

From surface level description to critical deeper analysis. A layered model of reflection in social work

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Abstract: Reflection remains at the core of social work education and practice. There are numerous models designed to demonstrate the key components and guide social workers through reflection. What appears less clear, is what differentiates reflection and critical reflection. This paper will discuss the multifaceted nature of reflection and introduce a model which aims to demonstrate how to move beyond description and engage in strong critical analysis. This model has been adapted from an existing model of reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005), which was initially created for use in teaching. The adaptation specifically aligns with critical reflection in social work. The following article will further examine the purpose of adapting an existing model and how this model can be used within practice education, as well as by experienced social workers within their own practice.

Keywords: reflection; critical reflection; practice education; social work; supervision; group supervision

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Claire Wilding qualified as a social worker in 2012 with an MA from Lancaster University and has worked within adult social care for 13 years. They have more recently moved to a Learning Lead role within the Principal Social Work team at the Metropolitan Borough of Bolton but maintain social work practice through the Best Interest Assessor role. Reflective practice has been a strong interest and strength throughout the author's social work career. Qualifying as a practice educator expanded the opportunity to support and facilitate the reflection of other social workers and students. The role of Learning Lead places responsibility to provide reflective individual and group supervision to apprentices and newly qualified social workers within Adult Social Care in Bolton.

Introduction

Critical reflection must remain at the heart of social work practice due to the ethical responsibility inherent in the role. Social workers are supporting and working with communities, families and individuals, often in circumstances that are increasingly challenging. Social workers are expected to navigate shifting power dynamics, widespread inequality and often limited resources. The uncertainty of political landscapes and the impact of this on those we work with, for example increased poverty and inadequate housing, places increased pressure on social workers. The values at the heart of social work are a commitment to human rights, social justice and advocating for equality (British Association of Social Workers, 2021). Social workers are responsible for safeguarding, assessing for and coordinating support services, advocating and working within key legislation. It is the responsibility inherent in the social work role that provides the fundamental need to ensure social workers can review their experiences and turn this into learning to inform future practice.

A significant challenge in reflective practice lies with moving beyond a surface level review towards critical reflection, whereby social workers need to examine their judgements, assumptions, values and develop skills in self-awareness. Reflection needs to move beyond a focus on individual practice to viewing situations in the wider social context. Critical reflection can be perceived, often by those starting their social work career, as self-criticism or the need to focus on what did not go well. Whilst being able to identify gaps in knowledge and recognise areas for development is important, critical reflection should explore the impact of our own social identities on our practice, along with the impact of societies structures and our own personal bias. Crucially, reflection tends to look at *what* we did, and critical reflection focuses on *why*.

The high pressures faced by many social workers can often be the reason given for lacking the time to stop and critically reflect on what we are experiencing. Reflection requires us to pause and take a step back from practice to think abstractly. As noted by Melekis and Jatlow (2026, p141) “One of the central features of critical reflection is the deliberate slowing down of thought and practice”. Supervision should create a space for social workers to stop and critically reflect on their work and experiences. Critical reflection within supervision should not be seen as a tick box exercise but as a valuable opportunity for supervisors and social workers to understand their work within a wider social context.

Working with individuals facing inequality, trauma and often significant physical and mental health conditions can place a substantial emotional pressure on social workers. The term ‘moral injury’ was coined by Shay (2014) in relation to experiences in the military. Maclean (2022) talks about the concept of moral injury in relation to social work practice. Maclean (2022) argues that moral injury can occur within social work due to the responsibility for assessing need and determining eligibility for limited resources. There is a need for social workers to strike a work/life balance and manage their own physical and emotional needs alongside those they support. Moral injury can also arise from the constant need to prioritise their workload when everyone is in their own individual need for support. Pearson et al (2026) highlight the need for moral and ethical decision making and how this is made more complex due to inequalities in health and resources, along with long waiting lists. Moral injury can result in burnout, feeling guilty, negative thoughts in relation to the role and a negative impact on a social workers analysis and decision making (Maclean, 2022). Pearson et al (2026) identified that moral injury in social work can occur when there is a conflict between values, beliefs and practice, particularly within multi-disciplinary settings. Quality reflection with a focus on feelings and emotions can help to mitigate the impact of moral injury in social work. Cultivating a culture of reflection within teams is needed to ensure reflection on feelings and the emotional impact is routinely available.

It is worth noting at this point that critical reflection is important in several other professions such as nursing, occupational therapy and within mental health services. Sherwood (2024, p401) discusses reflective practice in relation to nursing by stating “reflective practice helps separate what one knows and what one assumes to be true”. As well as supporting critical reflection in social work, the model discussed in this paper could be applied within other relevant professions.

Summary of existing reflective models

Schön (1983) developed the reflective framework involving reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which was later updated in 1987 to include reflection-for-action. This framework remains widely used within social work reflection and practice education. Kolb’s reflective cycle (1984)

comprises of a 4-stage framework which centres on the concept that we learn best from concrete experience, and the opportunity to reflect and analyse this afterwards. Kolb's 4 stages include the concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Gibbs (1988) introduced a framework comprising of a 6-step process to guide reflection on an experience and identify future learning. This involved Description; Feelings; Evaluation; Analysis; Conclusion; Action Plan. It is the abstract conceptualisation of Kolb's cycle and the analysis stage of Gibbs' model that critical reflection should feature. It is at this point of these two popular reflective tools that social workers should be moving beyond description to critical analysis. It is common to evaluate instead of analyse, and to reflect in a way that is devoid of any consideration of power, assumptions, values and bias. Siobhan MacLean has produced many reflective tools and frameworks to assist students and qualified social workers within their reflections. *The Big 6* (Maclean, 2016) prompts critical reflection on six themes; Power; Values; Emotions; Knowledge; Self Awareness; Uncertainty. This model explicitly encourages discussion and reflection on some of the key areas of social work practice.

The author considered a range of established reflective models and frameworks during the development of the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) to identify both their strengths and limitations. While many existing models provide valuable structure for reviewing and learning from practice experiences, the author identified that some may result in reflection that remains predominantly descriptive. The development of the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) was therefore informed by a perceived need to create a framework that more explicitly supports deeper critical analysis.

The Reflective Onion: A layered Model of Reflection in Social Work (2026)

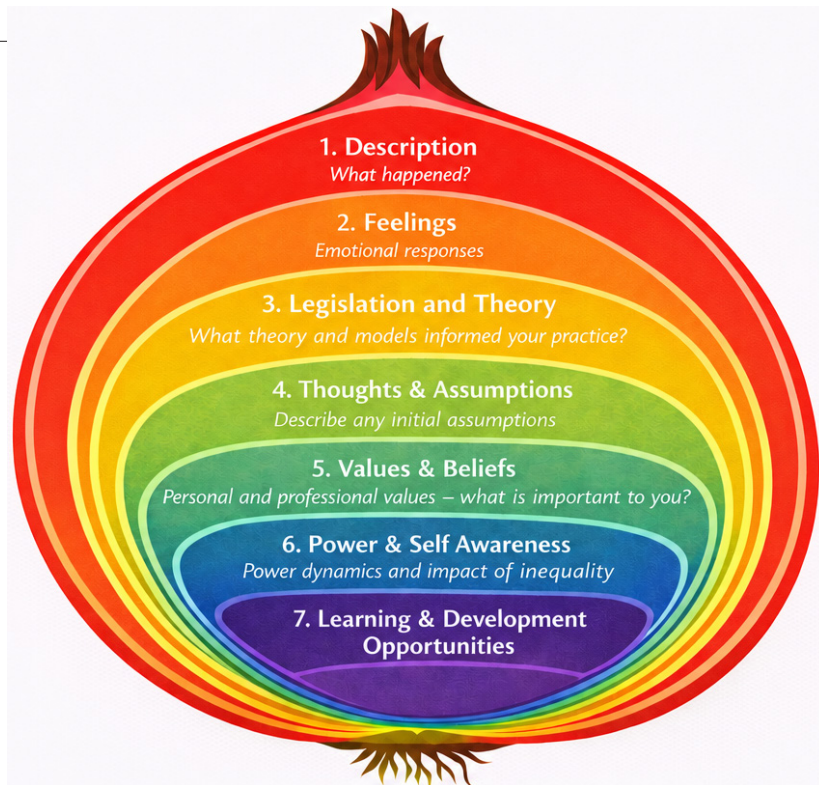
When considering how to support and facilitate the transition from surface level descriptive reflection to deeper critical analysis, the author of this paper has imagined the layers of an onion. Exploring this using the existing Onion Model of Reflection (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005) influenced the author to adapt the model to explicitly align with critical reflection in social work. The Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) Onion Model of Reflection was designed as a model to assist teachers in their reflection and professional development. The original model has been utilised by some within social

work reflection, and Maclean (2016) has assisted this application within her reflection resources. The author felt, however, that as the original model was created for use within education, its limitations were that it doesn't prompt some of the key concepts of social work reflection such as power, assumptions, bias, inequality, self-awareness and the use of legislation and theory.

The adapted model comprises of 7 layers which the author believes encourages the reader to explore any given situation or practice experience on a deeper level. The model is presented visually by an onion diagram. Fleming (1992) developed the VARK model which provides categories for preferred ways of learning and processing information into visual, auditory, read/write, and kinaesthetic. The onion graphic has been designed to support the reflection of those with a preference to visual aids and resources. The ability for this reflective model to be used within reflective discussions will benefit individuals with an auditory learning preference by facilitating verbal exploration. Furthermore, the accompanying crib sheet (see Appendix) will support those who learn best through provision of written information and guidance. As a practical tool it will assist kinaesthetic learners who learn best through engagement with tasks.

The graphic clearly demonstrates the intention of the model in exploring critical reflection as a layered approach. The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) can be used either as a stand-alone reflective framework, supported by the accompanying crib sheet, or alongside established reflective models. In the latter case, the onion acts as a prompt to encourage deeper critical reflection and exploration of underlying thoughts, assumptions, and learning. The 7 layers will be discussed below:

1. Description
2. Feelings
3. Legislation and Theory
4. Thoughts and assumptions
5. Values and Beliefs
6. Power and Self Awareness
7. Learning and development opportunities



From surface reflection to deeper and critical analysis. Adapted from Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) Adapted by Clare Wilding using Chat GPT

Description

This layer encourages reviewing an experience and considering *what* happened. There is value in reflecting on what happened, our role, the outcomes achieved, and the strengths and weaknesses of the situation. Whilst this level of reflection is descriptive rather than analytical, it provides the basis for exploring a situation on a deeper level. Influence was sought from the existing reflective models of Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984) which both request a factual outline of what has happened at the start of reflection. Kolb's model is based on experiential learning, and the first stage requires a concrete experience with the second stage focusing on a descriptive reflection of this experience. Being able to view and describe a situation/experience without immediate judgement and based on facts helps to provide an objective description. It must be noted that this can never be without bias as it still relies on a person's own interpretation of what has happened.

Feelings

Due to the potential of moral injury and the emotionally demanding work of social work, this model prompts reflection on feelings. This includes feelings before, during and after an experience. It encourages consideration of the feelings of others involved, what triggered any identified feelings and how these feelings were managed. The author has sought influence from existing reflective models that promote and encourage reflection on feelings. Gibbs (1988) places a focus on feelings in the second stage of his reflective cycle. Additionally, The Weather Model of Reflection (Maclean, 2016) aligns with the concept of the changeable nature of both the weather and emotions. The Weather Model encourages emotional awareness and therefore could be used when exploring this layer of the Reflective Onion (Wilding 2026).

Legislation and Theory

This layer encourages reflection on the relevant legislation and theory that underpins the actions and role of the social worker in any situation. It requests consideration of the legal basis of the reflector's role and actions, including utilisation of relevant case law. This layer prompts reflection on what theory has informed actions or decisions. This layer of the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) can be particularly valuable for reflecting-for-action as described by Donald Schön (1983). It can be used to help a social worker plan future action by understanding the legal basis of their involvement and identifying theoretical perspectives that can guide decision-making. It can help a social worker understand a person's situation through exploring theory to inform (Collingwood, 2008). Utilising the Collingwood Theory Circle Tool (Collingwood, 2008) can be helpful within this layer and can be used at any point in a social workers involvement with a person. This author has included a specific layer for legislation and theory, to highlight the importance of social work practice being grounded in legal knowledge and theory. Often consideration of theory can appear daunting to social workers and understanding theory within practice can be an area of challenge. For this reason, the accompanying crib sheet for the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) aims to support the natural integration of theory into reflective practice and strengthen evidence-informed decision-making. It achieves this through suggestions around social work models and theories that can be considered within each of the layers.

Thoughts and assumptions

This layer requests recognition of any initial thoughts and assumptions present before or during an experience. It prompts consideration of any assumptions other people may have made and how any assumptions were challenged or resolved. Within this layer, the model encourages consideration of how any previous experiences may be influencing the view of the current situation. The aim of this layer is to encourage conversation and thought around unconscious bias. It also encourages exploration of the assumptions that can be made by others, including assumptions around the social work role and the perceived power social workers hold. Influence for this layer was gained from Wonnacott's discrepancy matrix (Wonnacott, 2014), which the author has used within individual and group supervision. It is a useful tool to use to breakdown what we know about a situation or person we are working with. The purpose being to identify what we know to be factual, what may be ambiguous and explore any assumptions. It helps to identify gaps in information and helps to ensure decisions we are making are evidence based and not formed from assumptions. The author of this paper deliberately included a prompt for social workers to consider assumptions to promote professional curiosity. Through questioning what they think they know, social workers will be better placed to avoid bias and preconceived judgements within decision making. The author also proposes that Social GRACES (Burnham, 1992) is a useful framework to use to challenge assumptions we can make based on a person's social identity. Our own identity (class, education, ability, culture) forms a lens through which we view the world. Using this framework can expose bias and reduce the risk of making quick judgements about someone by encouraging professional curiosity.

Values and beliefs

This layer highlights the need to explore personal and professional values, along with the values of others. It encourages exploration of any conflicting values to ensure they do not influence judgement and decision making within social work practice. Along with the prompting questions within the crib sheet, the author also proposes use of the Values Daisy (Maclean, 2016) to explore personal, professional, societal and organisational values. As Fenge and Lee (2020, p6) highlight when discussing values and bias within mental capacity decision-making, "the lens we use to view the world creates the field of vision we see". Exploring our values builds self-awareness

and examining how they could influence our judgement helps to challenge unconscious bias. Kahneman et al (1982) identify several cognitive bias's including confirmation bias, availability bias and hindsight bias. Ethical dilemmas arise for social workers when there is a difficulty in balancing competing values. Critical reflection must include analysis of what informs our views, judgements and decision making. Our values and beliefs are integral in the decisions we make within our personal lives and therefore it is essential that they are explored when reflecting on our decision making within social work practice.

Power and self-awareness

The author of this model highlights the crucial need to explore power from a holistic perspective. The power inherent in the social work role is intrinsic within all areas of social work practice. Identifying the presence of power can be an area that social workers struggle to identify. Awareness of inequality, power imbalance and the unequal distribution of privilege is essential for social workers. It is only with this understanding, that social workers can practice in an anti-oppressive way that focuses on empowerment and strengths-based approaches. This layer of the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) prompts the use of social work models and theories that help to explore power. French and Raven's (1959) Bases of Power and the Starhawk (1987) 4-part framework of power can be used to explore what power looks like in the social work role and where this power originates. Utilising Social GRACES (Burnham, 1992) can provide a base to explore differences in identity, power and inequality. It can help to reflect on privilege, oppression and systemic biases. The accompanying crib sheet for the Reflective Onion (2026) prompts social workers to consider the power they hold in their role as well as the power they are perceived to have. It prompts exploration of the inequalities facing the individual's we work with and how, as a social worker, they could help to reduce the power imbalance and inequality through their role. It encourages self-awareness through prompting social workers to think about their own social identity and the impact that may have in their social work practice.

Learning and development opportunities

As with many reflective tools, the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) encourages reflection on what has been learnt through the process of critically analysing practice. It prompts consideration of any gaps in knowledge, experience or skills. This layer acts as a conclusion and an

opportunity to summarise the learning from the critical reflection. The aim is to identify development opportunities or an action plan to move forward. This could feed into a professional development review or assist in identifying training opportunities. It could contribute to an understanding of how to move forward with a particular piece of work through increased understanding of the dynamics and challenges. This part of the reflection process should not be neglected, as one of the key purposes of reflection is to support learning. Lawson (2018, p41) highlights that the learning gained through critical reflection must then be “translated into action”. This supports Kolb’s reflective cycle and the active experimentation stage. It can be a good opportunity for social workers to think about what they may do differently next time or equally what they would do again.

It is worth noting at this point that the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) aligns well with the current Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) domains. The British Association of Social Workers [BASW], (2026) set out the Professional Capabilities Framework as a framework for social work practice and learning in England. There are nine domains and it supports social workers to meet the requirement of the professional regulator. The PCF has been the framework for social work in England since 2012 and since this time has underpinned our continuous professional development. At the time of this article, the PCF continues to guide social workers through the different stages of their career. This model provides valuable opportunity for students, newly qualified social workers, practice educators, ASYE assessors, and experienced practitioners, to apply the PCF domains within each layer of the Reflective Onion (2026). For example, if exploring values and beliefs within layer 5, this would align with the PCF Values and Ethics. If exploring legislation and theory, this would align well with knowledge, critical reflection, and skills and interventions within the PCF.

Contexts for using the Reflective Onion

The intention of The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) was for it to support and guide critical reflection of a range of circumstances and experiences. This reflective model can be used in individual reflection, 1:1 supervision and within group supervision. This author wishes to describe how the model can be used within each of these scenarios.

Individual reflection

Students and newly qualified social workers are frequently required to critically reflect on their experiences within academic assignments, presentations and within their portfolio's. Critical reflection is an important aspect of Continuous Professional Development and is required for the renewal of social work registration. The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) can be utilised as a framework to ensure individuals are moving beyond the descriptive reflection. The accompanying crib sheet supports this process by providing reflective questions designed to prompt critical exploration within each layer of the Onion. In addition, it provides suggestions for relevant social work models and theories that can assist in analysing practice experiences. The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) could be used in its entirety to aid completion of a reflective assignment. Alternatively, it can be used as a component model with individuals selecting the most relevant layer or layers according to the nature of the situation being explored. This flexibility enables the model to be adapted to a range of learning and practice contexts.

1:1 supervision

The author has used this adapted model within one-to-one supervision sessions with newly qualified social workers undertaking their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) in England. At the start of supervision, social workers are invited to bring a situation or experience that they wish to reflect upon. The description layer of the Reflective Onion is then used to explain the situation. Some social workers prefer to use established reflective models, such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) or Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984). In these instances, the author has incorporated the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) during the analysis or abstract conceptualisation stage of the reflection. Social workers are encouraged to identify which layer or layers of the Onion they feel are most relevant to the situation.

From this point, the supervisor facilitates critical reflection using the accompanying crib sheet, supporting deeper exploration of the selected layer(s). In some supervision sessions, the entire discussion has focused on a single layer, for example, power or self-awareness, where these have emerged as the predominant themes. The author intends for the model to remain flexible and adaptable to the needs of individual practitioners and supervisory contexts. Its primary purpose is to promote, support, and deepen critical reflection, providing social workers and supervisors with a

visual framework to explore and critically analyse practice situations from different perspectives.

Group supervision

The author has used The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) within a group supervision session involving 8 social workers. The session commenced with discussion exploring the questions ‘What is reflection?’ and ‘What is critical reflection?’ The group then considered why social workers need to critically reflect. This provoked a meaningful discussion to form the foundation of the reflective session. Following this, the Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) was introduced, with the layers explained and a crib sheet provided to each social worker. The social workers then worked in pairs, with one individual adopting the role of facilitator while the other reflected on a piece of work, practice experience, or situation of their choosing. Approximately 20-30 minutes was allocated to enable the facilitator to support and guide their peer through a critical reflection. The author moved round the group to support the discussions. In many of the pairs, the facilitator made notes on behalf of their peer to document key aspects of their reflections for later consideration. Following the paired activity, the group reconvened to share their experiences and discuss key learning points that had emerged from the reflective process. The pairs then swapped roles to ensure they both had the opportunity to engage in facilitating and reflecting. Feedback from this group session was positive, with social workers reporting:

‘The reflective exercise was interactive, supportive and engaging’.

‘The Reflective Onion supported me to reflect by breaking down my experiences in layers... to zoom in on every aspect and gain a deeper understanding of my practice’.

‘The model supported me to better understand how my thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and values influenced my practice. It highlighted the importance of balancing both emotional and practical aspects of care’.

‘This reflection has strengthened my awareness of how internal responses impact practice and improved my ability to provide holistic support. Going forward, I will ensure I create space for emotional expression alongside practical interventions and continue to use supervision to challenge my practice and assumptions as part

of my ASYE development’.

‘The crib sheet is useful for taking reflection from a place of what worked well and what didn’t, to thinking more critically. The prompts to consider legislation and theory encourage thinking about the ‘why’ and has empowered me in my practice.’

‘The visual layout of the tool is beneficial to me and as each point leads onto the next, I feel it flows well making reflection effective and meaningful without feeling like an academic exercise.’

‘The Reflective Onion has helped me to think more critically about my decision-making by breaking down my experiences in a structured way. It encourages me to analysis deeper rather than just describing events. The model has supported me to move beyond surface-level reflection and consider the impact of my actions on outcomes for service users. A limitation is that it can feel quite structured and less flexible in fast-paced settings.’

Conclusion

This paper set out to introduce The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) which was developed in response to the need for approaches that explicitly support the transition from reflection to critical reflection. This paper acknowledges and recognises the strength and popularity of existing reflective models whilst also highlighting their limitations in relation to critical reflection. The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) draws upon aspects of these established reflective frameworks, whilst incorporating concepts central to social work practice. These concepts form the layers of the onion and encourage practitioners to explore practice experiences through the multiple interconnected layers. The model aims to promote deeper critical analysis, challenge unconscious bias, and strengthen evidence-informed decision making. This paper aimed to provide practical suggestions of how this model can be used to aid critical reflection across a range of contexts, including individual reflection, supervision, practice education, and group supervision. Its alignment with the Professional Capabilities Framework further supports its application throughout all stages of a social worker’s professional journey. The limitations of this model are that it remains in its

infancy. This author plans to review and reflect on its value and effectiveness in supporting critical reflection over time.

Whilst critical reflection aids learning and professional development, it also provides the foundation upon which anti-oppressive, person-centred, and strengths-based practice is built. Critical examination of power, values, assumptions, and social inequalities provides the forum for social workers to develop self-awareness, challenge discrimination and bias, and ensure that individuals remain at the centre of decision-making processes. As social workers continue to navigate increasing demand and reducing resources, there is a need for frameworks that make critical reflection accessible and valuable. The Reflective Onion (Wilding, 2026) supports this process by providing an approach to critical analysis that can be readily integrated into everyday practice, supervision, and professional development.

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Appendix

Reflective Social Work Tool *Crib Sheet for Practice & Supervision*

Layer 1 – Description

Describe the situation

- What is your role & purpose of your input?
- What was the outcome?
- What went well?
- What didn't go well?
- What are the next steps?

You could Use: **Gibbs Reflective Cycle** or **What, So What, Now What** or **SHARE**

Layer 2 – Feelings

Feelings before, during and after

- How do you think others' felt and what indicated this?
- What triggered these feelings?
- Have you felt this way before? Consider the impact of previous experiences
- How did you manage these feelings?

You could use: **Siobhan McLean Weather Model, Head / Heart / Hands, Object reflection (link feeling to an object)**

Layer 3 – Legislation & Theory

Relevant legislation – be specific and consider the legal basis for your role/actions.

- What relevant law/case law did you refer to?
- What theories/models have you used?
- How does theory explain the situation?
- How has this informed your actions/decisions?

Consider using the **Theory Circle Tool**

Layer 4 – Thoughts & Assumptions

What thoughts did you have prior and during the situation?

- Reflect on any assumptions you may have had
- Were any assumptions made by others?
- Do you feel any assumptions were made about your role?
- How were any assumptions challenged/resolved?

Consider using **Wonnacott's discrepancy matrix** or **Social GRRRAACCCEEESSS**

Layer 5 – Values & Beliefs

Your personal values – what is important you?

- Your professional values – what values underpin your role as a social worker?
- Think about the values of others related to this reflection
- Do all these values align? Is there any conflict?
- How you have you ensured any differences in values have not created bias.

Consider using **Social GRRRAACCCEEESSS** and the **Values 'Daisy'**.

Layer 6 – Power, Inequality & Self-Awareness

Consider the power you hold in your role:

- What power are you perceived to have?
- How did you, or could you, address power imbalance?
- Explore any inequalities faced by the person you are working with:
- How can you help in addressing inequality:
- Think about social identity (yours & theirs):

Impact of identity (positive/negative):

Consider how understanding the presence of power and inequality impacts on the approaches you take and decisions you make.

French and Ravens Bases of Social Power – explores different types of power; Siobhan McLean's **BIG 6**; **Social GRRRAACCCEEESSS**; **Critical race theory**; **Conflict theory**

Layer 7 – Learning & Development

- Are there any gaps in your knowledge?
 - Skills to develop:
 - Actions (training, reading, supervision):
-