



# The containing organisation: an evaluation of Reflective Practice Groups

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# Introduction

- RPG often used as an ‘umbrella term’
- Not supervision, but what are they?
- Range of aims
- Range of approaches
- Difficult to provide a single definition and therefore to judge effectiveness?
- Evaluation in Brighton & Hove sought to add to evidence base around RPGs as well as investigating effects within the local authority.



# Model of RPG employed at Brighton and Hove

- ‘Psychoanalytically informed, psycho-social’ (PIPS)
- Based on Tavistock’s Work Discussion (WD) model
- Developed from infant observation – observation of human interactions in a work context
- Underpinned by concepts of containment and projection
- Different to WD because not solely front line staff and different levels of psychoanalytic training required



# Process

- Group of practitioners with a trained facilitator
- Initial presentation – usually prepared in advance
- Presenter speaks for approximately 15 minutes on a troubling issue
- Group listen but do not ask questions
- Presenter then ‘sits out’ but still listens while group reflects on what heard
- Presenter re-joins conversation



# How are RPGs supposed to 'work'?

- Description and reflection on the task, which is shared with 'other minds'
- Participants access a fuller understanding of the emotional and relational dynamics present, leading to enhanced professional thoughtfulness
- This is then translated into more attuned and efficacious practice interventions.
- RPGs are developmental for practitioners, and not just 'problem solving'
- RPGs are believed to positively impact on practitioner / service user processes and relationships, and by extension on 'outcomes' for service users

*(Taken from Lees & Cooper, 2018 – forthcoming)*

## Background to evaluation

- In 2015 B&H invited CfSWP to tender for a programme of work involving the provision of regular facilitated RPGs at a number of organisational levels
- 'Delivery' along with staff/organisational development to enable sustainable longer term capacity for reflective practice.
- CfSWP funded evaluation in order to:
  - Contribute to the wider evaluation of service change
  - Contribute to the wider evidence base on reflective practice & its role in supporting relationship based practice

## Model of delivery

- External facilitator provided RPGs for senior managers, pod managers, practice managers & lead practitioners
- Plus support/education sessions for internal facilitators
- Internal facilitators conducted RPGs for social workers and non-social work practitioners ('trickle down' approach)
- Attendance was mandatory
- RPGs were additional to supervision arrangements

# Evaluation questions

1. How can we describe and conceptualise the work of the RPGs within the context of Brighton and Hove Children's services?
2. How have participants experienced participation in RPGs?
3. Has involvement in RPGs affected participants' capacity to deal with emotional aspects of practice and if so in what ways?
4. What are the perceived changes to practice that have resulted from involvement in RPGs?



## Data collection methods

- Questionnaire (T3) n=214, 22% response rate
- Observation of RPGs in progress ( x 6)
- Semi structured interviews (x 15)
- Focus groups (x 6)



# Data analysis methods

- Descriptive statistics for questionnaire data
- Thematic analysis of qualitative data
- Process for rigour and reflexivity in qualitative data
  - Acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and subjectivities
  - Checking out interpretations with range of stakeholders/amendments to text



## Findings

What were the positive outcomes of RPGs in Brighton and Hove?

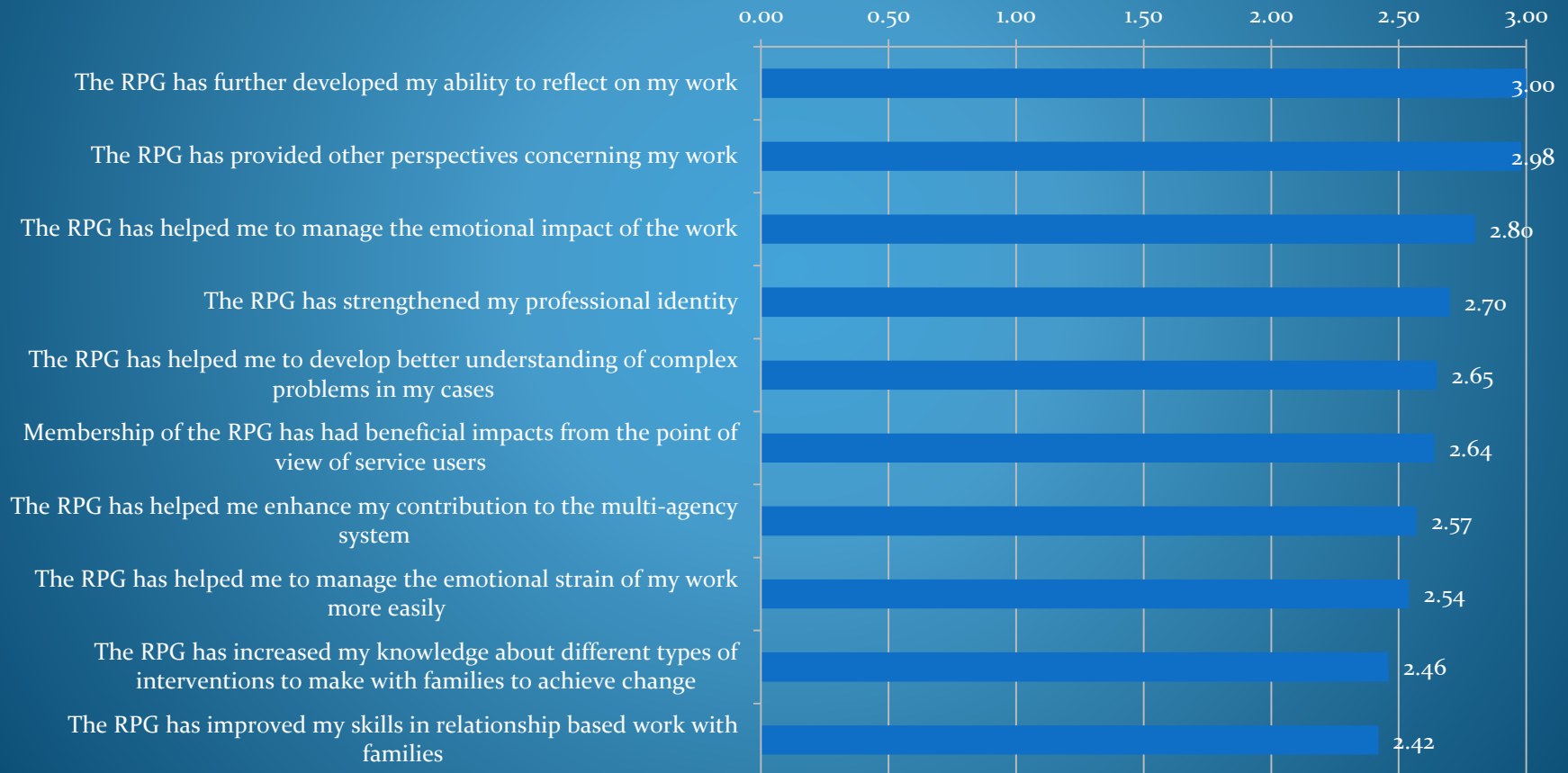


# Quantitative findings

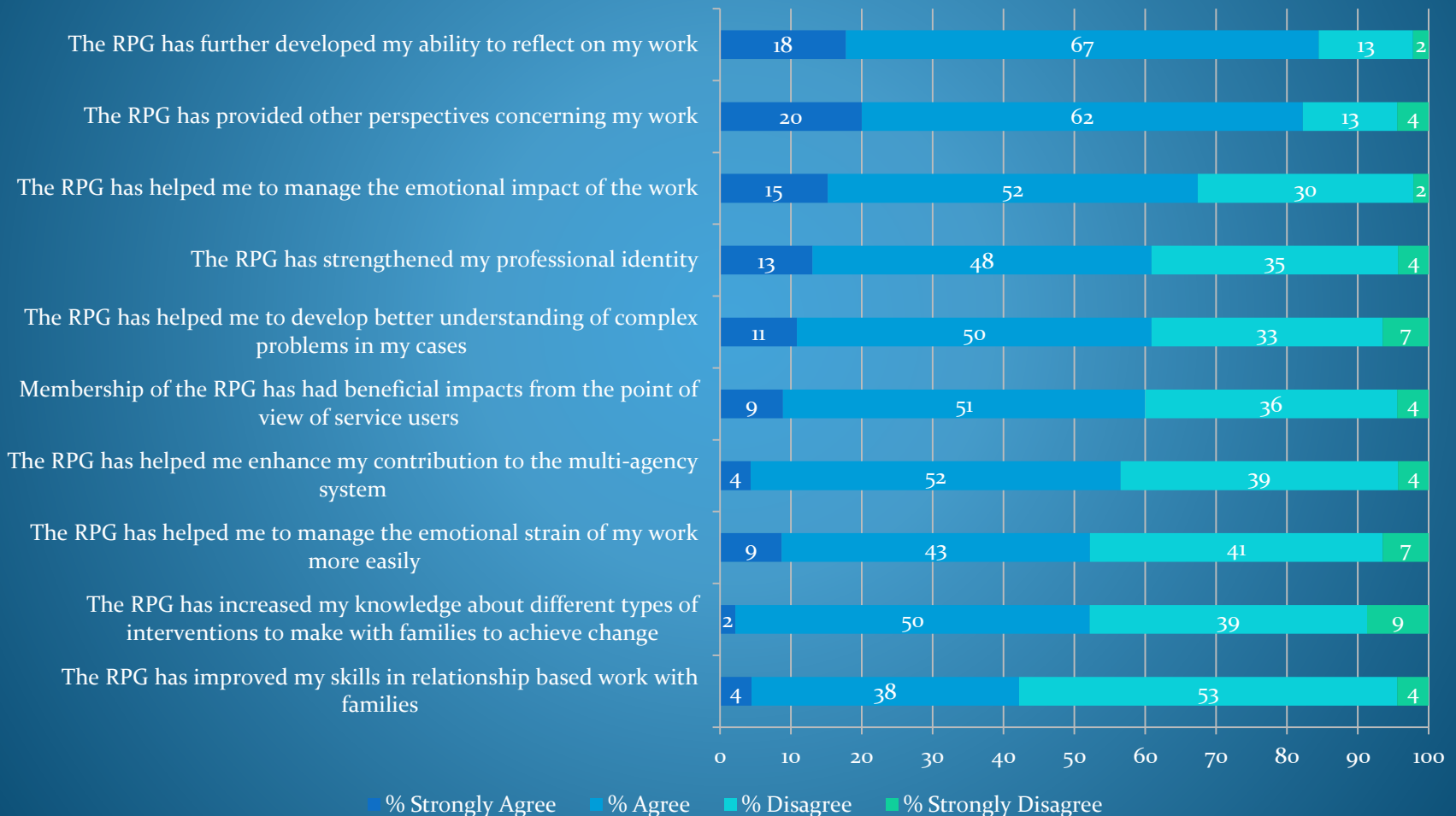
## T3 outcome statements

(4=strongly agree - 1= strongly disagree)

■ Mean (average) score



# T3 outcome statements





# Qualitative Findings

## Organisational/Professional Impacts

- Broader sense of organisation as a whole

*“...that coming together and sharing to do that I thought was really beneficial. And it's kind of enhanced, I guess my pride in the work that I do and we do really”*

*“I think it has helped when other teams have been in more difficulties for them to kind of go, oh actually yeah, we need to help over there....you know there's much more of an ownership of the work, the pressures, the strains across the whole of social work...you're kind of getting a broader sense of the whole of the organisation, social work, you know child protection social work”*

- (Resonance with ‘the RPG has strengthened my professional identity’ from quant findings)

## Emotional impacts

- Validation and reassurance

- Confidence that own experiences and concerns are valid
- Confidence that doing good work

- Going out feeling calmer

*“you can go in feeling very stressed or overwhelmed by things you need to do and just having that creative thinking space together can make you come out feeling like you’re on top of it and it’s OK, that’s the best bit about it really, in short, I think that’s the best thing”*

- Feeling supported

*“As a member of a group it’s helped me when things have felt difficult to feel that you know, that there’s other people that feel things are difficult as well and actually are willing to support me with that and share that, and so it’s played an important role for me in terms of that”*

(Resonance with ‘the RPG has helped me to manage the emotional impact/strain of the work’ statements from quant.)

# Enhanced capacity for reflection and thoughtful practice

- Changes to practice, doing things differently
  - Small number but striking examples in data
  - Changing thinking and action on cases
  - Thinking about own capacity and role
  - Gaining strategies/techniques to employ now or in future

*"and then me having had that space to reflect and to think and to you know look at new strategies, I then went back to the family and said we need to something about this cos this is not OK. It hasn't been working and it makes you very anxious...and he apologised and I said OK....we're talking on completely different terms now...and the child remained at home with them"*

- (Resonance with 'helped me to develop better understanding of complex problems' and 'has had beneficial impacts from the point of view of service users')

‘How’ questions?

What is it about RPGs that has facilitated these impacts and outcomes?

# Questionnaire (T3) Open ended answers

Could you say **how** the RPG has helped you to understand complex problems in your cases?

- Diversity of perspective (6)
- Space for reflection (4)
- Talked about management issues (4)
- Not impacted my practice (4)
- Hearing about each others' cases (1)
- No easy solutions (1)

Could you say **how** the RPG has helped you manage the emotional impact of your work?

- Talk and share (8)
- Support, acknowledge (7)
- Safe space away (6)
- Consider impact (3)
- Limited by low attendance (3)
- Combat isolation (2)
- It hasn't/NA (2)
- Other outlets more useful (1)



## “Qualitative - Design features”

### Time and space to think



*“I guess we just often get sucked in to doing all the time because of time pressures and so we’re wanting to do, so I think there’s the bit about I have to stop, and I have to try and hold that there”*

*“For me, actually having the resource put aside for that reflective space I think is really important, so although we may have sort of challenges around it and criticisms of it, I think organisationally...it’s hugely important that we’ve got that resource there”*

## “Qualitative - Design features”

### Time and space to think



The use of a facilitated, structured model for reflection denotes a ‘different’ space

*“You know there is something about actually you have to provide a structure to people’s discussions and to get them to think differently about how they’re feeling and the impact on them.”*

*“It felt really different in a really good way, in the sense that it felt like, yeah it was going to be challenging and thought provoking”*

(Some issues around scheduling and location – need to try to schedule to best suit groups’ needs. Also provision of ‘welcome’ through physical space/refreshments. Also a range of views on model and facilitation styles).

“Qualitative – design features”

Bringing workers together from across the service



- Opportunity for learning about each others' roles, sharing perspectives and the cross fertilization of ideas
- For some managers this represented a unique opportunity for joining with their peers

*“Obviously one of the differences is that it’s not your supervision group so you have a range of differing perspectives, different teams, people with different roles and priorities and so on, so that’s really helpful”*

*‘It’s time with your peers which I think is one of the key things for me’*

# Processes of RPGs appreciated by participants

Acknowledging,  
expressing shared  
experience

Wondering and  
listening

Drawing out the  
positives

*“language of feelings and emotions is valued and  
expected in a way that it can be shut down (in other  
forums)”*

Expressing and  
examining  
emotional  
experience

Expressing,  
hearing  
diverging  
perspectives

## Findings: Mixed picture

*“I mean from what social workers say a lot of people find it very helpful, but then a lot of people don’t.”*

*“I would definitely say it’s quite a controversial thing. I don’t think its got universal, you know, these have been great.”*



## What were the challenges related to the RPG project?

- Deeper level reflection not always achieved in groups
- Some became outlets for expression of purely negative feelings
- Others stayed at the level of 'problem solving'
- This could result in feelings of frustration

## What were the challenges related to the RPG project?

- Indication from data that this was a ‘group cohesion’ rather than a ‘facilitation’ issue (although some mention of different facilitation styles).

*“I’ve got two or three groups which I’m pretty confident in that if I wasn’t there a high quality level of discussion, actually my role is so minute now, those are my groups that have been more stable...two have been quite stable and quite reflective throughout, then we’ve got this one group who goes there and then shies away a little bit, which is interesting”*

- Feelings of trust and safety appeared to be pre-requisite for deeper level reflection, poor attendance was an important barrier to this.

*“it is a cohesive group where I feel safe to be emotionally vulnerable”*

*Versus*

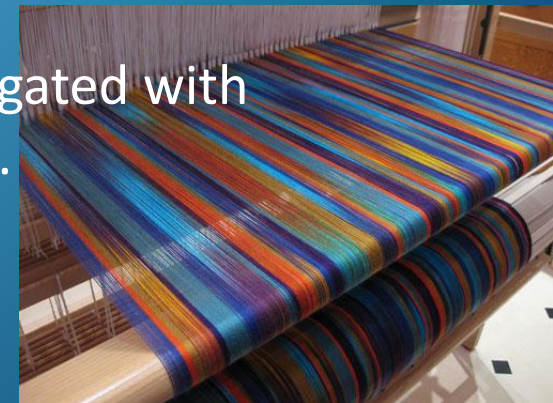
*“it’s very erratic who attends...so I don’t have any sense of this is a group of people that I belong to, where I’m safe to share information”*

## Challenges to attendance?

- Practicalities and demands of court etc.
- Some expressed difficulties around roll out of project which resulted in a lack of clarity around purpose of RPGs (mandatory but not clear why)
- Need clear modelling of attendance from senior staff
- Mix of group experience

# Can RPGs lead to 'happier staff, improved practice and better outcomes'?

- **Yes:** Findings suggest that RPGs created beneficial emotional and organisational/professional impacts as well as enhanced capacity for reflection and professional thoughtfulness.
- **But:** Not all participants had positive experiences. Data was rich and nuanced with a range of experience expressed.
  - Issues of attendance and 'buy-in' were highlighted
  - Outcomes for service users need to be investigated with reference to their own views and experiences.



Thanks for listening

Any questions?

