties. Some of the interviewees who work in associations stated that they reach out to older people through personal contact, contact through relatives and friends and by telephone and work with the older people to find a way to help them. *“My direct contact with them was mainly aimed at concretely solving some of their difficulties.”* (P1) When working with individuals in institutions and associations, the focus is on supporting older people with the activities of daily living.

Method of group work is recognised by all service providers for older people. In homes for older people, social workers state that group work with older people takes the form of meetings aimed at solving the difficulties and problems that the older people in the home face on a daily basis. *“We do group work once a month on the floors of the home, they present us with some of their problems in terms of living together, and our aim is to improve the living conditions in the home.”* (P2) In associations, group work is carried out through creative activities, education, exercise, etc. The group work is led by various professionals. Older people are involved in all activities and have the opportunity to actively participate and contribute to the development of some new activities that were not previously part of the association. *“We promote the recycling of materials among the older (...) we have different sewing workshops where they show their handiwork and how to master a certain technique.”* (P9) Group work is recognised as an indispensable component of various service providers for older people. In institutions, group work relies mainly on occupational therapists as implementers, and in associations, group work is carried out by leaders of activities for older people, association chairpersons, older people who have certain knowledge and skills, and various experts who can contribute with their knowledge to improve services for older people (e.g. kinesiologists, lawyers, nurses, etc.)

Community work is based on the commitment of individuals, groups and organisations working in the environment of the various service providers (Milošević Arnold and Poštrak, 2003). There are several reasons given by the interviewees for networking with different actors in the community: connecting generations, collaborating on projects and improving services within an institution or association. For social workers in homes for older people key of cooperation lies in local authorities

and institutions (e.g. pre-school, primary school, high school, etc.). The involvement of volunteers in the work of the institution and the organisation of various activities by different actors in the community is very important. *“In this respect, I have to admit that it’s something we like to boast about. So, it’s not like we just settle down with an older person and that’s it, but we’re really active and you can see that on social media.”* (P5) Interviewees in the associations stated that they involve all interest groups from the community who want to get involved and contribute to the association’s activities: *“A group of people from other places come here to hang out, or we have different days that we celebrate: holidays, senior day, family day, volunteer day. We have volunteers who play guitar or harmonica, and that’s always very good.”* (P6) When analysing the direct methods, it was found that they are interconnected and mutually dependent. When we talk about the method of working with the individual, we cannot exclude the group and the community.

Indirect methods are mostly covered by administration. The majority of respondents in homes for older people (social workers and the director) pointed out that administration is an integral part of the daily work of staff in such institutions and relates to record keeping, work plans, individual plans and reports. *“We use Google Sheets and documents where all departments are linked together, from the director to the social workers to occupational therapy, where different records are kept about personal data, about communication, about what we did on which day with the users, about what we talked to the families about.”* (P5) Although some previous research (Štambuk, Sučić and Vrh, 2014) has shown that social workers are overloaded with administration and that this affects the reduction of direct work with older people, this research has shown that some social workers use different ways to organise information about the user so that all professionals have the necessary information at the same time (e.g. Google documents). Respondents from the various associations confirmed that the amount of administration is high and that data is often kept in paper and computerised form, which takes up more time. *“Well, that’s a slightly more difficult part of the job, the administrative...it’s really demanding...a lot of associations give up for these reasons...They don’t apply for projects because it’s a problem for them...”* (P7). The majority of respondents confirmed that administration is a burden on their work and that they often do not know what and how to write. The preparation of documents for different projects is often demotivating (especially for associations) as they are not familiar with the application forms of the project documents. The reports often have to be adapted to the submitted administrative bodies, which requires additional work.

The results of this research have shown that most institutions and associations are involved in research whose purpose is to collect results for the preparation of graduate and doctoral studies, to survey people’s satisfaction with certain services, etc. *“We participate in a lot of research, but we do not actually have any feedback*

from that information. Mostly this research is done with the aim of improving the quality of life of older people." (P12) The above statements confirm the fact that the connection between research and real changes in certain service providers has not yet been recognised. The consequence of this phenomenon can also be attributed to the insufficient knowledge of the researcher and his role, the unclear objective of the research, where the contributions of the research and the passive role of the interviewees are not clearly stated. The majority of respondents who work in associations associate research mainly with projects and project activities and analysing the success of the activities carried out. Research is experienced through evaluation processes in which the satisfaction of the end users of a service is recorded. One of the examples of research that has influenced change in the work of the organisation is the issue of violence against older people. *"We participated in the research... The prevalence of violence among older people... it has been used to create some new programmes and projects... a lot of people have referred to that research."* (P9) Some of the aims of research in social work are to improve practise (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017), i.e. working with older people, to acquire new knowledge about working with older people and to develop new methods. Research opens the space for some new topics that have not yet been discussed in the practise of working with older people.

The method of social action includes different strategies and tactics to achieve a specific change that is important for a better life for older people (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017). Radical approaches (Knežević, Miljenović and Branica, 2013) to advocating for change were not observed in this research, but there are certain changes in the community that we can identify as crucial for working with older people. Respondents who work in homes for older people tend to focus on the work and functioning of the institution where older people are accommodated. *"Mostly we seek through some practises... and some of our experiences that we all decide together... that we might change some ways of working... something that maybe would improve the quality of the users' stay in our facility."* (P11) The majority of respondents stated that transparency in institution is key to provide the necessary information, making joint decisions and representing older people when there is a possibility of being cheated by third parties (e.g. when paying for certain services that are not the responsibility of the care home). The interviewees who are active in associations consider it important to promote examples of good practise and to draw the attention of the relevant institutions to the fact that the criteria for exercising the right to services contain certain inconsistencies. *"I am promoting the day care centre as a place where senior citizens can make good use of their free time, and I have also told the social workers that."* (P6) The respondents in this study mainly use strategies of negotiation, persuasion, co-operation and balancing to achieve a particular change for older people in the community. Most associations

use a strategy of persuasion to find a way for authorities to make certain services that have proven useful to older people permanent and sustainable.

The direct and indirect methods of social work presented in the results point to the need to integrate and combine all methods of social work. Each method cannot be considered separately, but should include all others in parallel.

Social work methods based on concepts of social work with older people

The research has shown that concepts of social work with older people (partnership, power perspective, anti-discriminatory practise, social network and community care (Mali, 2009)) are present in different social work methods. The partnership and power perspective as one of the concepts of social work is present in the direct methods of social work (working with an individual, working in a group and working in the community). The respondents who work in associations stated that the involvement of older people in the organisation of activities and events is essential to the work of the association. Older people are respected in associations as equal members who contribute to the work of the organisation. *“People get lost in these projects, it’s more about the administrative part, the accompaniment... and when you have to reach people, they are somehow a bit far away from all that. With us, the situation is different... a person can come, they can express their opinion, they can vote.”* (P7) The perspective of partnership and power is expressed above all in associations where older people work as activity leaders, employees and in the position of association president. Respondents who work in institutions mostly recognise that older people come to them for help and to solve problems. The strength of older people and the ability to solve certain difficulties themselves is not recognised in older people.

Anti-discrimination work with older people should be based on an understanding of old age as a phase of life in which older people should be granted independence and autonomy (Mali, 2009). Respondents working in homes for older people stated that the greatest difficulty in working with older people is finding enough time for direct work, that it is sometimes a great challenge to move an older person from one department to another and that co-operation with the family plays an important role. *“A particular challenge is some of their demands and needs that we cannot currently fulfil, as well as some conflicts between them that we cannot resolve because they are older people.”* (P8) Time is an important indicator that influences the equal treatment of older people. Research has shown that older people with reduced mobility do not have the same opportunities as people who are mobile in a home for older people. For example, people with reduced mobility do not have much contact with professional staff because they are not able to seek out professional staff when they want to (they are dependent on the help of others), and social workers cannot take the time to work directly with an older person who is less mobile due to the

heavy workload in their daily work. Respondents from the associations stated that the challenge in working with older people is finding the time and that it is crucial that the person providing a particular service to older people is motivated to help a person in need. Most of the respondents in the associations are approaching old age or are already old. They therefore explain that the following is important when working with older people: *“A person can come, he can express his opinion, he can choose that direct communication is most effective.”* (P7) Involving older people in a particular service and activity enables the active participation of older people (Mali and Grebenc, 2019), creates a time when older people can become independent and self-reliant, and enables the provider of services for older people to use social work methods successfully.

Social networks (formal and informal) are an indispensable part of everyone’s life, regardless of age. With increasing age, we experience that the intensity of connection with other people in the community decreases due to the functional changes of an older person (Mali, 2012). In this research, the interviewee was told that it is important to involve family members, volunteers and professional staff in the daily life of an older person (if the older person is accommodated in home for older people or is a member of an association that employs professional staff) who can complement the life of an older person in some way. Some associations went a step further and recognised the need to involve family members, not only at the level of association work, but also offered support to family members caring for people with dementia. *“There is a lady who cares for her husband and occasionally comes to the counselling centre, where she is supported by a psychologist. During this time, her husband is with us in the living room, and after the psychologist’s support, the couple stay together in our room for some time.”* (P6) In most cases, an older person’s social network is informal and consists of family, neighbours, relatives and friends. The example of supporting an informal network is a big step towards providing services for older people. Support for informal caregivers confirms the fact that formal and informal care cannot be separated. They should be interconnected and complementary, because on the one hand they utilise the social network of older people and on the other hand they enable older people to grow old in the community to which they belong (Hlebec, Mali and Filipovič Hrast, 2014).

This study has shown that community care is developing more intensively in associations that provide services for older people. Most associations and some homes for older people offer a home care service for older people who need such support. The respondents who are employed in homes stated that there is potential for the development of non-institutional services for older people, but that this currently only relates to meal preparation. Homes for older primarily organise activities in the home that are aimed at the residents, although occasionally other associations, institutions and individuals who wish to do so also take part. With

regard to care in the community, associations have developed activities (creative, educational, sporting, cultural, etc.) to influence the activation of older people in the community. They are always looking for new, innovative ways to help older people stay in their homes for as long as possible while organising the services they need. *“We have two people who come to us to volunteer or work for the common good... we bring them together with people who have not received home services”* (P1). Often, providers of services for older people have to outline the need for a particular service, which in most cases ends up with the project through which it was funded: *“Our transport service will be discontinued at the end of 2020 because the project is coming to an end. However, we have been trying for several months to promote this service and its importance for older people to various donors. We are hoping for a positive response.”* (P9) The above comments confirm that respondents in the associations are finding new ways to maintain services in the community, advocate and represent older people and represent key stakeholders in the development of care for older people. The analysis of the respondents’ answers revealed that concepts of social work are more prevalent in associations that provide services for older people, that develop support and assistance programmes for older people and that are more flexible in terms of the intensity of the development of services and activities than in institutions that provide residential services. Older people’s involvement in associations is based on partnership, anti-discrimination practise, social networking and community care.

Discussion

In recent decades, there has been increasing talk about the growing number of older people and the need for social work to specialise in working with older people. In order to be able to talk about specific social work that complements the general knowledge of social work, it is necessary to develop methods of social work in working with older people (Mali and Penič, 2022, p. 204). In Croatia, there is no research on the application of methods in social work practise that are based on concepts of working with older people. This research has shown that there are direct and indirect methods of social work with older that are present in various service providers in Croatia (homes for older people and associations). Direct methods usually include working with an individual, working in a group and working in the community (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017). Work with the individual is recognised in the area of support for older people in a particular life situation. Sometimes this involves difficulties with activities of daily living and sometimes a new situation that the older person is unable to cope with (e.g. changed conditions for exercising a particular right). Social workers see themselves as an important person who can help an older person at a particular moment. Other professionals such as lawyers and economist recognise the importance of their knowledge which

they implement in social work methods. The study on the power perspective, partnership and anti-discrimination practise (Mali, 2009) in work with older people does not provide a revealing picture. The reason for this could be the aforementioned research, which has shown that the legal framework regulating the activities of homes for older people does not recognise the importance of the role of social work in working with older people (Štambuk, Sučić and Vrh, 2014, p. 187) and older people are seen as passive recipients of help (McDonald, 2010, p. 25). The small number of social workers employed in homes for older people represents the lack of a system that accommodates a large number of older people. This means that social workers do not have enough time to apply social work methods based on social work concepts. The recommendations of previous research are that it is important to bring flexibility into the work of the institutions (especially in institutions where a small number of older people are accommodated), to pay attention to the individual experiences of older people and to be aware of the different cultures and habits in a place (Mali, 2008b, p. 442). Considering that working with individuals in practise cannot be seen as a stand-alone method, but as a method that also includes the method of group and community work (Urbanc, 2006, p. 25), the interviewees from the associations clearly pointed out that the involvement of older people in the organisation of work for older people is essential. Greater involvement of older people can contribute to the development of new methods and skills in social work (Mali, 2013b, p. 38), as research has shown. Associations as service providers for older people showed a high degree of flexibility and openness to cooperation. They often stated that they are guided by the interests of older people when creating activities and that people are at the centre of the association's work, which represents the development of a partnership between older people and professionals. Group work, which mainly takes place in associations, is a place where older people can be helped to achieve certain goal (solving a problem, meeting new people, etc.). The objectives are primarily focussed on gaining knowledge about specific changes (e.g. living and care arrangements, older abuse), developing creativity and connecting with others in the community. Group work helps older people to connect with other people and groups in the community. This means that they deal with the changes in society and raise awareness of the phenomenon of ageing (Mali, 2013b, p. 25), which finds its sources of knowledge about old age precisely among older people (Mali, 2013a, p. 121). Self-help groups for older people in Slovenia are an example of good practise aimed at reducing loneliness and isolation and influencing intergenerational bonding (Mali, 2013b). In both cases, the groups can be both subject and object, and their common feature is the empowerment of older people (Flaker, 2022). Indirect methods include the areas of administration, social action and research. The results of the study have shown that these methods are interlinked and cannot be considered separately. Most of the interviewees see administration in

working with older people as a difficulty and an obstacle that takes up most of their work. Previous research has shown the need for better organisation of work with users and a way of managing it (Štambuk and Sučić, 2014, p. 191). Documentation in work with older people should provide a range of valuable data about the people we work with directly (Zaviršek, Zorn and Videmšek, 2002). Documentation in social work is a source of information, a practical tool in the work, contributes to the visibility of a specific problem, leaves a written trace of an example of good practise, etc. (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Milošević Arnold, Poštrak, Stefanovski and Urek, 2011). The method of research in social work has only been recognised in research through its inclusion in theses and dissertations and through the implementation of various measures of quality and satisfaction with the service provided. The benefits of conducting research involving experts, users and researchers (McBeth, Austin, Carnochan and Chang, 2021) help to identify and understand problems and create improved or new forms of services (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017). Some studies have shown (Mali and Grebenc, 2019) that by applying action research in social work practise, certain changes can be achieved in the community in which older people live. The method of social action is the result of direct work with older people. To achieve a particular change, experts use various methods to advocate for older people (e.g. negotiation, co-operation, persuasion and compromise) (Chukwu, Chukwu and Nwadike, 2017) to enable older people to live with dignity. Respondents in this study gave many examples and ways in which they struggle with a system that is often unresponsive to the needs of older people. The purpose of advocacy in social work is to influence decisions or changes that are not in the user's favour (Zaviršek, Zorn and Videmšek, 2002, p. 80), social work should contribute to positive change in the different forms of care for older people (Mali, 2014). This opens up the possibility for the social worker to take on roles previously defined in the literature: the role of facilitator, advocate, activist and mediator (Mali, Mešl and Rihter, 2011). Based on the analysis of the direct and indirect methods, it was found that the methods should be considered as integrated, one method complements and influences the other, and by integrating the methods, spaces are opened for the development of specific working methods. The results of this research confirm the importance of involving older people in the creation of services and activities for older people. Teamwork is a key moment in working with older people. The different professional groups contribute to the development of services for older people from their professional perspective. The need for flexibility in working with older people has been shown in this study to be important, especially in moments of illness and frailty of older people, the time that needs to be available for older people and their level of mobility.

Conclusion

Social work methods are most prevalent in the literature on social work theory and social work interventions. The professionalisation of social work is reflected in the development of social work methods. Social work is a science and a profession that constantly examines certain phenomena, changes, etc. and searches for solutions (Mali, 2013b, p. 25) and accordingly the categorisation and definition of methods in social work cannot be definitive. They evolve in line with societal changes and the needs of individuals, groups and communities. In this study, methods were considered through the prism of direct and indirect work with users. The results of the study show that direct and indirect methods intertwine and complement each other in daily work and that concepts of social work are more present in those service providers where older people actively participate. One of the interesting facts was that the interviewees in this study were various professionals providing services to older people, social workers and managers of home for older people, as well as employees in associations who previously had other professions (e.g. economist, lawyer, nurse, educator). Two of the people involved in the study are older people and presidents of associations. Co-operation between different experts in the field of social work is extremely important. Teamwork can reduce the burden of some ethical dilemmas that arise in daily work, consult each other to create new perspectives on the challenges of working with older people (Sobočan, 2021). Various experts in this study, especially in associations, showed that regardless of their formal training in working with older people, they are highly motivated to work, recognise the needs of older people and think in the background that they too will one day be in a similar situation. Collaboration between different professions opens up space for creative connections and the development of new work methods that will be more efficient, diverse and interesting (Mesec and Stritih, 2015, p. 298). Their direct work with older people creates new knowledge about old age, which they indirectly pass on to the community in which they work. The research showed the integration of direct methods of social work with different service providers for older people and the lack of indirect methods such as research. Future research in the field of social work methods and concepts should include older people in order to gain the perspective of older people as recipients of services. Different service providers need to think about how they can network with researchers working on different aspects of ageing to bring about change in service delivery and influence the development of services in line with the needs of older people. The most important step to change current social work practise would be to consider how older people can be involved in the social work process with different service providers.

References

- Babić, Z., & Baturina, D. (2016). Koncept socijalnih investicija kao odgovor na krizu i nove izazove socijalne države: trendovi i perspektive. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 23(19), 39.-60. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v23i1.1280>
- Brennan, J., Reilly, P., Cuskelly, K., & Donnelly S. (2020). Social work, mental health, older people and COVID-19. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 32(10), 1205-1209. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1041610220000873>
- Burack-Weiss, A., & Brennan, F. C. (1991). *Gerontological social work supervision*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Chukwu, N., Chukwu, N.N., & Nwadike, N. (2017). Methods of Social Practice. In Okoye, U., Chukwu, N., & Agwu, P. (eds), *Social work in Nigeria. Books of readings* (pp. 44-59). Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press d.d.
- Čačinović Vogrinčić, G., Milošević Arnold, V., Poštrak, M., Stefanovski, P., & Urek, M. (2011), *Zapisovati socialno delo*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.
- Dobrotić, I. (2016). Razvoj i poteškoće sustava skrbi za starije osobe u Republici Hrvatskoj. *Društvena istraživanja*, 25(1), 21-42. <https://doi.org/10.5559/di.25.1.02>
- Duffy, F. (2017). A social work perspective on how ageist language, discourses and understandings negatively frame older people and why taking a critical social work stance is essential. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47 (7), <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw163>
- Eurostat (2023). *Demography of Europe-interactive edition*. Retrieved on 10.5.2023. from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-interactive-publications/w/ks-fw-23-001>
- Flaker, V. (2003). *Oris metoda socialnega dela: uvod v katalog centrov za socialno delo*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.
- Flaker, V. (2022). *Moč skupine*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.
- Grebenc, V. (2014). Understanding the Needs of Older People: Shifting Toward More Community Based Responses. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 21(2), 133-160. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v21i2.1187>
- Hlebec, V., Mali, J., & Filipovič Hrast, M. (2014). Community care for older people in Slovenia. *Anthropological notebooks*, 20(1), 5-20. http://www.drustvo-anthropologov.si/AN/PDF/2014_1/Anthropological_Notebooks_XX_1_Hlebec.pdf
- Hlebec, V., Srakar, A., & Majcen, B (2019). Long-Term Care Determinants of Care Arrangements for Older People in Europe: Evidence from SHARE. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 26 (2), 135-152. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v26i2.1604>
- Ombudsman's report (2021). *Analiza stanja ljudskih prava i jednakosti u Hrvatskoj*. Retrieved on 1.4.2023. from <https://www.ombudsman.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Izvjescje-pucke-pravobraniteljice-za-2021-1.pdf>

- Jedvaj, S., Štambuk, A., & Rusac, S. (2014). Demografsko starenje stanovništva i skrb za starije osobe u Hrvatskoj. *Socijalne teme*, 1(1), 135-154. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/177570>
- Knežević, M., Miljenović, A., & Branica, V. (2013). *Teorija socijalnog rada*. Zagreb: Biblioteka socijalnog rada.
- Laklija, M., & Dobrotić, I. (2009). Korelati sukoba obiteljskih i radnih obveza. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 16(1), 45-63. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v16i1.799>
- Lamza Posavec, V. (2021). *Metodologija društvenih istraživanja - temeljni uvidi*. Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar.
- Lymbery, M. (2005). *Social work with older people*. London: Sage publications.
- Lub, V. (2019). Theory, social work methods and participation. *Journal of Social Work*, 19 (1), 3-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017318757297>
- Mali, J. (2008). Comparison of the characteristics of homes for older people in Slovenia with Goffman's concept of the total institution. *European Journal of Social Work*, 11(4), 431-443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450802220966>
- Mali, J. (2009). Social work with people with dementia: the case of Slovenia. In V. Leskošek (ed), *Theories and methods of social work: exploring different perspectives* (pp. 149-160). Ljubljana: Faculty of social Work.
- Mali, J. (2011). An example of qualitative research in social work with older people: The history of social work in old people's homes in Slovenia. *Collegium Antropologicum* 35(3):657-64. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/51770200_An_Example_of_Qualitative_Research_in_Social_Work_with_Older_People_The_History_of_Social_Work_in_Old_People%27s_Homes_in_Slovenia
- Mali, J., Mešl, N., & Rihter, Lj. (2011). *Socialno delo z osebam z demenco*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.
- Mali, J. (2012). Deinstitutionalisation as a Challenge for the Development of Community-based Care for Older People. *Dialogue in Praxis*, 1(14), 57-69. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276203970_Deinstitutionalisation_as_a_Challenge_for_the_Development_of_Community-based_Care_for_Older_People_Deinstitucionalizacija_kot_izziv_za_razvoj_skupnostne_oskrbe_starih_ljudi
- Mali, J. (2013a). The Role of Social Work in the Epoch of Intergenerational Solidarity in Society. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 21(2), 111-131. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v21i2.1188>
- Mali, J. (2013b). Social work with older people: The neglected field of social work. *Dialogue in Praxis*, 2(15), 23-40. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276203963_Social_work_with_older_people_The_neglected_field_of_social_work_Socialno_delo_s_starimi_ljudmi_Zapostavljeno_podrocje_socialnega_dela

-
- Mali, J. (2014). The Role of Social Work in the Epoch of Intergenerational Solidarity in Society. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 21(2), 111-131. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v21i2.1188>
- Mali, J. (2019). The method of personal planning and the implementation of services in social work with older people. *Ljetopis socijalnog rada*, 26(1), 61-80. <https://doi.org/10.3935/ljsr.v26i1.253>
- Mali, J., & Grebenc, V. (2019). Rapid Assessment of Needs and Service sin Long-Term Care. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 26(2), 171.-187. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v26i2.1603>
- Mali, J., & Penič, B. (2022). Odzivi socialnega dela na ukrepe za zaježitev epidemije covid-19 v domovih za stare ljudi. *Socialno delo*, 61(2-3), 205-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.51741/sd.2022.61.2-3.203-221>
- Marković, N. (2022). Nacionalni plan borbe protiv siromaštva i socijalne isključenosti za razdoblje od 2021. do 2027. godine. *Časopis za socijalne djelatnosti*, 1(1). <https://socijalne-djelatnosti.nakladaslap.com/public/pdf/2022-01-01-14.pdf>
- McBeth, B., Austin, M.J., Carnochan, S., & Chang, E. (2021). Practice research methods in social work: Processes, applications, and implications for social service administrations. *British Journal of Social Work*, 52(2), 3328-3346. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab246>
- McDonald, A. (2010). *Social work with older people*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mesec, B., & Stritih, B. (2015). Razumevanje timskega dela v socialnem varstvu. *Socialno delo*, 54(5), 295-305. https://www.revija-socialnodelo.si/mma/Razumevanje_URN_NBN_SI_DOC-YUXVN8R9.pdf/2019011711444294/
- Mesec, B. (1998). *Uvod v kvalitativno raziskovanje v socialnem delu*. Ljubljana: Visoka šola za socialno delo.
- Milošević Arnold, V. & Poštrak, M. (2003). *Uvod v socialno delo*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.
- Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2021). National plan for the development of social services for the period from 2021 to 2027. Retrieved from <https://mrosp.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Glavno%20tajni%C5%A1tvo/Godi%C5%A1nji%20planovi%20i%20strate%C5%A1ka%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87a/Nacionalni%20plan%20razvoja%20socijalnih%20usluga%20za%20razdoblje%20od%20%202021.%20do%202027.%20godine.pdf>
- Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy (2018). Plan for deinstitutionalisation, transformation and prevention of institutionalisation 2018-2020. Year. Retrieved from <https://mrosp.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/MDOMSP%20dokumenti/Plan%202018-2020.pdf>
-

- Penava, Šimac, M., Štambuk, A., & Skokandić, L. (2022). Potrebe starijih osoba za uslugama iz sustava socijalne skrbi u Hrvatskoj. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 29(29), 191-212. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v29i2.1918>
- Pincus, A. & Minahan, A. (1973). *Social work practice: model and method*. Madison: F.E. Pea code Publisher, Inc.
- Sobočan, A. (2021). Etična socialnodelovna praksa v pandemičnem času. *Socialno delo*, 60(3), 219-231. doi: 10.51741/sd.2021.60.3.219-231
- Štambuk, A., Sučić, M., & Vrh, S. (2014). Socijalni rad u domu za starije i nemoćne osobe-izazovi i poteškoće. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 21(2), 185-200. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v21i2.1182>
- Šućur, Z. (2003). Razvoj socijalne pomoći i socijalne skrbi u Hrvatskoj nakon Drugog svjetskog rata. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 10 (1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v10i1.137>
- Teater, B. (2011). *Applying Social Work Theories and Methods*. New York: Open University Press.
- United Nations (1991). *United Nations Principles for Older Persons*. Retrieved on 1.4.2022. from <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/581/79/IMG/NR058179.pdf?OpenElement>
- United Nations (2023). *Leaving no one behind in an ageing World: World social report. 2023 UN/DESSA*. Retrieved on 10.5.2023. from <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000104?ln=en>
- Urbanc, K. (2006). *Izazovi socijalnog rada s pojedincem*. Zagreb: Alinea.
- Zaviršek, D., Zorn, J., & Videmšek, P. (2002). *Inovativne metode v socialnem delu: Opolnomočenje ljudi, ki potrebujejo podporo za samostojno življenje*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.