Reflective group interventions with social workers: a scoping review

Abstract

Social work is a rewarding yet highly demanding profession, and supporting practitioners to manage the emotional and practical demands of the role is key to addressing ongoing challenges in the recruitment and retention of social workers. Reflective group interventions (RGIs) – such as group supervision and reflective case discussion groups – are commonly used to support social workers, however comparatively little is known about the effectiveness of RGIs or the outcomes of providing them to social workers. This article is based on a scoping review of empirical research on RGIs with social workers. Twenty-seven studies were included as part of the review and findings data were extracted under four pre-determined categories: personal and professional development, working with service users, retention, and cost effectiveness. Challenges in embedding RGIs into practice were also identified as an area of interest. The evidence-base for the effectiveness of RGIs is relatively weak, with most studies being small-scale, localised, and exploratory in nature. Based on findings from the review, this article proposes a logic model for prospective inputs, outputs, and outcomes of RGIs and recommends further research to support the development of effective RGIs with social workers.

Keywords: Group supervision; reflection; retention; social work; well-being;

Teaser text

This article reviews research on different forms of reflective group interventions (RGIs) with social workers. The authors were interested in how RGIs – structured group discussions that promote reflection, learning, and emotional containment – influence professional and personal development, working with service users, staff retention, and whether such interventions are cost-effective. Twenty-seven studies were included in the review and the findings suggested that there were potential benefits for social workers, particularly in terms of their professional and personal

development, and working with service users. However, there is less research available relating to staff retention and cost-effectiveness, and in general the research on RGIs is limited in scope. The authors suggest a model for understanding and evaluating the potential benefits of RGIs and recommend that further research takes place to explore these potential benefits.

Introduction

The provision of support for social workers enables them to develop skills and confidence and manage the emotional demands of their role. The primary source of support is often good quality reflective supervision (Wilkins, 2017) and research on one-to-one supervision evidences its potential for supporting social workers' well-being (Warwick et al., 2023; Carpenter et al., 2013). While supportive supervisory relationships are important, Wilkins (2017) argues that too much emphasis is placed on an individual supervisor being able to meet the support needs of social workers.

A range of reflective group interventions (RGI) have been developed to promote reflection, containment, and learning amongst practitioners. The term 'intervention' is used within the empirical literature on forms of group support (Muurinen and Kääriäinen, 2022; Lees and Cooper, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2021; O'Sullivan, 2019) and captures that the intention of RGIs to bring about positive change and improve outcomes. RGIs involve a group of practitioners (more than two individuals) participating in a structured discussion that is aimed at promoting learning, developing practice, or offering emotional support. This may or may not involve management oversight – a key facet of supervision (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014) – so while some RGIs may meet the definition of supervision, many do not.

RGIs encompass a range of approaches, underpinned by differing theoretical perspectives. Systemic group supervision (SGS) – which, unlike other RGIs, often replaces rather than supplements one-to-one supervision (Wilkins et al., 2018) – is based on systemic thinking, prioritising exploration of the dynamic interaction of familial systems, and promoting curiosity (Bostock et al. 2022). Other RGIs describe themselves as group supervision, though serve as a supplementary form of support rather

than a replacement for one-to-one supervision (Julien-Chinn and Lietz, 2019). RGIs describing themselves as group supervision do not adhere to a single theoretical underpinning in the way that some other RGIs – such as SGS and work discussion groups (WDG) – do, and there is no singular approach to RGIs describing themselves as group supervision. Reflective case discussion groups (Lees and Cooper, 2021) and WDGs (O'Sullivan, 2019) are informed by psychodynamic theory and promote exploration of emotional and relational experiences. Schwartz rounds (Wilkins et al., 2021) and peer support groups (Dempsey and Halton, 2017) involve emotional sharing with a primary focus on containment and emotional support. Other models, such as theory and practice groups (Muurinen and Kääriäinen, 2020), restorative groups (Lauridsen and Munkejord, 2022), and critical incident debriefings (Pack, 2012) use established models to promote learning or to provide emotional support following challenging experiences.

Despite the existence of diverse approaches to RGIs and their potential value in supporting social workers, their impact on practice and practitioners is not well understood. This article seeks to address this gap by reviewing the existing empirical research on RGIs in social work.

Background to the scoping review

This scoping review was undertaken as part of a small-scale evaluation of a local authority pilot of a form of RGI focused on well-being of social workers. This evaluation involved carrying out a review of the literature to establish the range and quality of existing empirical research relating to RGIs.

The research team comprised two researchers with backgrounds in social work and one researcher from a health sciences background. Having an interprofessional team undertaking a scoping review is good practice, since researchers from different disciplines will bring different experiences, expectations, and expertise, thus enhancing the review process (Daudt et al., 2013). In our case, our backgrounds brought to the fore interesting differences in expectations. The health sciences researcher had expected to find randomised controlled trials and cost-benefit analyses of interventions, since these are common in the health sciences. Although randomised controlled trials

are viewed as the 'gold standard' in evaluating interventions in the health sciences, in social work their use has been comparatively limited, with some commentators identifying them as potentially problematic (Dixon et al., 2014). As a result, the social work researchers expected most studies to be qualitative, small-scale, and exploratory in nature. During the first meeting of the research team, the need to include research using a variety of methods was discussed, given the likely paucity of randomised controlled trials. When refining proposed themes, discussions between the research team ensured that themes would be recognisable to a primarily social work audience.

Scoping review methods

Scoping reviews are appropriate where there is a need to map the territory and identify gaps in current knowledge (Mak and Thomas, 2022). The scoping review process followed the six steps outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005):

1. Identifying the research question
2. Identifying relevant studies
3. Study selection
4. Charting the data
5. Collating, summarising, and reporting the results
6. Consultation with stakeholders (optional)

The model proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) has subsequently been built upon by Levac et al. (2010) and Daudt et al. (2013) to incorporate further good practice guidance, such as the aforementioned use of an inter-disciplinary research team and processes for dividing studies and cross-checking and sense-checking during stages three and four of the process. Consultation with stakeholders involved in the evaluation took place during and following the review, though no revisions to the report were proposed.

Mak and Thomas (2022) note the importance of having a clear research question when undertaking a scoping review. The research question which led the review was: *What impact do RGIs have on staff retention, staff turnover and intention to leave, personal and professional development (including well-being outcomes), service-user outcomes, and cost-effectiveness?* The question was devised through consultation with stakeholders and through the research and practice expertise of the two social work researchers, who have published empirical work on staff retention (Cook et al., 2024) and different forms of supervisory support (Gregory, 2024).

Search terms generated and refined with the research team and the University's subject librarian were: group*, reflect*, supervis*, social work*, social service*, child welfare, child protecti*, welfare system, welfare service, effective*, evaluat*, intervention* program*, initiative, strategy, effect*. These terms were used in conjunction with an exhaustive list of terms (n=47) separated by the 'or' Boolean operator related to study and evaluation designs, for example, study or trial or evaluation or factorial design or controlled study. OvidMedline, EBSCO CINHAL and Scopus databases were searched. Manual searches of grey literature also took place to identify relevant research reports that may not appear in academic databases, including What Works for Children's Social Work (whatworks-csc.org.uk), Social Work England (socialworkengland.org.uk), and Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (iriss.org.uk). Backward citation searching also took place by screening the references of included studies.

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they involved qualified social workers, in any geographical region. Studies were included if they reported outcomes as measured using validated measures, self-report, collected workplace data, or qualitative reports related to the research question. Reviews, systematic reviews, editorials, discussion papers, commentaries, letters, book chapters, and non-English language studies were excluded, as were studies based on individual rather than group interventions. Given the small scale and scope of the existing literature, the research team felt date parameters were not needed.

Literature searches took place in December 2022 and yielded 1,597 results. The records were divided equally between the three members of the research team for title and abstract screening to check relevance, which reduced results to eighty-three items. Any uncertainties were discussed within the research team to reach consensus. These articles were then subject to full text screening, with cross-checking from other members of the research team to ensure consistency and rigour, and this led to the inclusion of twenty-five articles. A further two research reports were identified via hand searching, leading to a total of twenty-seven articles and research reports being selected for inclusion. The process of selection is outlined in Figure 1.

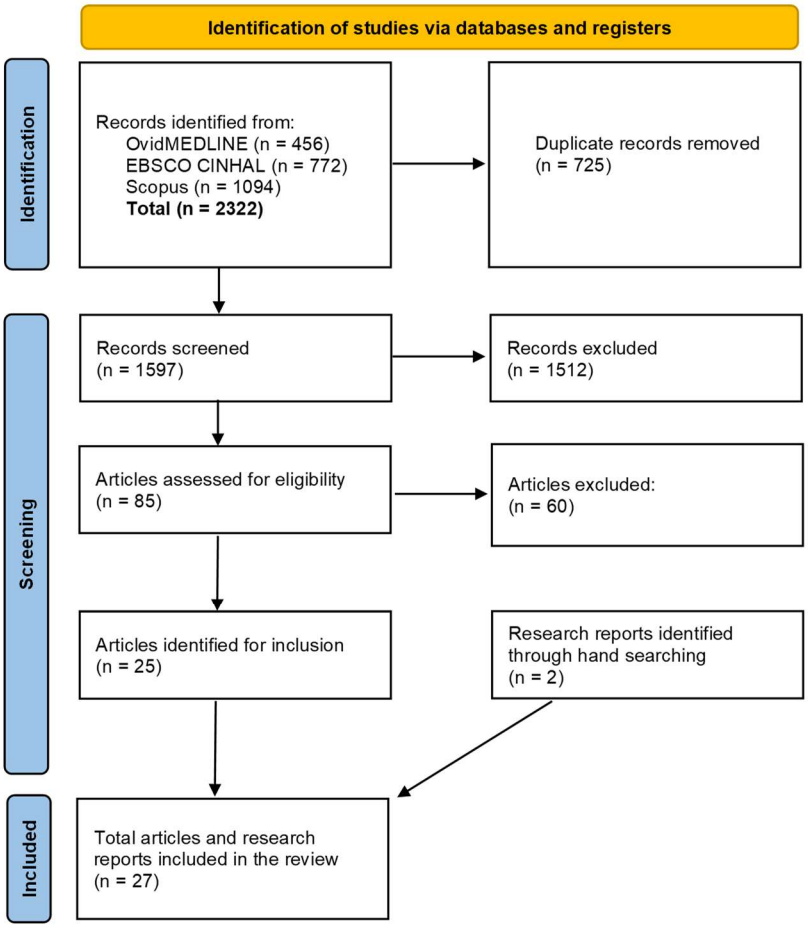

Figure 1: Flowchart of selection of studies for inclusion

Data relating to pre-determined categories were extracted from the included studies, with these categories derived from the research question and the expertise and experience of the research

team. The four categories were: personal and professional development, working with service users, retention, and cost effectiveness. Very few studies reported outcomes related to retention or cost effectiveness, with most findings relating to personal and professional development and working with service users. These two categories were subjected to further analysis and key themes were identified. Table 1 shows the prevalence of data relating to the four categories across the studies.

Author (year)	**Retention**	**Personal and professional development**	**Working with service users**	**Cost effectiveness**
Bailey et al., (2014)		X		
Bostock et al., (2019)			X	
Bostock et al., (2022)			X	
Brooks et al., (2012)		X		
Cabiati (2021)		X	X	
Csiernik et al., (2010)		X		
Dempsey and Halton (2017)		X	X	
Julien-Chinn and Lietz (2019)		X		
Lauridsen and Munkejord (2022)		X	X	
Lees (2017)		X	X	
Lees and Cooper (2021)	X	X	X	
Magnussen (2018)		X		
McLaughlin et al., (2019)		X	X	
Muurinen and Kääriäinen (2020)		X		
Muurinen and Kääriäinen (2022)		X		

O'Sullivan (2019)		X		
O'Sullivan et al., (2022)		X		
Pack (2012)		X		
Partridge et al., (2019)		X	X	
Pines and Aronson (1983)		X		
Shamai (1998)		X	X	
Smith (2022)		X	X	
Tham (2022)	X	X		
Warman and Jackson (2007)		X	X	
Wilkins et al., (2018)			X	
Wilkins et al., (2021)	X	X	X	X
Williams et al., (2022)			X	
Total	**3**	**23**	**15**	**1**

Table 1: Overview of study outcomes

Most studies were from the UK and Ireland (n=14), based in local authorities (n=15), and with child and family social workers (n=15). Twenty-one of the included studies used a qualitative approach, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations. There were a range of approaches to RGIs for social workers reported in the studies. The most common approach was SGS (n=6). Other approaches reported were group supervision (n=4), reflective practice groups (n=4), peer support groups (n=3), Schwartz rounds (n=1), clinical group supervision (n=1), peer consultation (n=1), burnout workshop (n=1), critical incident stress debriefing (n=1), and action research (n=1). Table 2 provides a breakdown of study design and form of RGI across the identified studies.

Author (year)	Study Location	Staff Group	Sample size	Study design	Reflective group intervention approach
Bailey et al., (2014)	Australia	Social workers	8	Pre-post evaluation surveys and external group evaluation session	Peer Consultation
Bostock et al., (2019)	England	Local authority Children's Services Social Workers	14 group supervision observations and 18 family visits	Structured Observations	SGS
Bostock et al., (2022)	England	Local authority Children's Services Social Workers	49	Qualitative interviews	SGS
Brooks et al., (2012)	USA	Social services - social workers and counsellors based in community inner city treatment agency	51	Qualitative survey	Clinical Group Supervision

Cabiati (2021)	Italy	Social workers (Child protection and adults, elderly, migrants and people in poverty)	45	Observations	Online mutual support groups for social workers
Csiernik et al., (2010)	Canada	Newly qualified child protection workers based in Children's Aid Society	13	Survey pre and post measures	Social Support Group
Dempsey and Halton (2017)	Republic of Ireland	Child Protection Social workers	11 (across two groups)	Qualitative - focus groups (three time points - baseline, mid-point and 12 months)	Peer support groups
Julien-Chinn and Lietz (2019)	USA	Child Welfare Service Agencies Children's Social workers	90	Cross-sectional survey	Group supervision
Lauridsen and Munkejord (2022)	Norway	Social Workers based in Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service – non-government	29	Qualitative - Reflection notes, focus group interviews, interviews	Action research and restorative circle process

		labour and inclusion services			
Lees (2017)	UK	Local authority social workers - children's services	268 took part in intervention 89 recruited to study	Mixed methods - Quantitative survey and qualitative interviews and focus groups and observations	Reflective Practice Group (Closely aligned to the Tavistock's WDG)
Lees and Cooper (2021)	UK	Local authority Social Workers and managers	Estimated 240 staff in the overall RPG. 15 interviews, three focus groups and +1 year. 7 interviews at 3+ years	Mixed-methods evaluation. Survey with qualitative and quantitative questions at +1 and +3 years. Interviews and focus groups	Reflective Practice Group
Magnussen (2018)	Denmark	Local authority Children's Services Social Workers	9 observations and 30 interviews	Observations and interviews	Group supervision

McLaughlin et al., (2019)	Ireland	Service case managers and child support workers in non-profit, state funded homeless service	8	Case study	Group supervision
Muurinen and Kääriäinen (2020)	Finland	Adult and children's social workers	16	Three case studies Group interviews	Practice and Theory Group
Muurinen and Kääriäinen (2022)	Finland	Adult and children's social workers	16	Three case studies Group interviews	Practice and Theory Group
O'Sullivan (2019)	Ireland	Child Protection Social workers	7	Case study	WDG

O'Sullivan et al., (2022)	Ireland	Social workers based in therapeutic fostering support service	1	Case study	Reflective Practice Group (Closely aligned to the Tavistock's WDG)
Pack (2012)	New Zealand	Social workers	13	Qualitative - interviews	Critical Incident Stress Debriefing
Partridge et al., (2019)	UK	Local authority Children's Services Social Workers	Not reported	Qualitative Survey	SGS
Pines and Aronson (1983)		Social services	53 23 in intervention group, 30 in control	Non-equivalent control group design with pre and post-test measures	Burnout workshop
Shamai (1998)	Israel	Social workers	16 social workers	Qualitative - clinical observation and evaluation survey	SGS
Smith, H (2022)	UK	Local authority Children's Services Social Workers	14	Observations	SGS - Unit Meeting model

Tham, P (2022)	Sweden	Swedish municipality (local authority) Children's Services Social Workers	36 newly qualified social workers, 5 team leaders	Pre-post design (no control group) Group interviews at baseline, one year and two years	Group supervision
Warman and Jackson (2007)	UK	Residential social workers in local authority children's home	15	Evaluation feedback	WDG
Wilkins et al., (2018)	UK	Local authority children's services Social workers	21 family meetings observed, 19 family interviews, 33 professionals in 22 observations of group supervision and questionnaires about each family	Mixed methods - observations of group supervision and family meetings and interviews with parents	SGS
Wilkins et al., (2021)	UK	Children's services social workers in 10 local authorities	5,072 randomised to intervention (n=2534) or control group (2538)	Randomised Controlled Trial	Schwartz rounds

			776 recruited to study, intervention group n=397, control group n=379		
Williams et al., (2022)	UK	Social Workers	Not reported	Evaluation feedback	Reflective Discussion Group

Table 2: Description of included studies (n=27)

Findings

The analysis identified sub-themes within the two most prevalent categories. Under the category of personal and professional development, the following themes were generated: emotional containment and safety, professional identity and ability, and collegial relationships and organisational culture. Under working with service users, the following themes were identified: greater insight and enhanced understanding, and empathy and compassion. Another theme identified outside the pre-defined categories was that of embedding the interventions into practice.

Personal and professional development

Many of the qualitative studies of RGIs found that being part of the group had a positive impact on personal well-being and created a space for emotional containment when discussing challenging cases. Furthermore, the groups provided opportunities for professional growth and contributed to the development of positive collegial relationships and organisational culture.

Emotional containment and safety

Several studies described the positive role that reflective practice groups had on social workers' capacity to manage work-related emotions, offering containment by creating an emotionally safe space to talk about feelings and the complex and painful aspects of practice. The group acted as a source of support that normalised difficulties with cases and there was some evidence of lowered psychological distress (O'Sullivan et al., 2022; Lauridsen and Munkejord, 2022; Muurinen and Kääriäinen 2022; Lees and Cooper, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2021; McLauglin et al., 2019; Partridge et al., 2019; Lees, 2017; Bailey et al., 2014; Csiernik et al., 2010).

In O'Sullivan et al.'s (2022: 190) study, one participant commented that the biggest benefit of the group process was "being understood, having feelings validated and accepted". This highlights the value of the group setting in providing emotional safety. In some studies, RGIs were associated with reduced stress and increased tolerance to stressful situations (Muurinen and Kääriäinen 2022;

Warman and Jackson, 2007) and an ability to process and manage anxiety (Smith, 2022). Muurinen and Kääriäinen (2022: 6) found that theory and research groups improved social workers' "work-related sense of well-being". Further benefits for social workers engaging in RGIs were reduced inhibition in expressing feelings and recognising the feelings of colleagues (Warman and Jackson, 2007). When dealing with the emotional impact of critical incidents, Pack (2012) found that individual support – including one-to-one clinical supervision – was required to supplement group-based interventions. However, group settings can effectively provide emotional support under unpredictable and turbulent socio-political conditions, as well as supporting coping with stressful life events (Cabiati, 2021; Shamai, 1998). Having a space that helped individuals to manage the emotional demands of the work was a key benefit shared by several RGI approaches.

Professional identity and ability

Other studies identified that RGIs helped to reinforce a sense of professional identity, and participants reported that their confidence was strengthened through the group environment. RGIs were also associated with developing professional skills such as augmentation, empowerment, decision-making and self-esteem, that could be drawn on in work with service users (Muurinen and Kääriäinen 2022; Lees and Cooper 2021; Muurinen and Kääriäinen, 2020; Brooks et al., 2012; Lees, 2017; Dempsey and Halton, 2017).

One participant encapsulated the sense of enhanced professional identity and self-efficacy that resulted from participation in a practice and theory group:

> I was also just thinking about professional identity. Wow, the things I can do! Often, I have had the feeling that man, I do good work. Or even with failed experiments, I realise what it's about and next time I can try and see if it would work another way (Muurinen and Kääriäinen, 2022: 1213)

Participating in reflective case discussion groups also elicited feelings of "solidarity" and "pride" in participants' professional practice (Lees and Cooper, 2021: 101). This enabled social workers to develop a sense of identity that helped them to "integrate their personal and professional values" (Dempsey and Halton, 2017: 14).

Collegial relationships and organisational culture

Several RGIs supported the development of constructive collegial relationships, strengthening working relations with managers, peers, teams, and enhancing the perception of organisational culture (Cabiati, 2021; Bailey et al., 2014; Warman and Jackson, 2007; Pines and Aronson, 1983).

Warman and Jackson (2007: 44) found that, outside the group setting, the use of WDGs could also "have an impact on the wider culture of the organisation", while Pines and Aronson (1983) reported statistically significant improvements in participants' perceptions of relations with co-workers. Other studies suggested these benefits extended beyond the immediate team or organisation, noting improvements in "collaboration with other professionals characterised by greater cooperation and fewer misunderstandings" (Cabiati, 2021: 685). This finding was echoed by Bailey et al. (2014), who found that peer supervision enabled participants to share learning across professional boundaries.

Some studies reported an improved learning culture within the organisation (Julien-Chinn and Lietz, 2019), fostering an open and reflective community (Lees and Cooper, 2019), and a supportive workplace (Tham, 2022). Wilkins et al. (2021), evaluating the Schwartz rounds approach, found a positive impact on relationships with colleagues, better awareness of different roles, and promoting supportive behaviour outside the group. Meanwhile, Julien-Chinn and Lietz (2019: 363) reported that group supervision was "positively associated with increased perceptions of learning culture" within participating organisations. Tham (2022: 1908) reported that one benefit of group support was a "stronger team feeling, a sense of cohesiveness, that the climate at work was more positive now". Taken together, these findings suggest positive outcomes of RGIs for team and organisational culture and cohesion.

Working with service users

There was some reporting of how RGIs impacted work with service users. Social workers were able to utilise experiences from the group sessions to develop new insights and rehearse skills, which, in some cases, improved practice with and outcomes for families.

Greater insight into working with families

There was evidence that SGS had a strong, positive relationship with the practice skills of social workers, including increased purposefulness, relationship-building, and being child-focused (Bostock et al., 2019), and higher levels of parental agreement and goal-agreement (Wilkins et al., 2018). Wilkins et al. (2018) describe this as a "golden thread": good quality SGS improves the systemic practice of social workers, which in turn leads to improved outcome measures for families. SGS modelled practice and provided opportunities for social workers to rehearse key skills, helping them to develop as practitioners (Wilkins et al., 2018; Bostock et al., 2019).

In periods of uncertainty and challenge for the workforce (like the Covid-19 pandemic), a reflective group was a useful way to discover novel approaches to working with service users. Cabiati (2021: 683) noted that participants felt the group setting enabled them to seek "permission to activate online home visiting interventions" and to gain confidence in "online parenting competence assessment". However, Lees and Cooper (2021) found that it can take time for reflective practice groups to embed improved skills into practice. After one year of reflective practice groups, Lees and Cooper (2021) found that social workers did not report increased knowledge of interventions or improved relationship-based work with families, however participants did report improvements in these areas after three years.

Enhanced understanding and multiple perspectives

RGIs provided a space for reflection on the complexity of social work, promoting better understanding the meaning of the behaviour of individuals and families, and encouraging

perseverance with challenging cases (Lees and Cooper, 2021; Cabiati, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2019; Lees, 2017; Warman and Jackson, 2007). The reflective capabilities developed in the group were also seen in higher levels of critical thinking in one-to-one supervision (Julien-Chinn and Lietz, 2019).

RGIs had the ability to support social workers "to suspend judgement and consider their bias and influence on the case" (Julien-Chinn and Lietz, 2019: 363), enabling practitioners to adopt a position of safe uncertainty (Smith, 2022). The capacity for social workers to hold on to safe uncertainty in SGS was found by Smith (2022) to be dependent on the skills of the supervisor. Skilled facilitators promote exploration of different perspectives, whereas directive supervisors risk stifling curiosity (Smith, 2022). Other forms of RGI, such as reflective discussion groups, can similarly promote safe uncertainty and curiosity when led by a skilled facilitator (Williams et al., 2022).

Being part of a RGI encouraged new perspectives on practice and approaches to managing cases. The group learnt from each other and exposed participants to alternative methods (Magnussen, 2018; Lees, 2017; Bailey et al., 2014). Bailey et al.'s (2014) research is noteworthy as the only study demonstrating outcomes related to working with adult service users. They found that the group offered "an opportunity to move in different directions" which "helps to reflect on alternative approaches" (Bailey et al., 2014: 485). Magnussen (2018: 368) similarly found that group case discussions meant participants "gained a new perspective on the case", opening different ways of thinking about the lives of the families that they worked with. The group setting encouraged social workers to pause during the busyness of their day-to-day practice and to "think more rather than talk too much" (Lees, 2017: 56), which contributed to a sense that RGIs help social workers to slow down their thinking and meaningfully reflect on their work.

Empathy and compassion

RGIs were associated with increased empathy and compassion for families (Lauridsen and Munkejord, 2022; Wilkins et al., 2021). In addition, being part of a group improved emotional awareness, encouraged practicing more thoughtfully, promoted a greater awareness of interpersonal

cues, and acted as a place to work collaboratively and think together about what might be going on for service users (Bostock et al., 2022; Wilkins et al., 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2019; Dempsey and Halton, 2017).

Dempsey and Halton (2017: 14) reported that the group setting gave participants a "unique space to observe [and learn from] their intra- and interpersonal behaviours" while also enabling them to process and manage work-related anxieties. This helped social workers to then think differently about the lives of individuals and families they worked with (Dempsey and Halton, 2017). Meanwhile, Lauridsen and Munkejord (2022: 140) found that the use of restorative circles similarly promoted different ways of thinking about and relating to families, with one participant reporting "I am more patient … I will speak and behave differently than I did previously". Group settings that promote connecting with difficult emotions and taking the perspective of others can be beneficial for promoting greater empathy and compassion.

Retention

The studies offered limited data on the impact of RGIs on workforce retention. Three studies reported information related to social worker intention to leave or sickness-related absence (Tham, 2022; Wilkins et al., 2021; Lees and Cooper, 2021).

Evaluating the impact of small group supervision for newly-qualified social workers over a two-year period, Tham (2022) found that, although work demands had increased, the intention to leave had not, and fewer social workers said that they often thought about leaving or changing roles. Moreover, social workers involved in the study viewed the organisation more positively, rating the climate in the organisation, the leadership, and collaboration more highly (Tham, 2022). Tham (2022) found that, alongside positive perceptions of the organisation, the number of vacancies within the organisation had reduced, and managers reported that they no longer needed to hire staffing companies to recruit.

A similar finding was reported by Lees and Cooper (2021) who found that, over three years of their evaluation, there was a reduction in staff vacancies in participating teams from six to zero and the number of temporary agency staff in participating teams dropped from fourteen to zero. Though turnover of staff remained similar, the findings suggest that recruitment of permanent staff may have been positively impacted by implementing the RGI (Lees and Cooper, 2021).

Social workers who took part in Schwartz rounds in Wilkins et al.'s (2021) randomised controlled trial reported slightly lower sickness-related absences compared with the control group. Around one third of sickness-related absences in the social work workforce are a result of mental health and stress-related illness (British Psychological Association, 2023), and experiencing high levels of stress is correlated with intention to leave the profession (Travis et al., 2016). It may therefore be that lower sickness absence could indicate reduced levels of stress and thus lead to improvements in retention over time.

Cost effectiveness

Wilkins et al.'s (2021) evaluation of Schwartz rounds involved each local authority taking part in six Schwartz rounds over a two-year period. The initial set up costs ranged from £5,200-£6,500 and running costs per round ranged from £288 - £2,700 (the majority of this was the indirect cost of staff time for those who attended). The annual average cost for in-person rounds was £22,600 and £5,100 for virtual rounds (again, the costs were primarily associated with staff time for preparation and attendance). The per-person cost was £22.50 for in-person and £19 for virtual Schwartz rounds (Wilkins et al., 2021).

The extent to which these costs were offset by benefits of Schwartz rounds is more challenging to establish. Wilkins et al.'s (2021) finding that participants engaged in Schwartz rounds reported slightly lower levels of sickness in comparison to the control group could partially compensate for the cost of the intervention. Other benefits – for example, enhanced well-being of staff or improvements in practice with service users – are harder to quantify to gauge the cost-benefit of Schwartz rounds. It

is notable that no other studies included economic data, making it hard to get a sense of the general cost effectiveness of RGIs with social workers.

Embedding into practice

Despite the positive outcomes reported by most studies, some also reflected the challenges associated with embedding RGIs into practice, including the long time it takes for potential individual and organisational benefits to be fully realised (Lees, 2017). It was difficult to provide a space for containment and emotional connections in an environment that traditionally had high intolerance to dependency (O'Sullivan, 2019). The importance of the skill of the supervisor or facilitator was reported (Smith, 2022), as was the need to ensure that the time given to attending was productive, rather than having a negative impact on workload (Magnussen, 2018; Brooks et al., 2012). For some, the emotional nature of the topics covered could be upsetting and some left feeling worse from having to cope with difficult emotions evoked by the discussion (Wilkins et al., 2021).

Williams et al. (2022) highlight several important factors that can mitigate these challenges, including having a skilled and containing facilitator, a clear sense of purpose, structure, and a focus on learning from reflection so that participants see the benefit of the RGI.

Discussion

Revisiting the research question – *what impact do RGIs have on staff retention, staff turnover and intention to leave, personal and professional development (including well-being outcomes), service-user outcomes, and cost-effectiveness?* – the findings from the scoping review most strongly support positive outcomes in relation to personal and professional development, and working with service users. There is empirical evidence to suggest that SGS may improve social workers' practice and lead to improved outcomes for families (Bostock et al., 2022; Bostock et al., 2019; Wilkins et al., 2018). There is also good evidence that Schwartz rounds deliver benefits for social workers, particularly in relation to reducing distress and enhancing collegial relationships (Wilkins et al., 2021). More

generally, the findings paint a picture that RGIs improve social workers' emotional well-being (O'Sullivan et al., 2022; Lees, 2017) and help social workers to develop their skills and to think about the families they are working with in different ways (Smith, 2022; Julien-Chinn and Lietz, 2019).

The review found limited evidence to support outcomes for retention or about cost-effectiveness of RGIs and, generally, the nature of the empirical evidence means that findings about outcomes of RGIs are tentative and provisional. Nevertheless, the potential usefulness of RGIs warrants further exploration. For example, despite there being limited data on whether RGIs improve staff retention, other research has found that work-related stress is correlated with a higher risk of burnout and intention to leave (Travis et al., 2016). It may therefore be that by reducing feelings of stress, over time, RGIs could reduce the likelihood of individuals seeking to leave the profession.

Similarly, a sense of self-efficacy has been identified as enabling social workers to feel content in their role, mitigating negative impacts of high levels of demand on them and supporting them to remain in the profession (Cook et al., 2024). Cook et al. (2024) found that a strong sense of professional identity for experienced social workers gave them a sense of purpose and served as a protective factor against work-related stresses. RGIs can promote a sense of identity, which may in turn reduce intention to leave (Muurinen and Kääriäinen, 2022; Lees and Cooper, 2021; Dempsey and Halton, 2017). The relationship between RGIs, developing self-efficacy and professional identity, and improving staff retention is worthy of further exploration.

There are costs to implementing RGIs, and while only one study provided detailed costings for implementing a RGI (Wilkins et al., 2021), factors such as hiring or training skilled facilitators, and other costs such as infrastructure and use of social workers' time, mean that RGIs require some level of financial input at a time where prolonged austerity has strained social work budgets. However, some of these costs – for example, social workers' time and online or physical infrastructure – are notional rather than additional costs. Social workers are also required to undertake professional

development activities, and the evidence suggests that RGIs can constitute a valuable – and relatively low cost (Wilkins et al., 2021) – professional development activity.

There are further challenges in implementing RGIs. One such challenge is ensuring that the 'right' intervention is chosen, since there are a range of models of RGI, and each has different aims and outcomes. SGS is most likely to be effective in improving practice and outcomes for families where systemic approaches are fully embedded in the teams using SGS (Bostock et al., 2022; Bostock et al., 2019; Wilkins et al., 2018). Where emotional containment of staff is the priority, emotion-focused RGIs – such as Schwartz rounds (Wilkins et al., 2021), reflective case discussion groups (Lees and Cooper, 2021) or WDGs (O'Sullivan, 2019) – are likely to be most beneficial.

Though one study included a RGI with newly-qualified social workers (Tham, 2022) and one involved practice supervisors (Williams et al., 2022), there was a lack of data about how different RGIs may have different outcomes for social workers at different stages of their career. There was also limited reporting on RGIs improving practice with adult service users. Given that Wilkins (2017) argues that forms of support should be selected in accordance with the needs social workers as well as the service, better understanding what RGIs are most effective in different practice contexts and at different stages of social workers' careers would be beneficial.

A further consideration is who should be part of RGIs. Some models include practitioners other than social workers and are led by practice managers, others are facilitated by someone external and do not include managers, and some are entirely peer-led. RGIs that include managers can act as forums for oversight and decision-making as well as reflection, but there is a risk that social workers may feel inhibited or influenced by the presence of a manager (Gregory, 2022). Directive supervisors may limit the capacity of RGIs to provide containment and promote curiosity (Smith, 2022). Further challenges arise in maintaining buy-in from social workers who are already busy (Lees and Cooper, 2021) and in giving social workers permission to be vulnerable in working contexts that do not encourage vulnerability (O'Sullivan, 2019).

Based on the findings of this scoping review, the logic model in Figure 2 outlines the required inputs, outputs, and outcomes of RGIs.

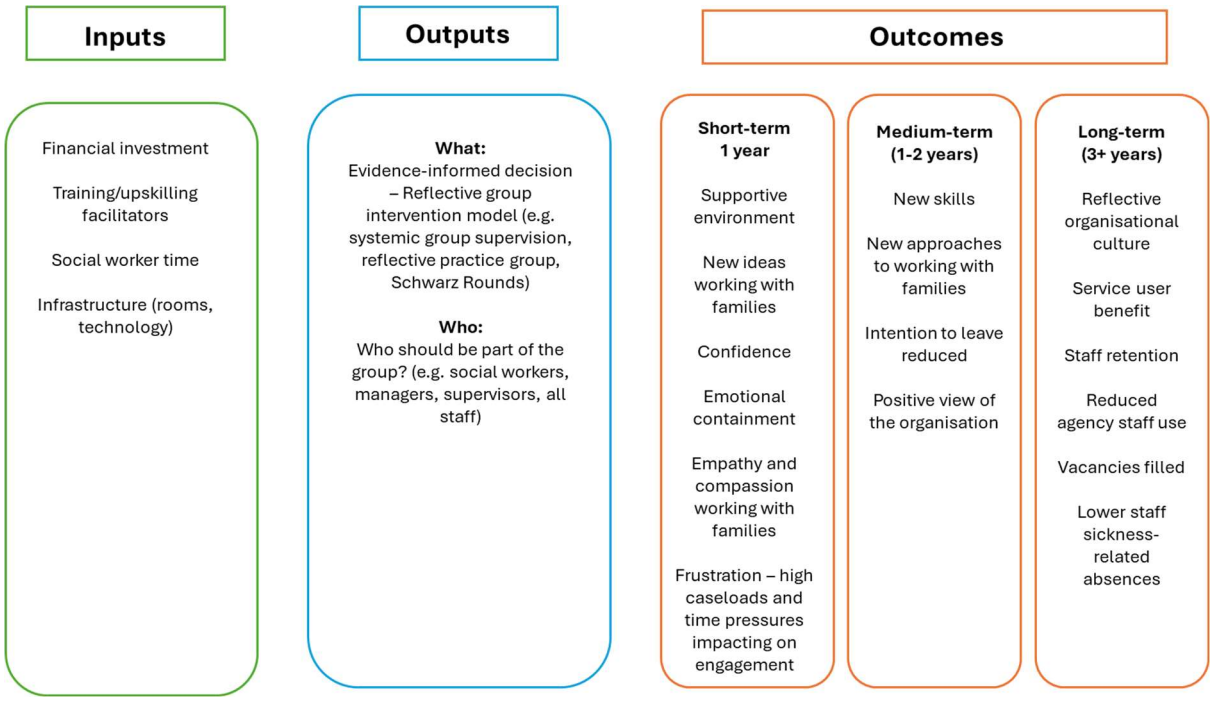

Figure 2: *Proposed logic model of potential impact of RGIs for social workers*

Given the relative lack of testing and evaluating of RGIs, the above model relies on findings that are tentative and on drawing inferences and hypotheses from these findings as to potential long-term outcomes. The model could, however, provide a basis for future implementation and evaluation of a range of RGIs.

Conclusion

It is evident that there are prospective beneficial outcomes from the provision of RGIs with social workers. These outcomes include improved well-being, emotional containment, opportunities to consider new perspectives, and the development of skills and knowledge. Longer-term, embedding RGIs effectively can foster a learning culture within organisations that can enhance retention of social work staff. However, the evidence-base for such interventions is provisional and there are few studies that test the efficacy of the array of RGIs on offer, particularly over a longer timeframe. Studies

testing hypotheses about optimal support in different organisational and practice contexts are rare, and there are few studies testing the impact of RGIs against other interventions or a non-intervention control group. As a result, conclusions about beneficial outcomes of RGIs are limited.

This article proposes a logic model of the outcomes of RGIs, however further research is needed to meaningfully examine the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of RGIs on social workers' well-being, their practice, and their intention to remain in the profession. Research exploring the efficacy of different RGIs with different cohorts of social workers would be beneficial. A more robust evidence-based would help organisations to decide which RGI best meets their and their social workers' needs and would support more effective implementation.

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Figures

Figure 1: Flowchart of selection of studies for inclusion

Figure 2: *Proposed logic model of potential impact of RGIs for social workers*