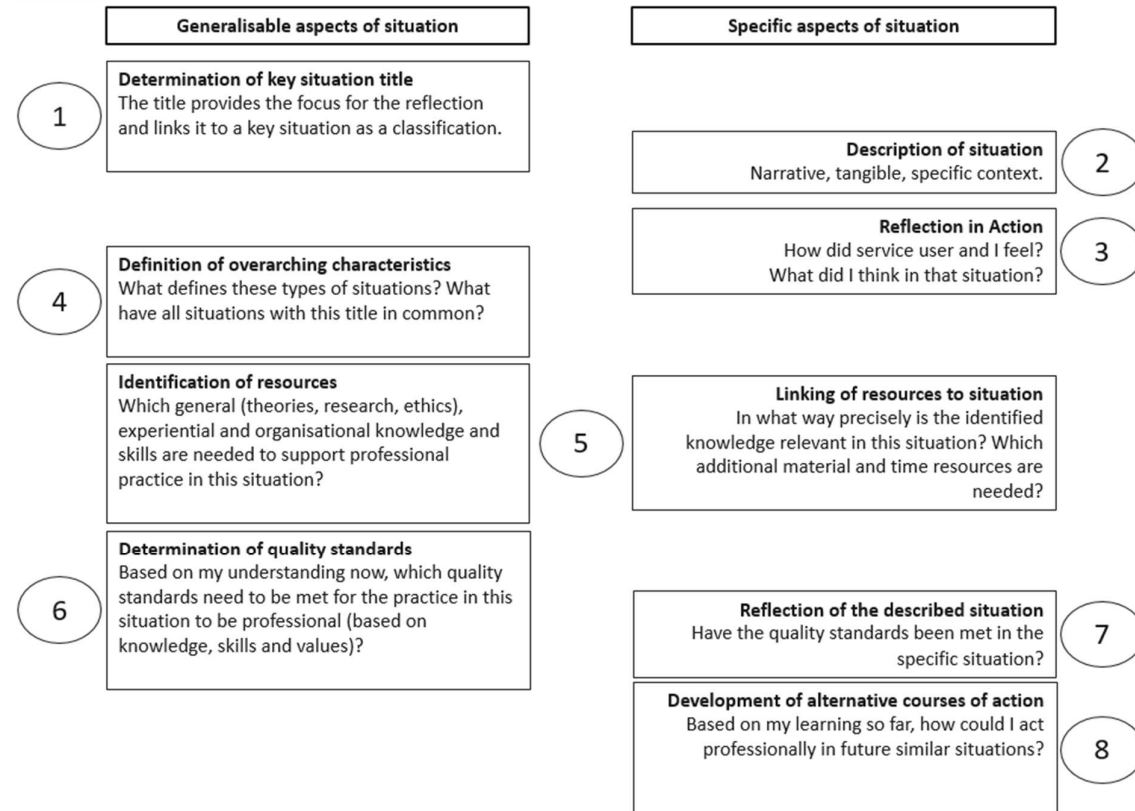




Guide for the Key Situations in Social Work Reflection Process

Introduction

This document guides you through the reflection process. It is structured along the eight process steps of the Key Situations in Social Work reflection process:



Please note that you can start the process with either the description of a situation ② and the reflection in action ③ or with the determination of a title ① under which you want to reflect a situation. This reflection process is essentially a learning process "that 'speak[s]' to the situations regularly encountered in social work" (Trevithick, 2012: 145). In this you relate generalisable (knowledge, skills, values) and specific (contextual, situational) aspects to gain a new in-depth understanding of the situation and the relevant knowledge, skills and values that help you manage key situations professionally.





The idea is that you work in a small community of practice (CoP) and each member explores her/his own experienced situation. Together you share your learning and tease out the aspects of this, which are relevant to all situations (i.e. the key situation).



Situations are recorded and for this purpose you may want to make use of the Key Situation platform. There you can explore other situations and share your learning within the professional and academic community. Please note the English platform is currently under construction.

This guide is structured around the eight steps. Each step contains:

- a brief **definition** of the step,
- **action** points as instructions on what you need to do and
- **guiding questions** to help you and your community of practice (cop) members to check whether you have understood and addressed all aspects as well as an

Example

For more information, go to www.keysituations.net, view our explainer video under: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d0PzmxQM7c> or read one of our English publications, which are listed at the end of this guide. Enjoy the learning!





1

Determination of key situation title

The title provides the focus for the reflection and links it to a key situation as a classification.

Definition

Even though every situation is unique, the key situation model starts with the premise that there are typical, reoccurring situations with generalisable and specific aspects. In fact, any profession can be described by its key situations¹. The title of a situation determines the focus with which the situation will be reflected. In most instances several titles are possible and the title will steer the reflection process. For example a typical, reoccurring situation such as “Taking a referral” could equally be explored under a title of „Making a judgement on urgent need“ or „A service user at risk to him/herself“. While the first one will focus on the relevant knowledge, skills and values in relation to referral taking, the second one will put the emphasis on professional judgement and need and the third one will expand your understanding of the nature of risk to self and related evidence for social work interventions. You may start off with a title at the beginning or choose a title once you have described and deconstructed the situation in the reflection in action step.

Action: Find a title

- Thinking about your daily practice, which typical, reoccurring situations do you encounter? Which situations do you grapple with the most? Are there situations, which you think you manage really well? A situation could have been handled more or less professional.
- Think of a title that would best fit this situation.
- Briefly describe the most important contextual aspect in a subtitle (e.g. Taking a referral / First contact with mental health services).

¹ The key situations (Schlüsselsituationen) for German speaking social work and social pedagogy have been described and a collection of about 130 key situations was developed. The description of English social work situations is planned as part of my PhD research. If you are interested in taking part in this process, please send me an email: adi.staempfli@schluesselsituationen.net.





- Present your title to the other learners and find two other participants who would like to reflect on their own experienced situation under the same title.
- *If you are working on the key situation platform:* create a page with the title and subtitle in the following format: Title / Subtitle.

1 Title

Engaging with service users/carers in challenging circumstances / Concerns about carer

Guiding questions

- Does the title focus on your experienced situation in a meaningful way?
- Have all three group members experienced situations, which fit this title?
- Can you agree on the chosen title and focus in your CoP?

Description of situation

Narrative, tangible, specific context.

2

Definition

The reflection process continues or may start with the description of an experienced situation in which the situation including its specific context in which it occurred is explained. The narrative is tangible and describes the situation as concretely as possible. Its narrative contains actions, statements, observable behaviours but no interpretations or assumed non-observable thinking. It is a little story with a focus on the social worker's actions with a beginning, a middle and an end, which is experienced by the social worker as an uninterrupted course of action. The specific context in which it occurred, the professional challenge and the interventions are outlined.





Action: Narration of situation:

- In your group, recount your situation, which you have experienced.
- Answer clarifying questions from your group members.

Action: Write down the situation:

- Each participant documents the situation in writing, using either the template provided or on the key situation platform with the specific situation template. (approx. ½ A4-page). Please observe the following points when you describe your situation:
 - No names, only functions (service user, carer, social worker, team manager, etc.)
 - No place names, instead, if necessary for general understanding use terms such as; city, town, village, surrounding countryside, in the centre of ..., etc.
 - No mention of medical diagnoses with symptoms and progression, etc. If it is necessary, describe at most a general health situation (for example, physical illness, depression, terminal illness in its final stages, severe injury, etc.)
 - No exact times (hours, dates, appointments), instead use more general descriptions; morning, evening, during the winter, later, in the past few weeks, etc.
 - Genders may be changed, unless reflection on gender is the focus the situation.
 - Starting situation and context are briefly explained (use the heading context).
 - Description contains actions, statements, observable behaviours but no interpretations or assumed non-observable thinking. It is not too generalised or too abstract and should come alive with all emotions, challenges and positive aspects.
- *If you are working on the key situation platform:* Document the whole situation at this point under '3 Description of situation: context'.





3 Description of situation: context*

Context: A safeguarding concern raised by the district nurse to an inner city Community Mental Health Team highlighted a potential risk of neglect to a service user (SU) who lives at home with her son; he is also her carer (C). The social worker (SW) arranged a meeting to discuss the allegations with the carer.

Description of situation: The social worker arrives at the service user's home. ... The social worker concludes the meeting by thanking the carer for his honesty and says: "I know that my questions have been challenging for you. I really appreciate your openness. I hope that we can continue to work together to make sure that your mother is continuing to be as well as she can be".

*Note that the order in the final description is different from the actual process. Therefore, the description of the context is listed as number 3.

Guiding questions

- Does the description refer to *one* situation with a beginning and an end, which was experienced by the social worker as an uninterrupted course of action? (Not to a number of connected situations)
- Is the narrative tangible and concrete?
- Is the narrative understandable with no gaps in actions (e.g. Description of what people do and say)? Does it contain no interpretations or assumed non-observable thinking?
- Is the context, setting and starting situation briefly described (e.g. Referral and assessment team in adult social services team in an inner city local authority)?
- Is the description completely anonymised with no names, places, agencies named?
- Are people described by their role?
- Does the title match the situation?





Reflection in Action

How did service user and I feel?
What did I think in that situation?

3

Definition

According to Schön (1983), a mostly unconscious "reflection in action" controls actions and behaviours in any situation. This can be made conscious after the event through a reconstruction of the thoughts, emotions and mental states, which guide the actions in the situation. In this way, implicit knowledge and guiding concepts are elicited and described and made accessible for professional reflection and learning. For this purpose, the situation is divided into 4 - 5 meaningful sequences (around the core parts of beginning – middle – end). This helps to reduce the otherwise elusive complexity of the situation. Following this the reflection in action in each sequence is described. The emotion (feeling) and cognition (thinking) of the social worker (SW) and the emotion of the service user(s) (SU) is added to the description of the situation. Thus a comprehensive picture of the situation emerges, which then allows the reflection of the prevailing feelings, thoughts and tacit knowledge as well as actions in the situation.

Action: Role play the situation to elicit the reflection in action:

- Select one of the three situations in your group.
- Re-enact the situation (Social worker, service user, observer) in a role play with a person playing the social worker, the service user and an observer.
- In the subsequent discussion describe the reflection in action. Key questions: What emotions did the social worker and service user feel? What did the observer see (body language, facial expression as an indication of emotion)? What did the social worker think in each sequence (action-guiding thinking)?

Action: Document and enrich the situation with reflection in action:

- Divide the situation in about 4 - 5 meaningful sequences.
- After each sequence, add the emotion and cognition of the social worker, and the emotion of the service user (SW emotion:, SW cognition: ..., SU emotion: ...).
- *If you are working on the key situation platform:* Copy and paste the description of each sequence under the headings 'First sequence', 'Second sequence', etc. and add





the reflection in action after the subheading 'Reflection in Action' of each sequence. Leave the context under '3 Description of situation: context'.

4 Description of situation with Reflection in Action in action sequences

Fourth sequence

The social worker concludes the meeting by thanking the carer for his honesty and said: "I know that my questions have been challenging for you. I really appreciate your openness. I hope that we can continue to work together to make sure that your mother is continuing to be as well as she can be".

Reflection in Action

- **Emotion C:** Feeling accused and defensive. Feeling of surprise and disbelief.
- **Emotion SW:** Slightly awkward about having looked through and inspected someone's home and to be questioning their behaviour, sense of morality, beliefs and values.
- **Cognition SW:** The social worker understood the necessity to ask such questions. Relief that the carer appears not as defensive at the end.

Guiding questions

- Are the sequences chosen meaningful (beginning, middle and end)?
- Are the emotions of the social worker and service user and the thinking of the social worker clear and consistent with the sequence/situation? Are they described succinctly in the reflection in action under each sequence?
- Which emotions and cognitions appear in all three situations under the same title (in your group)? Which seem to be specific to your situation?





4

Definition of overarching characteristics

What defines these types of situations? What have all situations with this title in common?

Definition

The overarching characteristics describe the typical and generalised aspects of a key situation. They apply to all typical, reoccurring and similar situations with the same title, since they include the commonalities on an abstract level. These characteristics define *all* situations under the same title, even if they occur in different organisational settings and with different service user groups. The overarching characteristics are thus on a higher level and refer to the *key* situation.

Action: Determination of overarching characteristics of the key situation

- Determine the characteristics jointly in your group for all three situations.
- Start with a feature of the specific situation and reword it in a more abstract way, so that it applies to all situations under the same title. What are the features and characteristics that define these types of situations?
- Check whether the characteristics sufficiently define the key situation. Are they too specific? Are they too abstract?
- *If you are working on the key situation platform:* Document the characteristics under '2 Characteristics of situation' in bullet point form.

2 Characteristics of situation

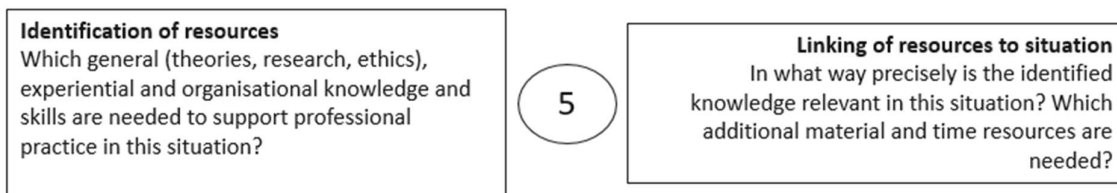
- The relationship is characterised by a power dynamic between the social worker and the service user, which impacts on engagement.
- The service user/carer is resistant to fully engage with the social worker.
- There are conflicting expectations between the service user/carer and the social worker.
- The social worker has to be able to work with diverging expectations and resistance.





Guiding questions

- Do the overarching characteristics reflect the typical and reoccurring aspects of the three situations (and possible further situations under the same title)?
- Are they worded abstractly enough and do not reflect specific aspects such as service user group, organisational setting? Are they not too abstract so that they are describing essentially all situations in social work?
- Are any additional characteristics missing?



Definition

If we want to shape and manage situations professionally, we need knowledge and methods, apply our skills and take into account contextual, organisational and legal factors and conditions. Together, all of these are tools, needed to successfully manage professional situations and we therefore call them "resources". The resources consist of knowledge and skills and of the more tangible and intangible aspects. In the Key Situation model we distinguish the following resources:

| | |
|---|---|
| Scientific knowledge of social problems | <i>Why do the people in the situation act in this way?</i> Explanations of social problems, behaviours, processes, research from social sciences, ... |
| Scientific knowledge of interventions | <i>How can one act as a professional social worker?</i> Methods, procedures, tools, research on what works, ... |
| Ethical knowledge | Whereupon do I align my actions? What are the core values, which need to be considered by social workers in this situation? Values, attitudes, code of ethics, ... |





| | |
|---|--|
| Experiential knowledge | What does this situation remind me of? What previous experiences have I made in similar situations? Own experiences, as well as experiences of others, ... |
| Organisational and contextual knowledge | <i>Which contextual conditions determine and shape my professional actions?</i> Organisational mandate, law and policy, socio-political conditions, ... |
| Skills | <i>What do I need to be able to do as a professional?</i> <i>Which skills are needed in this situation?</i> Being empathic, communication, cooperation skills, self-reflection, capability to follow social work processes, |
| Infrastructure and material resources | <i>With what can I act?</i> Material resources, available time, budgets, infrastructural conditions, room, |

Different forms of knowledge can be used for varying purposes. For example, legal knowledge can explain an action as an internalised code; guide our actions as a value, or impose a procedure in law. All these resources can support the successful handling of a situation, but not all need to be used necessarily to ensure professionalism. Expanding your understanding of and relating these resources to your situation promotes the integration of knowing and doing and supports the development of a professional identity.

Action: Identifying relevant resources (knowledge, skills and values for the situation.

Ask yourself: what resources do I need, to manage the situation professionally? Research resources for each of the above categories. There are three possible ways of identifying resources:

1. Look at the cognition of the social worker in the reflection in action. Are there any implicit forms of knowledge (e.g. concepts, assumptions, general principles), which can be explored? For example, you may find that underlying your actions are thoughts in relation to research and theory, methods, skills and values.
2. Consider any reading and learning you have done as part of your education or continuous professional development. Are there any relevant theories, research findings, methods, etc., which are relevant to the situation?
3. Pose questions to the situation, which you would like to investigate. For example, you might wonder: Why the carer (in the example) initially appeared quite





defensive. Pose such questions for all resource forms. You may find referring to the above questions for each resource type (in the second column) helpful.

Action: Researching and describing relevant resources (knowledge, skills and values for the situation.

- Start your investigation in one of the three ways. You may combine these. Expand your research and look for additional resources, by using journals, social science data bases, libraries, books, etc.
- Once you have identified relevant resources for each category, you will need to describe them succinctly. Describe each idea (e.g. a concept from a theory, an intervention method, an ethical standard or value, an experience, a section of a law and a specific skill) as specific, succinct and understandable as possible. What have the authors said? What are their main findings? What is stated in the code of practice? What does the case law say? What skills are described in the literature?
- Discuss the resources in your group and share your resources. Discuss your understanding of the resources with your co-learners. Call upon the facilitator for feedback and clarification.
- For each resource identified, for example a research finding, write a small paragraph in your own words. You may use indirect or direct quotes to underline the key messages. Where relevant add references and add them to the reference list. Apply academic referencing guidelines and list these in under '9 Literature'.
- *If you are working on the key situation platform: Record the various resources under the appropriate heading.*

Action: Link resources to the situation.

- Based on the description of the resource, relate the resources (terms, concepts, research findings, values, etc.) to the specific situation. The guiding questions is: „Why exactly is this knowledge in this situation relevant? “
- The posed questions (if you have chosen the third option of identifying resources) need to be answered based on knowledge and in relation to the specific situation.





- After the paragraph outlining the resource add a second paragraph, in which you make this link.

5 Resources

5.1 Explanatory scientific knowledge – Why do the people in this situation act in this way?

What might be the reason for the carer's defensiveness?

All human beings have “defence mechanisms” (Anna Freud, 1942, in Illeris, 2009: 15). Illeris (2009) refers to Leithäuser (1976) who described everyday consciousness. When exposed to a situation we activate our pre-understandings of that situation. If the situation (or aspects of it), does not correspond with these pre-understandings, it is rejected or distorted to fit. Defences may be conscious or unconscious and therefore are beyond our immediate awareness and control (Trevithick, 2011). Defence mechanisms serve as a guard “from further harm – protect us from thoughts, feelings, actions or events that are felt to be threatening, anxiety-provoking and painful – or that signal danger in some way” (Jacobs, 2010: 110) and ultimately function as a defence of our identity and may be at play when the perceived content of situations is too overwhelming (Illeris, 2009).

In this particular situation the carer immediately reacted through actions and words to his awareness of disagreement and conflict in relation to the safeguarding concerns raised. Perhaps this reaction by the carer was purely unconscious and yet the social worker was aware of this emotion immediately. An explanation may be that the carer perceived himself as a dutiful son who is looking well after his mother (pre-understanding) and when presented with another view he rejected this unconsciously. On the other hand, it may be that the carer was aware that he has neglected the needs of his mother to some degree (pre-understanding) and he reacted consciously in order to avoid the perceived danger of the social worker's and ultimately the state's intervention to protect his freedom.

...





The references of the resources are listed at the end of each situation.

9 Literature

...

Illeris, Knud (2009) A comprehensive understanding of human learning. In Knud, I. (ed) Contemporary Theories of Learning. Learning theorists in their own words. Oxon and New York: Routledge. 7 – 20.

Trevithick, Pamela (2011) 'Understanding defences and defensive behaviour in social work'. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 25(4): 389-412.

...

Guiding questions

- Are the initial situation, the reflection-in-action, the overarching characteristics and resources connected comprehensibly and plausibly in the situation?
- Are the resources described, related specifically to the concrete situation, so that their direct relevance is clear?
- Are hypotheses and multiple approaches to the situation explicit and based on the representation of different explanatory models, intervention strategies, experiences and values?
- What are the similarities and differences between the three situations under the same title? What aspects appear in all situations under the same title, which are very specific to a specific situation? What are the specific and the generalisable aspects of the situation(s)? What conclusions can be drawn, for example in relation to key situations, knowledge, practice and values?





6

Determination of quality standards

Based on my understanding now, which quality standards need to be met for the practice in this situation to be professional (based on knowledge, skills and values)?

Definition

Professionalism commands that situations are managed based on knowledge, skills and values and in accordance with quality criteria. The latter are the yardstick, with which practice is evaluated. They bring to mind why an intervention in a situation can be judged as successful or professional. Professional social work pays attention to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory forms of interventions in accordance with codes of practice and ethical requirements. The resources described above, including the ethical knowledge point to the required quality.

Quality standards are formulated at a medium level of abstraction. That is to say that they should not be too general, depicting the general standards of the profession but instead should be specific enough to reflect the demands of the particular *key situation* in a sufficiently differentiated manner.

Action: Determination of quality standards

- The guiding question here is: “By which aspects do I recognise that the situation was managed professionally? “
- Look at the ethical knowledge and consider how this could be formulated as a standard.
- Look at the other resources and discuss which ones are relevant to the quality of the situation. For example, is there a strong evidence base for certain interventions? Are certain theories of particular importance for this type of situation? Formulate a quality standard for each point identified.
- Look at codes of practice, knowledge and skills statements and PCF to determine quality professional handling of a situation.





- Formulate each quality standard at a medium level of abstraction, not too abstract that they are relevant to all professional situations and neither too specific and therefore only relevant to the specific situation. The quality standards should be applicable to all situations with the same key situation title.
- Word the standards in positive ways, e.g. “Self-efficacy of the service user is strengthened”, “Consideration of risks is balanced, looking to both protection and potential”

6 Quality Standards

1. Resistance is recognised, explored and discussed transparently and non-judgementally.
2. Person-centred approach: The social worker is congruent and empathic and pays attention to building a rapport with the service user/carer.
3. ...

Guiding questions

- Are the initial situation, the reflection-in-action, the overarching characteristics, resources and the quality standards connected comprehensibly and plausibly in this situation?
- Are the chosen quality standards meaningful? Do they reflect professional social work and reflect knowledge, skills and values?
- Are the quality standards applicable to all specific situations of a key situation title but not to all professional key situations?
- Are any central quality standards missing?





Reflection of the described situation
Have the quality standards been met in the
specific situation?

7

Definition

The quality standards are now used to reflect on and evaluate the described situation. The standards are not only helpful in considering quality in typical, reoccurring situations but also to specifically evaluate how these were met (or not met) in specific interventions in situations.

Action: Reflection of the situation on the basis of quality standards

The guiding question for this step is: *“How do you judge the quality expressed in the description the situation against the quality standards?”*

- Assess each standard one by one and consider how this was met in the specific situation. Use the standards as headings for the reflection.
- Reflect on where a standard was not met and why this might be the case.
- Describe and document your reflection in a reasoned, balanced and specific way.

7 Reflection based on quality standards Quality Standards

1. Resistance is recognised, explored and discussed transparently and non-judgementally.

The carer could not help but feel the conversation was perhaps deemed interrogatory and I recognised this early on. I acknowledged the carer's resistance and discussed the nature of the safeguarding concern openly with him. I displayed a non-judgemental attitude by acknowledging the competing demands he experiences.





2. Person-centred approach: The social worker is congruent and empathic and pays attention to building a rapport with the service user/carer.

I believe I was congruent and developed a rapport with the carer. My communication remained professional throughout the interaction. On reflection I was not fully prepared to have to question the carer as much as I did, I found this awkward and uncomfortable and the way I posed some questions was not very effective. My verbal and non-verbal communication was open and congruent with what I was feeling and thinking. I managed to display professional integrity, while focussing both on the concerns and the carer's situation.

...

Guiding questions

- Are all quality standards evaluated, including the ones which have not been met fully?
- Is the reflection related specifically to the situation at hand?
- Will outsiders be able to understand the reflection?
- Ist die Reflexion konkret auf die Situation bezogen?
- Does the reflection provide a clear view of the quality of social work?

Development of alternative courses of action

Based on my learning so far, how could I act professionally in future similar situations?

8

Definition

Based on the learning and evaluation of the previous reflection alternative courses of action are now developed. The guiding questions for this is "How can I act in similar situations to





meet the quality standards? What could I have done differently? How would I act in a next similar situation?”

Each description of a situation includes all eight elements, which point to the specific, unique aspects of a situation, as well as to the generalisable aspects, such as overarching characteristics, resources and quality standards. The alternative courses of action point to the developmental potential and to ways in which professionalism can be developed. The starting point may have been a situation, which was not managed successfully or professionally, as this was a useful starting point for the reflection and learning process.

Action: Development of alternative courses of action

Ask yourself: „If I could go into that situation once more, what would I try to do differently today?”

- Consider the previous reflection based on the quality standards, which were not fully met and consider alternative approaches.
- Describe the possible alternative courses of action.
- Consider the standards, which were met. Could you imagine other ways in which these could have been equally met? Describe alternative courses of action for these.
- When describing these alternative approaches, include anticipated consequences of these.
- Think about your personal development needs.



8 Alternative courses of action

In hind sight I thought that I could have improved on my delivery of some of the questioning. I was not fully prepared for the situation.

In a similar situation I therefore plan to prepare myself emotionally more for this type situation, particularly as I now know that I can expect a certain amount of defensiveness. I will remember this experience and will write down some non-judgemental, open questions in advance as an aide memoire.

However, how much more preparation is needed, I cannot say at this point. Moreover, I believe in this type of situation you have to be adaptable, transparent and prepared for any number of reactions. The knowledge developed about the nature of defence mechanisms will hopefully help me to understand on my feet, what possible reasons for the defensiveness might be and will inform my hypotheses.

Guiding questions

- Have you considered all quality standards in relation to alternative intervention approaches?
- Are the alternatives understandable, meaningful and specific?
- Have you explained the consequences of the alternative courses of action?
- Have you got clear ideas about how you need to develop your own professionalism in order to be able to act on the developed alternative courses of action in future similar situations?





Literature²

Staempfli, Adi; Tov, Eva; Kunz, Regula; Tschopp, Dominik & Eugster Stamm, Stefan (2016 in print). Improving professionalism through reflection and discourse in communities of practice: the key situations in social work model and project. *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*.

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Trevithick, Pamela (2012) 'The generalist versus specialist debate in social work education in the UK', in J. Lishman (ed.) *Social Work Education. Research Highlights 54*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, pp 133-153.

Staempfli, Adi; Kunz, Regula & Tov, Eva (2012). Creating a bridge between theory and practice: working with key situations. *European Journal of Social Education*, A Periodical of FESET N° 22/23 - 2012, 60-78.

http://www.schluesselsituationen.ch/docs/publikationen/European_Journal_2012_Staempfli_Kunz_Tov.pdf

² Most of our literature is in German but there is a growing number of English publications. For a list of German publications go to: <http://www.schluesselsituationen.ch/publikationen-und-vortraege/publikationen-zum-modell> or visit our website: <http://www.schluesselsituationen.net/>

