



Critical Reflection: The Importance of Case Reviews and Reflective Practice in Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Investigations

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Abstract

Using methods and data from Operation Soteria Bluestone in Avon and Somerset Constabulary in 2021, this paper proposes two key approaches to critical reflection that we suggest all police forces should be using in rape and serious sexual offences investigations: individual critical reflection throughout investigations using ‘Reflective Practice Points’ and regular ‘Case Reviews’. One of the main themes from the data examined is the cumulative impact rape and serious sexual offences investigations have on officers. Given the high case load and lack of staff to manage the work means officers default to a ‘can do attitude’, but this is often at the expense of the officers’ wellbeing. Reflective practice points embed critical reflection in day-to-day investigations, whilst case reviews allow for routine identification of strengths and areas for improvement across the force, basic strategies which should already be familiar to policing. Fundamentally, they are tools which can be incorporated and normalised into policing that strives to embed critical reflection in its normal operation. Simultaneously implementing these two approaches will introduce processes to support staff wellbeing, learning, and development, which will in turn contribute to the improvement of rape and serious sexual offence investigations. Having a blend of regular, informal, and formal avenues for critical reflection is key in the early identification of the different stressors experienced throughout the investigation process of rape and serious sexual offences.

Keywords Critical reflection · Reflective practice · Case reviews · Rape · Serious sexual offences · Policing · Wellbeing

Introduction

During a plenary meeting in 2019, the Mayor of London described the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) as being “under-resourced and overstretched” (Mayor of London, 2019). The MPS is not alone; police forces across England and Wales are facing challenges that are interconnected and linked to these two issues: officers are being asked to “do more and more with less and less” (Mayor of London, 2019,

p. 2); funding has been significantly reduced over the last decade; demands on police appear to be increasing, particularly in relation to complex and serious crimes; and the workforce has only just started to increase after years of decline (Atkins et al., 2019, p.136). Poor funding primarily affects staffing levels by impacting recruitment, and whilst there is currently a campaign to recruit additional officers (Home Office, 2019), the majority of these will not join as investigators. This situation is compounded by “a national crisis in the severe shortage of investigators, such as detectives” (Her Majesty’s Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary [HMCIC], 2017, p. 12) which means that investigators inevitably deal with a high volume of caseloads, and officers “without the right skills and experience are investigating particular crimes” (HMCIC, 2017, p. 13) which severely impacts officers’ safety and wellness as well as the quality of service (HMCIC, 2017). Another area impacted by police funding reductions is training which appears to be poorly designed and inappropriate (HMCIC,). The annual assessment of policing in England and Wales in 2019 stated

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that specialist knowledge appears to be lacking which means underqualified and inexperienced officers take on responsibilities for which they are not prepared (HMCIC, 2019).

Pedagogical police training programmes have been found to lack clearly articulated aims and consistent evaluation approaches (Belur et al., 2020a), as well as agreement on what the resultant officer capabilities or professional behaviours might be (McGinley et al., 2019). This creates a learning environment where the planning, delivery, and evaluation of functional and pedagogical change is often lacking (Belur et al., 2020b; Fyfe, 2019). This moderates the effect of both formal learning and creates a learning environment which often delivers content with little understanding of its intended or actual effect. Structural issues combine with cultural ones which may play a wider role in shaping assumptions about what knowledge is important (De Long & Fahey, 2000) with 'blame culture' (Lewis et al., 2019) playing a part in shaping practitioners' views that 'important' knowledge is that which mitigates the potential to be blamed for an organisational failure; a factor which presents "a significant barrier to organisational learning" (Tomkins et al., 2020, p. 98). Extreme fatigue due to a heavy workload, lack of appropriate training, and unaddressed mental and emotional health issues can lead to decreasing levels of morale and motivation amongst police officers and create a persistent problem of a lack of psychological safety in the work environment which is harmful for officers and in turn can potentially expose the public to harm.

The broad context of policing and challenges faced by police officers are further amplified when dealing with rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). Research consistently highlights the complex nature of rape allegations made to the police. Victims often present with mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, and other vulnerabilities (Charman & Williams, 2021; Hohl & Stanko, 2015; MOPAC, 2019). Such allegations present complex and awkward investigations for detectives as they problematise notions of the 'ideal victim' (Williams, 2019), may be deemed unworthy of attention or judged to be the fault of the victim, or just too complicated (Horvath et al., 2011). This paper advocates a critical and reflective approach to the investigation of RASSO through case review and reflective practice.

Critical reflection is "the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to take a critical stance or attitude towards one's own practice and that of one's peers, engaging in a process of continuous adaptation and learning" (Schön, 1983, pp.

102–104). Critical reflection provides opportunities for professionals to consciously learn from experience. Critical reflection is often useful to apply to complicated ideas to prompt an analysis of the problem to provide a solution and to draw upon knowledge already possessed (Moon, 2004). The process allows people to reflect at an individual level on themselves (both in professional and personal environments), and at a wider level through considering the social context that they work within. This might mean reflecting on society, the culture, or the institutional constraints in which they work (Bolton, 2014). Critical reflection is an approach used across many arenas including social work, nursing (Christopher, 2015; Ferguson, 2018), and teaching (Hengesteg et al., 2021) to improve practice, identify training needs, and provide meaningful support around welfare. Police professionals routinely respond to complex societal problems that are often unpredictable and require opportunities to critically reflect on their practice to enhance the quality of the work (Christopher, 2015; Whelan & Gent, 2013) and enhance decision-making (Christopher, 2015; Norman & Williams, 2017). The main benefits to critical reflection are the improvement of investigations, the identification of training needs, the establishment of communication and peer to peer support, as well as the prioritisation of addressing police officers' mental and emotional health issues by providing the workforce with psychological help and support.

Whilst "traditionally, policing has never been considered or termed a critical reflective practice" (Christopher, 2015, p. 326), it has engaged in limited forms of critical reflection in certain specialisms with, for example, post action debriefing to elicit operational learning embedded in firearms and surveillance operational doctrines. Latterly, critical reflection has been embedded as a central tenant of the Policing Education Qualification Framework for new recruits as part of wider professionalisation initiatives (Wood, 2018). Despite the critical need, reflective practice has been slow to evolve in policing (Christopher, 2015). Police organisations need to provide police practitioners with more routine opportunities to reflect on their work, to enable critical discussions about their work and their role within it (Pepper & McGrath, 2020). The need for this is evident in RASSO investigations yet is compromised by high demand which prohibits capacity for critical reflection (Christopher, 2015; Wood et al., 2021). This is exacerbated by the rapid pace of change, the norm of reactivity, and conflicting demands in policing (Goode & Lumsden, 2018).

Methodological Approach

This paper drew on methods and data collected more widely as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone¹ (see Hohl & Stanko, 2022) in Avon and Somerset Constabulary in 2021. This included the following:

- (1) Conducting four focus groups in Avon and Somerset police force with frontline staff involved in investigating and managing RASSO. A total of 19 participants were involved in the focus groups gleaned a range of responses from Detective Inspectors, Detective Sergeants, Detective Constables, Frontline Response Officers and Police Investigators. The focus groups explored officers' perceptions of their role in RASSO, their experiences of training and the provision of support from the organisation in relation to welfare and wellbeing. To contextualise the focus groups, a further nine interviews with strategic leads for RASSO, learning and development and training were conducted. The transcripts from the focus groups were coded and thematically analysed. The findings indicated there were opportunities for reflection at different stages of the investigation. The analysis suggests these reflective points would benefit the quality of the investigation, as well as provide opportunities for those involved in RASSO investigations to the impact the case might have on their own sense of wellbeing given the complex and traumatic nature of the offences, highlighting the benefits of integrating critical reflection in working practices.
- (2) Collecting data from 38 case reviews, all of which were RASSO offences, and which contained a range of victim-suspect relationships and policing outcomes (see

below for full details of the method of data collection used).

From analysis of these data, this paper proposes two key approaches to critical reflection that we suggest all police forces should be using: individual critical reflection throughout investigations using 'Reflective Practice Points' (RPP) and regular 'Case Reviews' (CR). RPPs embed critical reflection in day-to-day investigations whilst CRs allow for routine identification of strengths and areas for improvement across the force. Simultaneously implementing these two approaches will embed processes to support staff wellbeing, learning, and development, which will in turn contribute to the improvement of RASSO investigations.

Reflective Practice Points

Avon and Somerset Constabulary's desire to embed critical reflection into policing practice can be seen in their desire to mirror the reflective practice outlined in the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship and Degree Entry Holder Programme programmes in their own training going forward. This was perceived to be critical to facilitating a change of culture within the organisation. The use of critical reflection was not only seen to be important on a daily basis for front line officers but also for supervisors:

That ability to say, 'we've just completed this', this is where supervisors and team managers come in because, actually, we should be sitting down, whether it's after a day on the streets as an operational police officer, first responding or whether that's as at the end of a long investigation, that we sit down and say, 'what's the learning for us?' 'what could we have done better?' 'we've had a great result, we've locked someone up for 10 years for rape' but, actually, 'what would have made our lives easier? What would have been better for the victim? What is the impact on the victim? What have we done?' and all those types of thing (Learning and Development representative)

Given the complex nature of RASSO cases that are reported, there are clear links to learning, competence, and being equipped to deliver the role. The ability to critically evaluate and reflect on decisions is vital for learning with operational officers indicating the benefits of such an approach in supporting them from both a learning and wellbeing perspective and supporting the investigation, the needs of the victim, and the quality of evidence that is collected. The data collated from this research suggests that reviews should be iterative as the case evolves through the system, and Fig. 1 maps out key review points to assist in embedding critical reflection within RASSO investigations. The wider benefits of this

¹ Operation Soteria Bluestone is a UK Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. It is a unique project which is underpinned by rigorous social science. With multi-disciplined academics located in multiple universities, mixed qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to a five pilared approach to organisational change with police forces, uplifting the capability of more specialist police decision-making in RASSO cases. The research informs policing practice as well as government policy and is set to inform a national change. These research informed pillars pinpoint specific areas for improvement which will form part of the new framework for investigating RASSO: (1) suspect-focused investigations; (2) disrupting repeat offenders; (3) victim engagement as procedural justice; (4) promoting better learning, development, and wellbeing for police officers; and (5) using data more effectively in RASSO investigations. The pathfinder project started in 2021, based in Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, the pillar leads include Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.

RASSO specific reflection points: sharing practice across teams involved in RASSO investigations could identify improvements, training needs and provide meaningful support around welfare.

RP points as the case evolves. Onus on iterative process. Managed across departments where necessary involving all parties (e.g. response, first response officer (FRO), analysts, investigations, learning and development functions).

Points to cover at each Reflective Practice Point:

- **Case and victim needs** – *enhancing professional investigations, decision-making and outlining appropriate next steps.*
- **L&D gaps and training needs of staff** – *developing new learning and detailing themes for CPD areas, sharing both promising ideas and training needs.*
- **Staff welfare check** (a trauma informed approach being mindful of cumulative impact and case load) – *supporting wellbeing and early identification of staff needs.*

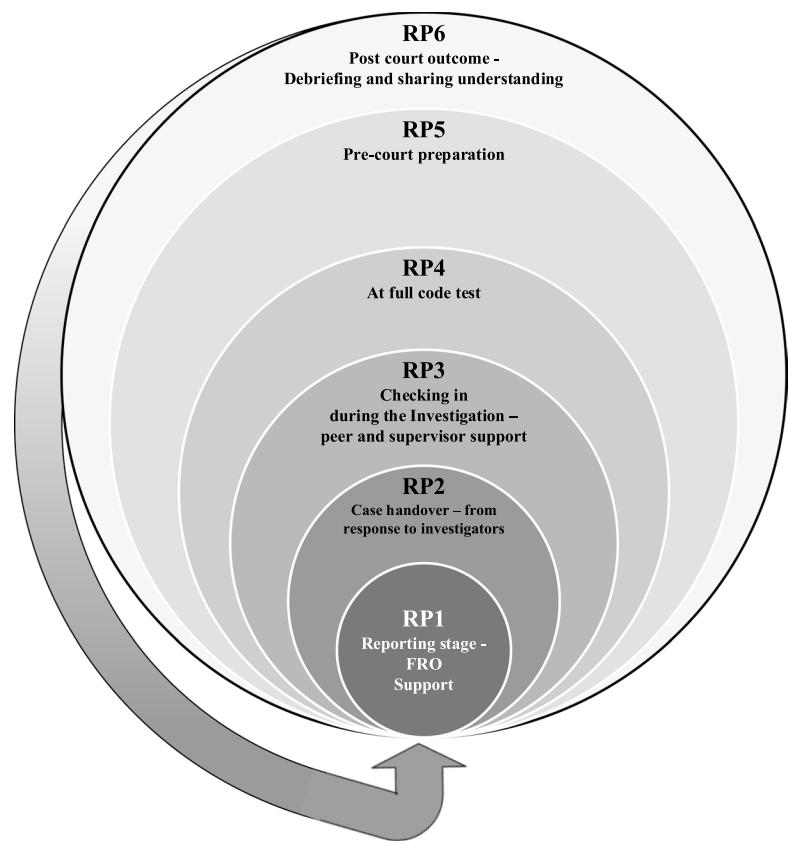


Fig. 1 Visual mapping the Reflective Practice points central to RASSO cases

approach link to the ability to identify areas for development in relation to sharing practice and knowledge with investigations (particularly in the context of the victim and the quality of the investigation as it moves through the system), critically evaluating decision-making, identifying learning needs, and promoting officer wellbeing.

RPP 1: Reporting Stage—First Response Officer (FRO) Support

FRO must complete mandatory training to be eligible to attend RASSO calls. However, within the first response team, courses were not evenly allocated to officers and only a few had received the training (Williams et al., 2022). This resulted in the same officers attending the majority of RASSO calls. Officers described exposure to trauma from repeatedly dealing with complex and distressing cases. They reported they would benefit from peers or supervisors checking on them throughout their shift as they often worked in an unsupervised environment and felt isolated from the team. Regular checks from a supervisor would capture wellbeing issues. FRO felt the mechanisms to recognise their overall welfare were missing and they felt unsupported, until the

point when emotional trauma took hold and they required time off work:

...I'm quite open to say that about five years ago I had a period when I was having FRO job after FRO job and any sexual assault that came on the team, domestics all came to me. I got to a point where my anxiety levels rose and I said, 'I need a break'. I had about six weeks where I wasn't doing it. (First Response Officer—FRO)

RPPs at this early stage within the response environment is crucial to support the officer involved in working on the initial stages of the investigation and preparing the case for handover to the OIC.

RPP 2: On Case Hand Over—From Response Officers to Investigators

First response and Criminal Investigation Department (CID) teams were disjointed, particularly in the transfer of responsibility for RASSO investigations. Whilst time and heavy workloads are the immediate inhibitors to sharing learning, providing opportunities for feedback from the FRO to the investigator and vice versa is key. The FRO in RASSO cases

holds valuable knowledge of the victim and their needs. It is crucial that knowledge is transferred to investigators. A shared approach could enable dialogue around the quality of the case file collated by the FRO. Immediate feedback was deemed to be important to first responders who hand the case over with no knowledge around what happens to the case going forward and no ability to reflect on their own practice for the purposes of learning.

the most important part of it is that first engagement... It's such a shame because it is the most important part, you wouldn't ever get to court without it. ... you are the most valuable part of this investigation from this point of view. (First Response Officer; FRO)

A reflective approach would nurture an ethos of shared understanding between the first responder and investigators in the main office. This RPP could have the additional benefit of providing closure on cases and offer an opportunity to deal with trauma for the FRO in the event they take a victim's initial account.

RPP 3: 'Checking-in' During the Investigation—Peer and Supervisor Support

The point at which officers have established their initial investigative strategy, completed any immediate risk assessment and safeguarding considerations, and started any immediate or time sensitive actions, the investigation proceeds to the stage at which Early Advice may be sought from the CPS, and longer-term actions can start to be considered. At this point, the importance of 'checking-in' becomes relevant and is one of the key themes that emerged from focus groups with front line officers and investigators. The supervisor plays a key role in this, particularly for those officers who are managing the case, dealing with the victim, and undertaking all of the supporting administration. Much of this work is undertaken alone with little contact from the team which was described as challenging and intense:

But actually having your supervisor recognise that is really tough. It's different to standing on a scene for over time, it's different from anything else. It's very intense and there's no let up through the whole day really. (Detective Constable)

Supervisor recognition of officers' work undertaken with a victim is important to them. Given RASSO cases are often allocated to the same officers, having channels to communicate regularly is important in recognising the cumulative effect of trauma on officers at an earlier stage. FROs and investigators mentioned the importance of supervisory support. There were positive stories outlined in the focus groups about supervisors who made efforts to touch base with their staff. However, ease of being able to do this routinely was

compounded by the volume of workload in the main office. Often officers utilised their own informal peer support networks as a form of reflection and support, which is particularly important as new information is generated by the investigation, including new investigative leads and advice from other agencies such as the CPS. Whilst this is excellent practice, it relies on the individuals to create this space rather than facilitating this as recognised support approach that should be applied as standard.

RPP 4: At Full Code Test Stage

Before a case can be considered for prosecution it must pass 'the full code test' applied by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). This test is applied to determine whether: (i) all outstanding reasonable lines of enquiry have been pursued (the evidential test); and (ii) if there is sufficient evidence to prosecute whether it is in the public interest to do so (the public interest test) (The Crown Prosecution Service, 2017). It is essential at this concluding stage of an investigation that the full code test is applied properly. Central to this involves dispelling myths and actively challenging any bias and use of rape myths. Critical reflection provides the means of doing this as it creates space for constructive challenge between officers and allows for new perspectives to be considered. It is also essential at this time for proper consideration of all investigative avenues, focusing on case strengths not weaknesses to be explored which again critical reflection provides space for. In addition, critical reflection at this point can help to focus officers' attention on establishing and challenging the behaviour of the suspect. This in turn can guide a positive investigative strategy, lead to more accurate risk assessments being conducted and the development of effective safeguarding strategies. Further benefits of critical reflection at this stage are helping to signpost areas of learning and development, as well as providing further opportunities to identify welfare issues given the cumulative impact these cases have on officers. Dealing with repeated traumatic and complex investigations meant that officers were stressed and burned out. Some felt at 'breaking point' but the feeling of being overwhelmed with case load had become normalised.

I think the problem is that we know that there's nothing going to be able to change or be done about it. Everyone feels like they've got too much on, but unless we suddenly get a massive influx of PCs to share the load then we all know nothing is going to change. (Investigator)

RPP 5: Pre-court Preparation

Understanding the demands on these officers and the reality of all the elements required for the role demonstrates the

specialist nature of the investigations (see Dalton et al., this issue, for more on specialism) and the time required to support the cases and victims through the system. Maintaining an iterative approach to reflection, to include those cases that are part of these officers' workload but are not classified as 'live' is a crucial part of the case review process and, where necessary, officers need to be supported with time to prepare for court.

By the time you've got it to court, you've kind of forgotten—that sounds awful, but you're working on live cases aren't you, so you almost have to relearn it or just rechip (?) for the build up to court. It's like a cycle. (Investigator)

Where cases are not progressed to court, this RPP is a particularly important time for officers and supervisors to reflect on the progress of the case and to ensure that all avenues of investigation have been exhausted including, where necessary, exploring avenues for longer term disruption of offending.

RRP 6: Post Outcome—Debriefing and a Shared Understanding of the Outcome

The officers interviewed emphasised the importance of debriefing. However, debriefs were not part of routine practice. Given the iterative nature of the RPPs suggested in this model, having a final case review/reflection point to share the outcome of a case with all parties (e.g. FRO, police investigators, analysts, supervisors) involved is essential. This would allow them to reflect on the whole process and identify key learning points, and supervisors should be responsible for ensuring this is implemented.

The Value and Challenges of Reflective Practice Points

Critical reflection is not easy in a policing context; however, it is not impossible (Christopher, 2015). Policing engages in limited forms of reflective practice in certain specialisms, with, for example, post action debriefing to elicit operational learning embedded in firearms and surveillance operational doctrines, but the practice is not widespread. This piece argues that the potential benefits in terms of improved investigations and outcomes for victims make overcoming any challenges an imperative. As shown in Fig. 1, at each reflective practice point it is essential that the following are considered as part of the reflection process: Case and victim needs; learning and development gaps and training needs of staff and staff welfare checks. It should also enable individual, unit, and organisational learning.

Case Reviews

The Process of Case Reviews

As well as the immediate case review that can be conducted at RPP 6, there is scope for more comprehensive critical reflection to be conducted by officers, supervisors, and senior staff. The Case Review (CR) process outlined here was co-designed and implemented by police officers and Blue-stone researchers to examine a sample number of RASSO investigations from across Avon and Somerset Constabulary. An easy-to-understand template for conducting CRs was developed for the reviewing officers to complete based on templates used by Inspectorates and within similar audit processes, such as Serious Case Reviews. The sample of cases for the reviews were taken from different force areas and case types based on victim-suspect relationship (stranger, acquaintance, and domestic) and a range of outcomes (victim declines to prosecute, no further action [police or CPS decision], charged). The key aims of CRs are identifying, sharing, and consolidating good practice, as well as identifying and tackling poor practice, to inform staff development and ensure investigative efficacy.

Close collaboration between the researchers and the police leads was vital to define and identify the people who completed the reviews. The expertise and experience of those conducting reviews was key to how the cases were critically examined and how much learning could be identified. The staff chosen in the Constabulary to conduct the reviews were separated into two groups, but all had to have specialist knowledge of RASSO. The initial reviewing groups were all Detective Inspectors, and the second group were senior leaders from Detective Chief Inspectors and above, through to Chief Officers. The rationale for the two groups completing the reviews was that in Avon and Somerset Constabulary Detective Inspectors oversee the day-to-day management of investigations and teams involved in RASSO cases (although could not review cases they had been involved in), so involving them brought a sense of ownership and "buy in" to the review process from those that are responsible for embedding and strengthening ways of working. The second group were officers who would not necessarily regularly assess and review ways of working within their teams or departments. They may have cause to look at individual cases, but they hold different responsibilities, and from speaking to the higher ranks it was accepted that there was no consistent method in which they secured performance in ways such as a CR. Their critical reflection would potentially be different to the Detective Inspectors, given their strategic roles, and the differing approaches was intended to provide depth to the overall review process and embed the importance of CRs throughout the force.

The CR process required the first reviewer to provide a summary of the actions taken in the case, and then to critically reflect on several areas of the investigation: initial investigative focus, direction, decision-making, and completion; risk assessment and management; victim engagement; supervisory oversight; considerations around the suspect including any repeat perpetration; liaison with the CPS and other services; and time management. This analysis focused on identifying strengths of the cases and areas for improvements, using the reviews as learning exercises as much as a performance management tool. Reviewers were provided a template with which to create this summary and review, and this structured approach allowed for all reviewers to be consistent in their method of review. The secondary review completed by Senior Leaders involved them reviewing the case, but importantly the initial review conducted as well. Not only could they form insights from the individual cases, but also consider the thought processes of the Detective Inspectors completing the initial reviews. In this way, the CR process first involves a level of peer review conducted by officers whose roles involving leading RASSO investigations, followed by a level of review from senior staff.

The Value and Challenges of CRs

One of the fundamental benefits to the CR process is that it allows for officers to gain a better understanding of the efficacy with which investigations are being conducted. Whilst it is important that audits and reviews like this should be completed by external stakeholders (e.g. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services) it is vital they are embedded within internal Constabulary working practices, as senior leaders themselves recognised that their involvement and commitment to the reviews had provided them with information that had not been readily available to them through other means. The reflections from those senior officers involved in the reviews found that both gaining a better understanding of the nature of the cases and the decision-making of the Detective Inspectors was hugely valuable for organisational learning purposes. The CR process in Avon and Somerset was seen as a step towards building collaboration between leadership and field officers encouraging reflective practice and thus, provide a better-quality service. The additional critical assessment of a case from a different perspective can allow for both risks to be identified and opportunities progressed to mitigate such risk. Conducting CRs provides a mechanism for acknowledging both good and poor practice, and taking appropriate measures in both instances, that did not exist in Avon and Somerset Constabulary before, and consequently made it difficult to ascertain where improvements needed to be made. The benefit of the CR process in this instance is that it allows for a nuanced approach to performance assessment that data

analytics are unlikely to capture. For example, performance data on victim contact or regularity of supervisory reviews pulled from crime recording systems likely to indicate the *quantity* of this action, but not the *quality*. CRs allow for investigations to be assessed in such a way that it can record not only what work is being completed and its quality, but how long work is taking and the impact of such. This could be how long it takes to arrest and interview a suspect once known, and what impact an early or late arrest has on the investigation, risk management, and victim engagement.

As a consequence of the CR process, not only can individual performance be addressed, but by completing a review of an appropriate sample number of cases picked at random in an organised way, it could help to build an evidence base to bring about organisational and structural change where it is needed. Feeding the results into a central mechanism for analysing the collective results provides strength and support for seeking to improve performance and develop staff. It assists in providing leaders across the organisation with data that can inform business cases or reorganisation of staff or investment in resources. Further, it provides layers of context to compliment and support other data streams/tools that are used to manage performance.

One of the challenges of CRs is that the staff involved naturally have relationships with the officers who conducted the investigations they are reviewing. Despite the focus being on learning, officers' lack of familiarity with the process of critical reflection may hinder the process where they do not want to be seen as being critical. This may be compounded in cases where OICs may be asked to peer review officers who are of a more senior rank than them (in forces, for instance, where both DCs and DSs run RASSO investigations). Senior Leaders need to recognise and address these issues, clearly communicating the objectives and purpose of critical reflection, together with reassuring staff about how the reviews will be used constructively. Where critical reflection, including peer review, is not usually used as a tool for performance assessment and learning, these types of additional issues, including teaching officers to approach the task neutrally and without bias, all require consideration.

In Avon and Somerset Constabulary there were instances where live risk was identified by the second reviewing officers, which provides further weight to the value of having layers of oversight embedded within a CR process. An example is a case whereby a male had been investigated for sexual offences against females and his background supported a view that he presented a sexual risk to children. The secondary review highlighted a lack of recording of action to identify other children and work with partner agencies to safeguard them. Whilst this action could have been completed, the record keeping did not reflect that it had and so the risk remained present. The secondary review highlighted the issues caused by a lack of a specialist trained officer on

this case and the negative impact that had on the safeguarding strategy, along with the delays caused in interviewing the suspect and potential risk enduring longer than it should have. It was identified that after the suspect interview, a review of the investigation plan was not created to formalise the next steps of the investigation which caused some of the case to drift. The secondary review led to an immediate direction for officers to assess the risk, ensure partner agencies were engaged, and that a safeguarding plan was initiated. It was found that the risk had actually been managed but that the recording of such was not as it should have been. So, whilst the safeguarding was in place, the lack of recording of information could negatively impact upon both current and longer-term public protection work, which is underpinned by, and reliant upon, effective sharing of information held. The findings from the secondary review also triggered a process of critical reflection with those involved in the investigation, along with the implementation of training to ensure the learning was embedded. Whilst an obvious challenge to embedding the CR process is their time-consuming nature that place increased demand upon already stretched officers, Senior Leaders need to recognise the multifaceted benefits that this process can bring to the policing of RASSO and provide staff with adequate, time, space, and learning to be able to conduct this type of critical reflection.

Conclusions

Learning how critical reflection can enhance practice from other professions is valuable to help identify why it is impactful as well as recognising some of the challenges. The social work literature realises the benefits of reflective practice and its role in aiding practitioner awareness in the work they conduct, their professional power in society in relation to clients they support, identifying individual development requirements and, addressing work related stress (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Yip, 2006). All these elements are important when considering how critical reflection can work in policing contexts, given similarities of both professions working with high demand, addressing and responding to difficult societal needs and operating under significant fiscal constraints. Given the demand, within social work, critical reflection does not come without its challenges. Social workers often only used critical reflection in times of crisis, and they found it challenging to integrate in day-to-day practice (Taiwo, 2022). Christopher (2015) places the importance for reform to convey that reflective practice should be a conscious activity in policing, given the role it plays on enhancing strategic and operationally effective approaches to policing complex problems. He suggests a more considered infrastructure is required to consciously enable reflection. This is useful

learning to consider in the context of policing RASSO investigations when considering critical reflection as constituent part of practice to realise the many benefits to develop a deeper understanding of the requirements of the investigation addressing the complexities of the case, the needs of the victims as well as considering the impact of the case on the investigators themselves.

The two approaches proposed in this paper, RPPs and CRs, are not silver bullets to improving the policing of RASSO. They do, however, bring together many basic strategies which should already be familiar to policing. The extra resilience that CR provides in its two-step process is a real strength, leading to proactive action to ensure the public are safeguarded, highlighting areas where improvements need to be made and also ensuring learning is taken when action has not been taken when it should have. RPPs should assist officers in embedding critical reflection into their everyday working practices, a step which given resourcing constraints may be a more manageable way of integrating critical reflection in policing, and which may in turn make the process more familiar to officers when they are asked to conduct more long term, CR based critical reflection. Fundamentally, they are tools which can be incorporated and normalised into policing that strives to embed critical reflection in its normal operation. Should police forces decide to embed these processes within their organisations, the next step is to test and evaluate both the RPPs and CRs to establish whether they work as anticipated here, how they change and potentially improve the investigative process and support officer learning and wellbeing, and to consider the feasibility with which such practices can be implemented in the context of resourcing, time, and financial considerations. As has already been outlined, as well as providing a measure of good and poor practice through which investigations can be improved, critical reflection supports police officers' emotional wellbeing through the provision of safe spaces to share challenging professional experiences and address emotive issues encountered. One of the main themes from the data examined is the cumulative impact these types of cases have on officers. Given the high case load and lack of staff to manage the work means officers default to a 'can do attitude', but this is often at the expense of the officers' wellbeing. Officers described being overloaded with work as the norm, with the serious emotional impact of stress and burnout they experienced compounded by the traumatic and complex cases they are dealing with on a continuous basis. Having a blend of regular, informal and formal avenues for critical reflection is key in early identification of the different stressors experienced throughout the investigation process of a RASSO.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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