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Ravalier, J., Wegrzynek, P. A., Mitchell, A., McGowan, J., Mc Fadden, P., & Bald, C. (2022). A Rapid Review of Reflective Supervision in Social Work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 1-18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac223>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**

The British Journal of Social Work

**Publication Status:**

Published online: 08/12/2022

**DOI:**

[10.1093/bjsw/bcac223](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac223)

**Document Version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record




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# A Rapid Review of Reflective Supervision in Social Work

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## Abstract

Reflective supervision (RS) is a crucial component of social work practice but little is known about how RS works within the UK context and what the outcomes of RS are for social workers and their service users. A rapid literature review comprised searching four databases for academic and grey literature on the topic of social work RS. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool and the University College London's literature assessment method were employed in an expedited quality appraisal for all included papers. Twenty-seven papers were included. Findings suggest that a supportive, available manager or a peer-group enables reflective practice. Regularity of supervisory sessions and acknowledgement of a social worker's autonomy are seen as enablers of reflexivity. In contrast, task-oriented approach that is overly focused on accountability and hindered by the sparsity of resources proves problematic for both social workers and service users. Whilst theoretical papers were available, RS was not defined in a uniform fashion and there was limited evidence pertaining to supervisory practice. More research focusing on what works and what improvements are needed in RS, including adopting a participatory approach would help to bridge this gap and further inform policy and practice.

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**Keywords:** rapid review, reflective practice, reflective supervision, social work

*Accepted: November 2022*

Supervision has been referred to as the ‘cornerstone’ of good social work practice (Laming, 2009) and its reflective element is a crucial component to the social work experience. Munson (2002) suggested that social work supervision contributes to society by encouraging social reform and improving client advocacy. With social workers having a key role in supporting some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people across the globe (Ravalier *et al.*, 2020), reflective supervision (RS) should support well-being and improve practice, ensuring better outcomes both for the individual social worker and the service users that they work with and for (Morelen *et al.*, 2022). However, whilst the social work profession has been facing a significant increase in job demands, including workload responsibilities and high levels of stress (Hussein, 2018), RS is significantly lacking in both quality and quantity across the social work profession, being described as a ‘tick box’ or not taking place at all (Ravalier, 2019).

Social Work England (2022) have written RS into the professional standards for the profession to inform social work practice. This regular ‘protected time with their manager’ should be used to discuss and evaluate social workers’ responsibilities and the impact of work on their well-being (Social Work England, 2020) to help to ameliorate endemic stress and burn-out (McFadden, 2020). The need for provision of regular and ‘sufficient’ supervision is emphasised for social work students as well (The College of Social Work, 2012). However, reports suggest that delivery of supervision varies significantly across England (Department for Children, School and Families [DCSF], 2009). According to the British Association of Social Workers’ (BASW, 2011) commissioned report, weekly supervision is received by 0.7 per cent of social workers, with only around 59 per cent receiving it once a month. The same report suggested that the majority (70.6 per cent) of social workers would like to have monthly supervisory sessions and only 55.2 per cent of social workers were satisfied the frequency of their supervision. The latter varies between social workers in Child and Adult Services, with contextual reasons such as the Social Work Task Force (Social Work Task Force, 2009) review of children’s social work in England contributing to these differences.

To-date, several different models of RS have been put forward; Morrison (2009) emphasised the multi-stakeholder and multi-functional nature of supervision, drawing upon Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle and reflective process that underpins it. Peshkin’s model of reflective practice focuses on a practitioner’s emotions rather than procedures, but the model lacks empirical support (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2010). According to Lawlor (2013, p. 181), RS is interactional and ‘the instrument is the supervisor’. Prioritising the practitioner in reflective process links to

Schon's (1983) 'reflection in action' where social workers focus on their own actions before linking these to their knowledge ('reflection on action'). Partridge (2010) conceptualised RS as transformative, involving supervisory systems engaged in reflexive cycle that facilitates change and resembles participatory research. Whilst theoretical perspectives on supervision are available, to better understand the place of RS in social work, including best practice strategies and how they affect a social work workforce and service users, a rapid review of academic and non-academic literature was conducted. The review aimed to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What does best practice for social work supervision look like?

RQ2: Why supervision doesn't happen and what to do to make it happen?

RQ3: How supervision impacts social worker well-being and service user outcome?

## Methods

The current review aims to update our knowledge of the UK and Ireland social care supervisory processes and adds a novel focus on RS. It was undertaken in order to inform best practice RS in social work, understand barriers to RS across the profession and provide an overview of the impacts of RS on social workers and service users. In order to do so, we undertook a rapid literature review of existing academic and grey literature. Ethical approval was not sought as no data collection was required.

In July 2021, electronic databases PsycINFO, SocINDEX, the first ten pages of Google Scholar, and OpenGrey were searched from inception to identify academic and grey literature that had examined supervisory practice for social workers; to be included, papers had to be original articles or reviews, and include populations of adult social workers based in the UK or Ireland to account for cultural and regulatory factors. Selected papers had to be published in English (we had no translation budget) and could define supervision expanding beyond the administrative/performance management into education and support for social workers (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). The outcomes included ways in which social work supervision is delivered, barriers and enablers of effective supervision, social workers' well-being (and other) outcomes linked to said supervision practice and any service user outcomes linked to social workers' supervision as provided within the included literature. Key search terms were

'social work' AND ('supervision' OR 'management' OR 'leadership' OR 'mentoring') AND ('reflective' OR 'reflective practice' OR 'critical reflection' OR 'best practice')

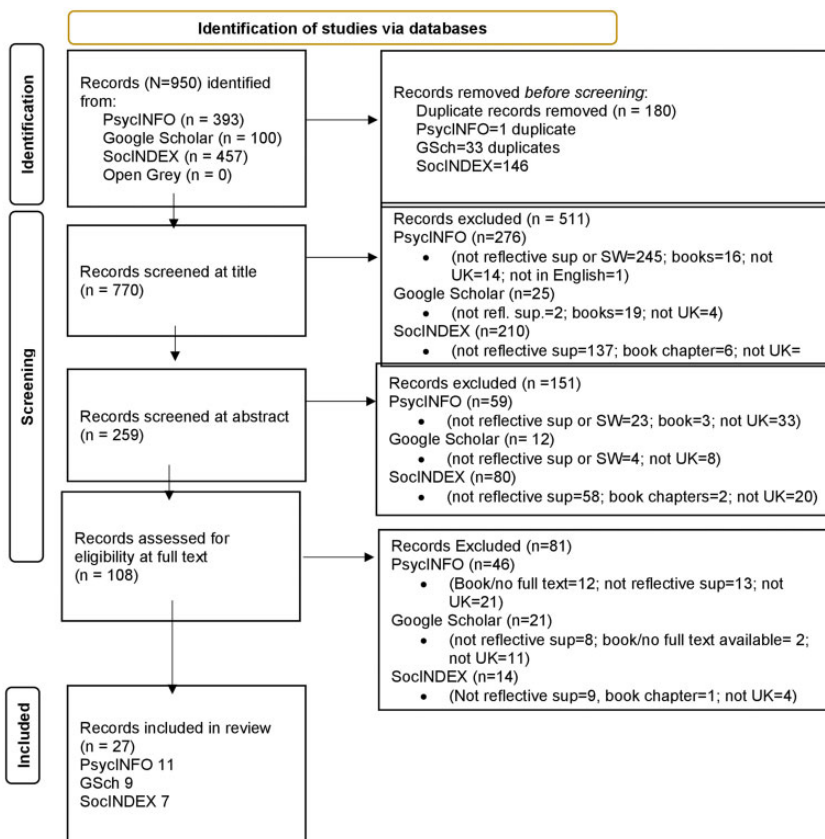
These search terms were developed in consultation with social work professionals as part of a wider participatory research approach, where an external panel reviewed a list of terms proposed by the research team and amended it accordingly to reflect terms that they would expect to see based on their using such terms in their work or having read about in the academic literature. A librarian at the host institution assisted with formatting the final search strategy. The identified papers were assessed by P.W. and A.M. for relevance to the review at title, abstract and full-text. [Figure 1](#) summarises the study selection process. Reference lists of the included papers were not searched and an expedited quality appraisal was completed to account for the rapid review methods ([Plüddemann et al., 2018](#)). Quality assessment criteria for empirical studies were adopted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) ([Hong et al., 2018](#)). Non-empirical papers were assessed using University College London's (2021) test for evaluating resources. The protocol ([Wegrzynek et al., 2021](#)) was drafted a priori, uploaded to the Open Science Framework and all protocol amendments have been recorded.

## Results

### Types of studies included

The search returned 950 results which were screened and 27 papers were included (see [Supplementary File S1](#)). [Table 1](#) shows the inter-rater agreement ([McHugh, 2012](#)). The types of included studies comprised: a literature review ([Wilkins, 2017](#)), theoretical papers ([Bradbury-Jones, 2013](#); [Ingram, 2013](#); [Kelly and Green, 2020](#)), ethnographic studies ([Ruch, 2007](#); [Ferguson, 2018](#)), a mixed methods study ([Wilson, 2013](#)), a multi-method study ([Manthorpe et al., 2015](#)), small-scale qualitative (case) studies ([Bingle and Middleton, 2019](#); [Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011](#); [Graham and Killick, 2019](#); [Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2019](#)), a qualitative part of a pilot quasi-experimental study ([Pitt et al., 2021](#)), a small-scale collaborative knowledge exchange study ([Turney and Ruch, 2018](#)), action research projects ([Dempsey et al., 2008](#); [Wilkins et al., 2017](#)), papers describing training programmes ([Lawlor, 2013](#); [White, 2015](#); [Dugmore et al., 2018](#)), action learning—[Ward, 2013](#); [Patterson, 2017](#)), an interpretive case study ([Harlow, 2016](#)), a cross-sectional survey ([Cleak et al., 2016](#)), surveys ([Hunt et al., 2016](#); [Bunce et al., 2019](#)), a (theory-oriented) case study ([Harvey and Henderson, 2014](#)) and one non-academic article ([Peet, 2011](#)).

When this information was provided, the majority of the literature considered child protection social work (sixteen papers). Four papers included social work students as their population. There was a mixture of current and older sources. Due to heterogeneity of the included literature findings, the results have been summarised narratively.



**Figure 1:** PRISMA flow—selection of papers for the review. *Source:* Adopted from Page et al. (2021).

**Table 1.** Inter-rater agreement

| Database       | Total hits retrieved | Agreed relevant hits | Per cent inter-rater agreement |
|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Psych Info     | 393                  | 11                   | 95                             |
| SocINDEX       | 457                  | 7                    | 100                            |
| Google Scholar | 100                  | 9                    | 93                             |
| Open Grey      | 0                    | n/a                  | n/a                            |
| Total          | 950                  | 27                   |                                |

### Quality assessment

Ten of the included papers (seven qualitative, one quantitative and two mixed-methods) were judged to be of high quality (Table 2). Factors affecting the quality ratings included vague of descriptions pertaining to

**Table 2.** Quality assessment

| First author [ref.] | Year | Design                                       | SQ1                                | SQ2 | Q1                | Q2               | Q3 | Q4                            | Q5                 |
|---------------------|------|--|------------------------------------|-----|-------------------|------------------|----|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Bingle Bourn        | 2019 | Qualitative                                  | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
|                     | 2011 | Qualitative (qualitative Content Analysis)   | +/? (statement)                    | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Dempsey             | 2008 | Qualitative (Action research)                | ?/- (not clearly stated/aims only) | +/? | +/?               | +/?              | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Ferguson            | 2018 | Qualitative                                  | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | ?  | +                             | +/?                |
| Graham              | 2019 | Qualitative                                  | +/? (statement)                    | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Pitt                | 2021 | Qualitative                                  | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Ruch                | 2007 | Qualitative                                  | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +/? (limited quotes)          | +                  |
| Staempfli           | 2019 | Qualitative                                  | +/? (aims only)                    | +/? | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Turney              | 2018 | Qualitative (Knowledge Exchange Study)       | +/?                                | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Wilkins             | 2017 | Qualitative (Action research)                | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | ?  | +                             | +/?                |
| Bunce               | 2019 | Quantitative                                 | +                                  | +   | +                 | +/? (limitation) | +  | ? (attrition rate not stated) | +                  |
| Cleak               | 2016 | Quantitative                                 | +/? (aims only)                    | +   | +                 | +                | +  | + (56 per cent response rate) | +                  |
| Harlow              | 2016 | Quantitative (quantitative Content Analysis) | +/? (aims only)                    | +/? | -                 | +                | ?  | ?                             | +                  |
| Hunt                | 2016 | Mixed-method survey                          | +/? (aims only)                    | +/? | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +/? (vague detail) |
| Manthorpe           | 2015 | Mixed-method                                 | ? (not stated)                     | ?   | ? (not explained) | +                | +  | +                             | +/?                |
| Wilson              | 2013 | Mixed-method                                 | +                                  | +   | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +/?                |
| Bradbury-Jones      | 2013 | Theoretical paper                            | N/A                                | N/A | -                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |
| Dugmore             | 2018 | Training programme                           | N/A                                | N/A | +                 | +                | +  | +                             | +                  |

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

| First author [ref.] | Year | Design  | SQ1 | SQ2 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|---------------------|------|---|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Harvey              | 2014 | Theoretically oriented case study                         | N/A | N/A | -  | +  | +  | +  | +  |
| Ingram              | 2013 | Review and theoretical paper                              | N/A | N/A | -  | +  | +  | +  | +  |
| Kelly               | 2020 | Theoretical paper   | N/A | N/A | +  | +  | +  | +  | +  |
| Lawlor              | 2013 | Training programme description and theoretical discussion | N/A | N/A | -  | +  | +  | +  | +  |
| Patterson           | 2017 | Training programme description                            | N/A | N/A | +  | +  | +  | +  | +  |
| Peet                | 2011 | Non-academic review/blog                                  | N/A | N/A | -  | +  | +  | ?  | +  |
| Ward                | 2013 | Training programme description                            | N/A | N/A | -  | +  | -  | +  | +  |
| White               | 2015 | Training programme description                            | N/A | N/A | +  | +  | -  | ?  | +  |
| Wilkins             | 2017 | Review  | N/A | N/A | +  | +  | ?  | -  | +  |

Notes: SQ1: Are there clear research questions? SQ2: Do the collected data allow to address the research questions? Q1: Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question? Q2: Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question? Q3: Are the findings adequately derived from the data? Q4: Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data? Q5: Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation? Q1: Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question? Q2: Is the sample representative of the target population? Q3: Are the measurements appropriate? Q4: Is the risk of nonresponse bias low? Q5: Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question? Q1: Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question? Q2: Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question? Q3: Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted? Q4: Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed? Q5: Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved? Q1: Currency. Q2: Relevance. Q3: Authority. Q4: Accuracy. Q5: Purpose.



Q3, Q4 and Q5. Eleven articles were not empirical papers (e.g. theoretical) and thus did not meet the screening questions for the MMAT Tool (Hong *et al.*, 2018). This was expected due to the broad inclusion criteria for the review and those articles were assessed (University College London, 2021) as high, including on accuracy ( $n=8$ ) and providing information that is current ( $n=5$ ) and relevant to the review ( $n=11$ ).

## Conceptualising RS and best practice

There is a notable lack of specificity in how RS is conceptualised. For example, in the reviewed literature, 'reflective practice' places emphasis on the individual social worker whilst 'RS' seems to concern both, the social worker and their supervisor. As such, the two terms can be seen to refer to processes with somewhat different characteristics, although Kelly and Green (2020) use the terms interchangeably. Reflective teaching and learning is another way of engaging in RS, particularly in social work training. Uncertainty with regards to defining reflective practice was reported by undergraduate social work students (Wilson, 2013), which suggests that the issue of the lack of agreed definition of the nature of supervision persists from the early stages of a social worker practitioner's career. The issue of this lack of specificity pertaining supervision practice had previously been noted elsewhere (Carpenter *et al.*, 2012). In the current review, Wilkins (2017) argued that case management is the only format of supervision that has ever been delivered in social work, although it has to be noted that the author based his conclusions on a 'selective' literature review (p. 4). Interestingly, Pitt *et al.* (2021) found that a more 'managerial', case management approach to supervision and its focus on accountability is not uniformly perceived as negative by social workers or their supervisors. Importantly however, the above issues make summarising the literature and answering the research questions set by the review challenging from the onset.

## Barriers to RS

Supervision practices within social work underwent regulatory changes that, according to the reviewed papers, have led to an over-expansion of administrative tasks and task-oriented organisational culture (Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Ward, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Pitt *et al.*, 2021). Peet (2011) noted how case (resource) management interferes with adoption of a reflective lens in supervisory encounters, with others highlighting issues around its singular focus on accountability (Pitt *et al.*, 2021). Pressures linked to funding, resources (including time constraints; Dempsey *et al.*, 2008; Peet, 2011; Pitt *et al.*, 2021) and focusing on meeting managed care requirements (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2015) result in 'rational' models of

supervision. Practicing supervision in this way often conflates performance management with recognising the needs of the staff (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). This fails to acknowledge the broader needs of the social work practitioners such as their affective factors (Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Wilkins *et al.*, 2017) and autonomy (Kelly and Green, 2020). Manthorpe *et al.* (2015) argued that reflection is perceived as an ‘optional extra’ within supervision, even for the newly qualified social workers. Individual reflections about the emotional aspects of social work may sometimes be constrained by challenging/frightening situations encountered by the workers (Ferguson, 2018).

The lack of/limitations of supervision training for social work managers affect their confidence and motivation to (begin to) deliver RS (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Lawlor, 2013; Wilkins *et al.*, 2017; Turney and Ruch, 2018). Stakeholders often seem apprehensive of the ‘unknown’ (Dugmore *et al.*, 2018) and ‘getting started’ (Turney and Ruch, 2018) with the process of RS often proves challenging. Furthermore, inheriting supervision approach from predecessors may be an obstacle to adopting reflective approach if the supervision model being passed down is not reflective (Wilkins *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, Wilkins (2017) noted how beyond England, a single supervisor does not tend to supervise a group of social workers, which in turn may help to facilitate the supervisory process more effectively and accounts for human factors. In a theoretical paper, Kelly and Green (2020) noted that, within health care, RS does not include social workers as they are not seen as part of the health-based response when issues of child protection arise. Finally, White (2015) highlighted challenges of technology-mediated supervision, for example, lack of IT skills and not offering insight into the worker–service user relationship.

## Enablers of RS

Managers (and practice teachers for social work students) are seen as facilitators of reflective practice (Ruch, 2007; Wilson, 2013) and a good relationship between a supervisor and a social worker is pertinent to the success of the interactional supervisory process (Harlow, 2016). Pitt *et al.* (2021) found that flexibility and an ‘open door policy’ with supervisors allow social workers to benefit from a more needs-based supervision. Patterson (2017) suggested that peer and group supervision could be adopted in parallel or instead of the ‘traditional’ one-to-one sessions, with findings from Bingle and Middleton (2019) supporting the importance of group case discussions in promoting reflexivity. Lawlor (2013) found that reflective practice training sessions increase supervisors’ delivery of and workers’ engagement with such strategies, respectively. Staempfli and Fairtlough (2019) noted a need for regular supervision, which in their paper took a form of a peer-led, tutor-supported supervision (‘intervision’) for social work students. Enabling a

more reflexive approach was also linked to outsourcing the task of providing RS to account for strained internal resources and high workloads ([Pitt et al., 2021](#)).

### Outcomes for social workers

Effective supervision encourages an atmosphere of trust and a feeling of peer support ([Ruch, 2007](#); [Dempsey et al., 2008](#); [Dugmore et al., 2018](#); [Pitt et al., 2021](#)). Good supervision has a therapeutic effect ([Ingram, 2013](#); [Graham and Killick, 2019](#); [Pitt et al., 2021](#)) and enables a discussion of affective factors and the development of workers' capacity to consciously engage in internal forms of reflexivity ([Dempsey et al., 2008](#); [Wilkins, 2017](#); [Ferguson, 2018](#)). [Harvey and Henderson \(2014\)](#) suggested that RS aids with managing ways to maintain safety of social workers facing challenging encounters with the service users and [Graham and Killick \(2019\)](#) noted its ability to address stress and support resilience. Reflexivity supports learning from one's mistakes, improving job skills ([Wilson, 2013](#)) and challenging own biases ([Bradbury-Jones, 2013](#); [Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2019](#)). Whilst supervision offers social workers a chance to consider things from another perspective, [Pitt et al. \(2021\)](#) found that from both social workers' and supervisors' perspective, reflection is often a missing element within the supervisory process. For newly qualified social workers, supervision affects engagement with work ([Manthorpe et al., 2015](#)). Similarly, [Cleak et al. \(2016\)](#) suggested that supervision is linked to regularity with which social work students engage with learning. Whilst supervision can aid stress management ([Graham and Killick, 2019](#)) and worker retention, when a manager's supervision responsibilities apply to multiple social workers the process may lose its supportive effect ([Wilkins, 2017](#)). [Wilkins \(2017\)](#) noted a distinction between RS and 'good' support more generally, suggesting that by overly focusing on the former one neglects the latter. [Graham and Killick \(2019\)](#) found that supervision session promoted staff resilience. Contrastingly, amongst undergraduate social work students in [Bunce et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study, reflective ability was not a predictor of resilience or psychological distress. Whilst reflective ability is not the same as RS, it would arguably be linked to reflective practice.

### Outcomes for service users

One of the research questions for the current review referred to the impact of RS on service users; however, these outcomes were not highlighted directly by the reviewed literature. Benefits (or otherwise) for the service users were referred to indirectly, for example, by

reporting social work professionals' self-assessment of the service they were able to provide (reduced quality) (Hunt *et al.*, 2016) and their relationship with the service users having a potential to be more productive (Harvey and Henderson, 2014; Wilkins, 2017). Good reflective support and supervision for social work practitioners is vital in assessing circumstances of their service users (Pitt *et al.*, 2021) and enables client-centred practice. As such, a full understanding of the service user outcomes from multi-stakeholder perspective is lacking and, somewhat alarmingly, this echoes Carpenter *et al.*'s (2012) findings.

## Discussion

The current rapid review considered evidence pertaining to RS for social workers in the UK. This approach updates our knowledge of the UK social care supervisory processes and adds a novel focus on RS. Identified literature was limited and highlighted issues around inconsistent definition of reflection in the context of social work supervisory practice. Nevertheless, a supportive, available manager or a peer-group, who remove a myopic lens by providing separate insight into a case/experience facilitate best practice (RQ1 and RQ3). Regularity of supervisory sessions and acknowledgement of a social worker's autonomy are seen as enablers of reflexivity. In contrast, task-oriented approach that is overly focused on accountability and hindered by the sparsity of resources proves problematic for both social workers and service users (RQ2). When RS is delivered effectively, it serves broad functions of practice evaluation (e.g. Bradbury-Jones, 2013), work/study engagement (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2015; Cleak *et al.*, 2016) and managing stress (Graham and Killick, 2019) that is often experienced by the social work staff (Hussein, 2018). Whilst the literature did not include direct evaluation of the user outcomes, RS is seen by social workers as a contributing factor in achieving more client-centred practice (e.g. Pitt *et al.*, 2021; RQ3).

Wilkins (2017) argued that a significant proportion of child and family social work local authorities in England do not currently implement RS. Interestingly, Pitt *et al.* (2021) argue that supervision can sometimes be reflective without stakeholders interpreting it as such. This, the authors suggest, is achieved through provision of a secondary, supervisor's perspective on a topic being discussed with a social worker. Such conceptualisation of reflection (Tsang, 2005) makes it feasible to suggest that there is a middle ground between strict case management-type supervision and reflective supervisory practice (e.g. as seen in Morrison's model of reflection; Morrison, 2009) that provides elements of critical and/or creative thinking (RQ2).

There was a common theme running through the reviewed literature pertaining to the need of RS to allow social workers to engage with the

emotional side of their practice (both positive and negative), whilst providing a safe space and a supervisory relationship to do so (Ingram, 2013). Arguably, this kind of process may be challenging at times due to human (e.g. supervisor–supervisee conflict) and environmental (e.g. pressures and expectations linked to caseloads and procedures) factors. Addressing the ‘uneasy alliance’ encountered in supervision, Ingram (2013, p. 17) proposed a model of co-created approach to RS that aims to dovetail emotional and procedural elements of social work practice and signposts to the national codes of practice as additional forms of support.

Importantly, becoming an ‘experienced facilitator’ of RS (e.g. Cleak *et al.*, 2016) emphasises the importance of training supervisors to perform this role effectively. Hawkins and Smith (2006) referred to ‘self-supervision’ as means of reflecting about supervising others. The issues in defining RS depicted by the reviewed literature highlight the complexity of the task faced by the supervisors to deliver this crucial element of social work practice, particularly when paired with a lack of training to support the delivery of the broad functions subscribed to supervisory sessions. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has redefined the ways of working and the availability of support for both supervisors and their staff (Social Work England, 2020). Therefore, addressing the need for appropriate support mechanisms (e.g. training sessions or alternative modes of supervision delivery such as peer-group supervision) seems key to enabling the provision and receipt of RS, as supported by the reviewed literature (e.g. Lawlor, 2013; Patterson, 2017). Relatedly, the current review found evidence that group supervision can be beneficial (e.g. Bingle and Middleton, 2019), or seen as complementary (Patterson, 2017) versus conventional on-to-one format. Utilising inter-vision (e.g. by including social workers in health-based, multidisciplinary response to child protection) is an approach adopted elsewhere but not practiced in the UK (Kelly and Green, 2020). However, the review supports expanding the term ‘experienced facilitator’ (of RS) to incorporate the ‘group mode’, providing the regularity of supervision sessions is maintained (Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2019).

To maximise the benefits of RS (e.g. Cleak *et al.*, 2016), the policy-makers should also ensure that the emphasis to embed RS training is clear at the point of students obtaining their social work practice education (RQ2). Published evaluations of past training programmes suggested a lack of specificity in adopted techniques and terminology (e.g. coach versus mentor; Harlow, 2016). However, as long as the aim of the training initiatives remains to improve the overall skill set of the supervisors/staff to enhance RS practice, blending of terms is arguably less problematic providing that effective communication remains the key facilitator within the process (Lawlor, 2013). Furthermore, White (2015) argued that there is not one approach to supervision as it needs to be attuned to

individuals. As such, if the frequency and the quality of supervision increase as a result of supervisors receiving adequate training, it is reasonable to assume its positive effect on staff retention and thus designing and implementing such programmes would be an investment worth considering (e.g. [Chiller and Crisp, 2012](#)).

Whilst several theoretical models conceptualise supervision, evidence of their outcomes and cost-effectiveness is lacking ([Carpenter et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, the reviewed literature reflects varied approach to RS but there is a clear absence of evidence relating to its effects on social work service users. As such, there is rationale to include the input of service users in the RS process and by that enable a multi-stakeholder voice to be heard, albeit the need for transparency within reflective practice is intertwined with professional boundaries and acknowledgement of ethical issues (e.g. [Peet, 2011](#)). In addition, as supervision is facilitated (or otherwise) by organisational stakeholders as well, future studies engaging a wider group of stakeholders via participatory action research could further our understanding of RS best practice.

## Strengths and limitations

The current review was comprehensive and considered both academic and non-academic literature to enhance the relevance of the findings for the broad range of stakeholders, including the social workers and the policy-makers. Relatedly, a significant problem faced in the current work was that the literature does not define RS in a uniform fashion and only a selection of empirical papers could be quality-assessed, which limits the strength of the conclusions made. Consultation with the social work advisory group when designing the search strategy facilitated inclusion of the literature that is relevant and supports our greater understanding of the processes involved in RS practice. Whilst the majority of the literature focused on social work supervision within Children Services and more research on RS within other types of social work is needed, the former may be explained by the emphasis to monitor Child Protection practice and social workers' accountability as a result of past high-profile Child Protection cases.

## Conclusions, implications and future research

Effective supervision enables social workers to develop personally and professionally; it is vital for helping to maintain their well-being, professional development, it enables management oversight as well as promoting the best outcomes for service users ([Stanley, 2018](#)). However, the current state of evidence pertaining to RS for social workers, including

details of what works and what improvements are needed, is limited. Theoretical papers are available but there is limited evidence pertaining to supervisory practice. Implications from the current review include the need for further research adopting participatory action research approach (Reason and Bradbury, 2008) that would help to bridge this gap whilst encouraging stakeholder participation.

## Ethical approval

Not applicable.

## Acknowledgements

The authors thank Melissa Hamdani and Alice Wallace for their valuable input at the initial stages of this work. They would also like to thank the panel of social workers who gave up their time to contribute to a consultation that informed the creation of the list of key search terms for the current review.

## Funding

There was no funding for this project.

## Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

## Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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