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Ethical Use of Power and Authority in Social Work

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Housekeeping

- Use the chat function for comments and questions
- Stay engaged in the session – so silence mobiles and 'pop up' emails etc
- The slides will be sent out to all delegates



By the end of the course, delegates will:

- Have considered the types of power and authority they have in their role and how to use these in an ethical way
- Have an overview of the key theories and research in relation to this area
- Have considered the core ethical issues and principles in social work



Programme

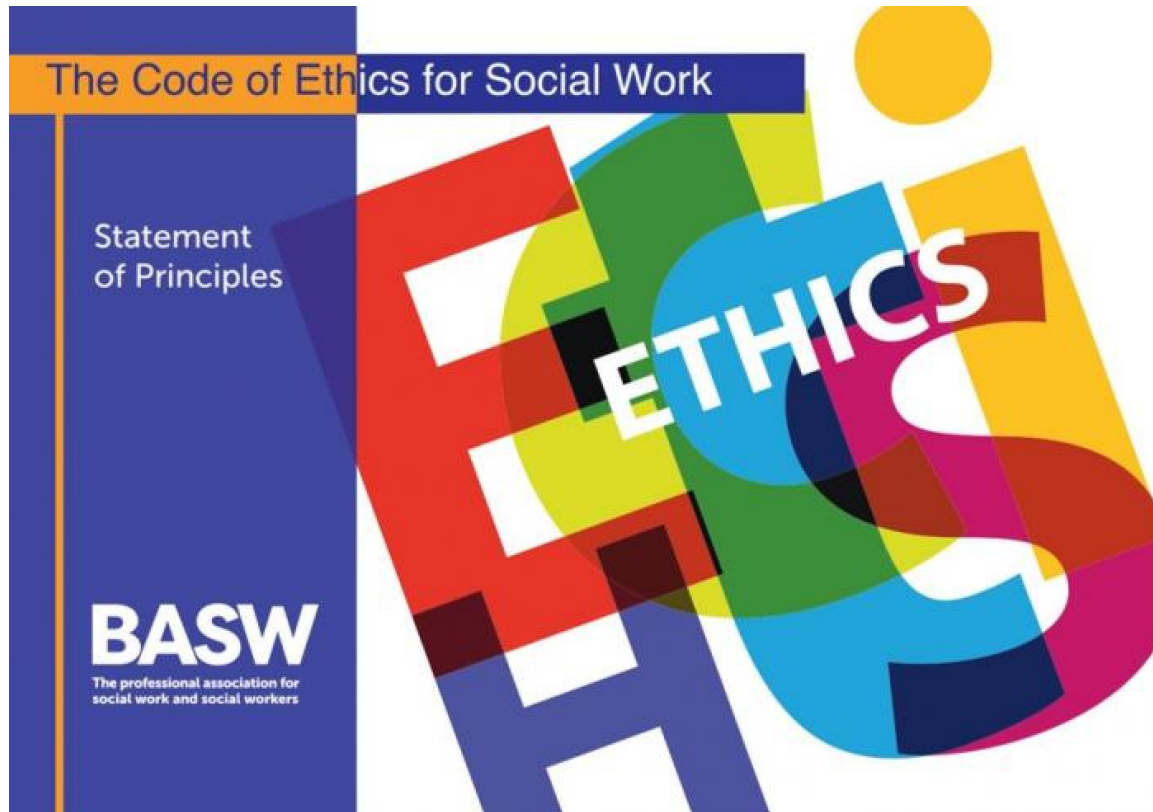
- Setting scene, sources of power
- Standards and examples
- Practical ways to address power and authority
- Deeper dive into social work ethics and values
- Direct links with discrimination and oppression
- Ethical dilemmas and moral injury
- Good practice checklist and resources
- Questions/comments
- Close





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Setting the scene and sources of power



Social workers should use the authority of their role in a **responsible, accountable and respectful manner**. They should **exercise authority appropriately** to safeguard and protect people with whom they work and to ensure people have as much control over their lives as is consistent with their own rights and the rights of others.

BASW Guidance on practicing ethically as a social worker, The Code of Ethics for Social Work

Key legislation includes...



- Mental Health Act 2007
- Care Act 2014
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Mental Capacity Act 2005
- Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards 2015
- Equalities Act 2010



What power and authority do you have in your role
(e.g. key decisions, areas of practice)?

Consider how being a NQSW impacts on this power and authority

Power and authority in social work

Power given to social workers by legislation

Assessing eligibility for services

Different levels of power in different situations

Advocating on behalf of a client in relation to services e.g. providing your professional opinion with colleagues, manager etc

Writing assessments, reports (e.g. for court), support plans, reviews

Putting in place packages of support and care

Moving into new roles (social work apprentice, NQSW) and how that changes your professional identity and decision making

There is a need to assert professional opinion in a MDT situation – perception and confidence in this will depend on your role currently (e.g. student, NQSW)

Sources of power in social work

Hassenfeld (1987) applied some of these theories to social work practice and identified four sources of power that social workers have and should remain alert to in their use.

- **Power of expertise** – professional power acquired through professional training, continued development and specialised knowledge
- **Referent power** – individuals defer to a particular social worker because of the strength of their personality or because they have very specialised knowledge in a particular area
- **Legitimate power** – social workers are mandated through legislation, policy, agency duties or organisational procedures to take particular decisions and actions
- **Power of resources** – social workers have a gatekeeping role and they decide who is eligible to receive services.

Within this range of power types, the impact of prejudice and discrimination is potentially far reaching. As such it is important that you act both with professional integrity and in accordance with professional values and ethics.



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Standards and examples

As a social worker, I will:

1.7 Recognise and **use responsibly**, the power and authority I have when working with people, ensuring that my interventions are always **necessary**, the **least intrusive, proportionate**, and in people's **best interests**.

3.1 Work within **legal and ethical frameworks**, using my professional authority and judgement **appropriately**.

3.5 Hold **different explanations** in mind and **use evidence** to inform my decisions.

3.6 Draw on the **knowledge and skills** of workers from my own and other professions and work in **collaboration**, particularly in integrated teams, **holding onto and promoting** my social work identity.

BASW - Using authority in accordance with human rights principles

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PCF 7 – Intervention and Skills

Use judgement, knowledge and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support, prevent harm and enable progress

Social workers **engage** with individuals, families, and communities, working **alongside** people to determine their **needs and wishes**, and what **action** may be helpful.

We build **productive working relationships** and **communicate effectively**.

Using our **professional judgement**, we employ **appropriate interventions**, promoting **self-determination, support, protection and positive change**.

We develop and maintain **skills** relevant to our roles.

We understand and take account of **power differentials** and use our **authority appropriately**.

We **evaluate** our own practice and its impact, and how we **improve outcomes** for those we work with.

Statement 10 – Professional ethics and leadership (extract)

Social workers should be able to demonstrate the principles of social work through professional judgement, decision making and actions within a framework of professional accountability.

They should be able to work collaboratively to manage effectively the sometimes competing interests of service users, their families and their carers ensuring that the needs of all parties are appropriately balanced, but that where children are involved, the children's interests are always paramount.

They should be able to acknowledge the inherent tensions where there is a dual role of care and control; be able to meet eligible needs within limited resources and manage the emotions and expectations of service users and carers.



Knowledge and skills statement (KSS) for child and family practitioners

Statement 8 – The law and the family and youth justice systems

- Navigate the family and youth justice systems in England using legal powers and duties to support families, to protect children and to look after children in the public care system, including the regulatory frameworks that support the full range of permanence options.
- Participate in decisions about whether to make an application to the family court, the order to be applied for, and the preparation and presentation of evidence.
- Seek advice and second opinion as required in relation to the wide range of legal issues which frequently face children and families involved with statutory services including immigration, housing, welfare benefits, mental health and learning disability assessment, education and support for children with learning difficulties.
- Use the law, regulatory and statutory guidance to inform practice decisions.
- Take into account the complex relationship between professional ethics, the application of the law and the impact of social policy on both.

Example: Types of power (taken from BASW resources)

- Katy is 23 months old. She was taken into local authority care when she was two months old and has been living with a foster family.
- Her mother regularly uses drugs and alcohol and has been told that she is not able to prioritise Katy's needs.
- She has been allowed limited supervised contact with Katy while she has been in care as she has been contesting the care order and children's social care have been looking into other options.
- Contact with Katy's birth mother has now stopped as a placement order has been made and Katy is in the process of getting to know her intended adoptive parents and will shortly be permanently living with them.
- The foster mother contacts the office upset that the adoptive mother has been calling Katy by a completely different name while she takes her out on visits and has made it clear that she will not be calling her Katy once she is living in their home.
- **Who has power in this situation and what types of power are they?**
- **What assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes are likely to impact on this situation?**
- **What type of power would you as a social worker have in this situation?**



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Practical ways to address power and authority

How can we ensure we use power and authority ethically and responsibly ?

Be **transparent and open** about what we can and can't provide support with

Treat people as we want to be treated, have **respect** for the people we work with and make them feel **valued**

Be **professional**

Give as much **information and advice** as possible (information and knowledge is power)

Share knowledge and information with colleagues

Use a **strengths based approach** – support people to come up with their own solutions

Be **empowering** and **encourage resilience**

Use of **advocacy**

Connect people with their local communities and networks

Use **statutory services and legislation properly** and always in the **best interests** of someone

Share the responsibility with service users of meeting their **goals**

Use supervision **appropriately** and as a **shared space**

Be **open minded** and **establish a relationship** with the service user

Power and authority in organisations / teams

- Inclusion in training and interview panels of people with lived experience talking about how they want to be treated / supported by social workers
- Space for critical reflection – consideration of power and unequal relationships we operate in, impact of inequality on our work
- Consideration and awareness of own values and ethics and the impact this has on the use of power and authority
- Anti-oppressive practice, especially in relation to mental health and safeguarding
- Focus on Trauma Informed Practice and Unconscious Bias



What practical ways can we address power and authority in social work?

Practical ways to address power and authority in social work

Listening Circles – giving people a chance to say what they are thinking and feeling

Practitioner forums

Critical reflection

Group supervision

Team meetings

1:1 supervision (discussions and also shared agenda / responsibility)

Training and development

Family Group Conferencing

Person-centred practice

Strengths Based Approach

Independent advocacy

Making Safeguarding Personal

Motivational Practice



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Deeper dive into social work ethics and values

Working definitions of ethics and professional ethics (BASW)

- Broadly speaking, 'ethics' is about matters of right and wrong conduct, good and bad qualities of character and responsibilities attached to relationships. Although the subject matter of ethics is often said to be human welfare, the bigger picture also includes the flourishing of animals and the whole ecosystem.
- The term 'ethics' may be used in a singular sense to refer to the study of right and wrong norms of behaviour, good and bad qualities of character; or in a plural sense, to refer to the actual norms and qualities.
- Professional ethics concerns matters of right and wrong conduct, good and bad qualities of character and the professional responsibilities attached to relationships in a work context.



DEFINITIONS



- In everyday usage, 'values' is often used to refer to one or all of religious, moral, cultural, political or ideological beliefs, principles, attitudes, opinions or preferences.
- In social work, 'values' can be regarded as particular types of beliefs that people hold about what is regarded as worthy or valuable.
- In the context of professional practice, the use of the term 'belief' reflects the status that values have as stronger than mere opinions or preferences.
- The term 'social work values' refers to a range of beliefs about what is regarded as worthy or valuable in a social work context (general beliefs about the nature of the good society, general principles about how to achieve this through actions, and the desirable qualities or character traits of professional practitioners).



Human Rights

- Upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being
- Respecting the right to self-determination
- Promoting the right to participation
- Working holistically
- Identifying and developing strengths

Social Justice

- Challenging oppression
- Respecting diversity
- Distributing resources
- Challenging unjust policies and practices
- Working in solidarity



Professional integrity

- Upholding the values and reputation of the profession
- Being trustworthy
- Maintaining professional boundaries
- Making considered professional judgements
- Being transparent and professionally accountable



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Direct links with discrimination and oppression

Defining prejudice and discrimination

Prejudice: an attitude or belief (what you think)

A learned attitude towards an individual or group based upon stereotypes and grounded on emotion rather than reason (can be positive but usually used in the negative)

Discrimination: An action (what you do)

Unequal treatment of individual(s) or group(s) on the basis of real, or assumed, characteristics

Payne (2005) defined discrimination as a `...means of identifying individuals and groups with certain characteristics and treating them less well than people or groups with conventionally valued characteristics`.

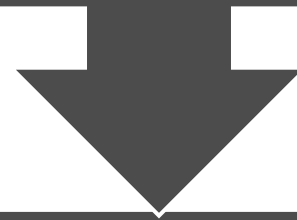


Defining anti-discriminatory practice (ADP)

- Anti-discriminatory practice is at the core of social work values. It is an approach that seeks to reduce, undermine or eliminate discrimination and oppression and remove the barriers that prevent people from accessing services.
- Discrimination can be overt (in the open) or covert (hidden).
- Overt discrimination is usually more obvious and hence easier to identify; an example would be that a woman is told her career progression will be limited because she has taken a career break to have a child.
- Covert discrimination is far more subtle and may involve deliberate acts that are hidden from view but result in less favourable treatment. This type of discrimination is often more difficult to identify and challenge; for example the same woman's career progression is limited but the reason given to her is that other colleagues were performing better, but the period used to assess performance is the same period as her career break.
- The first example is likely to be received as offensive and discriminatory – it is clear what needs to be challenged.
- With covert discrimination, it is likely that a whole range of justifications is involved, which would need to be unpicked to be able to challenge the discrimination effectively
- By recognising that discrimination exists, in many different forms, it becomes possible to challenge it when it does occur. Social workers are expected, both as part of their professional codes of ethics and as part of their professional capabilities, to apply anti-discriminatory principles to all elements of their professional practice.

Defining oppression

'...the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution. Typically, a government or political organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups. The oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by the individual or group who has more power' (*Barker, 2003*)



The source of oppression can be either structural (e.g. arising as a result of the way systems and processes operate) or individual (e.g. arising as a result of an individual's prejudice or action).

Defining anti-oppressive practice (AOP)

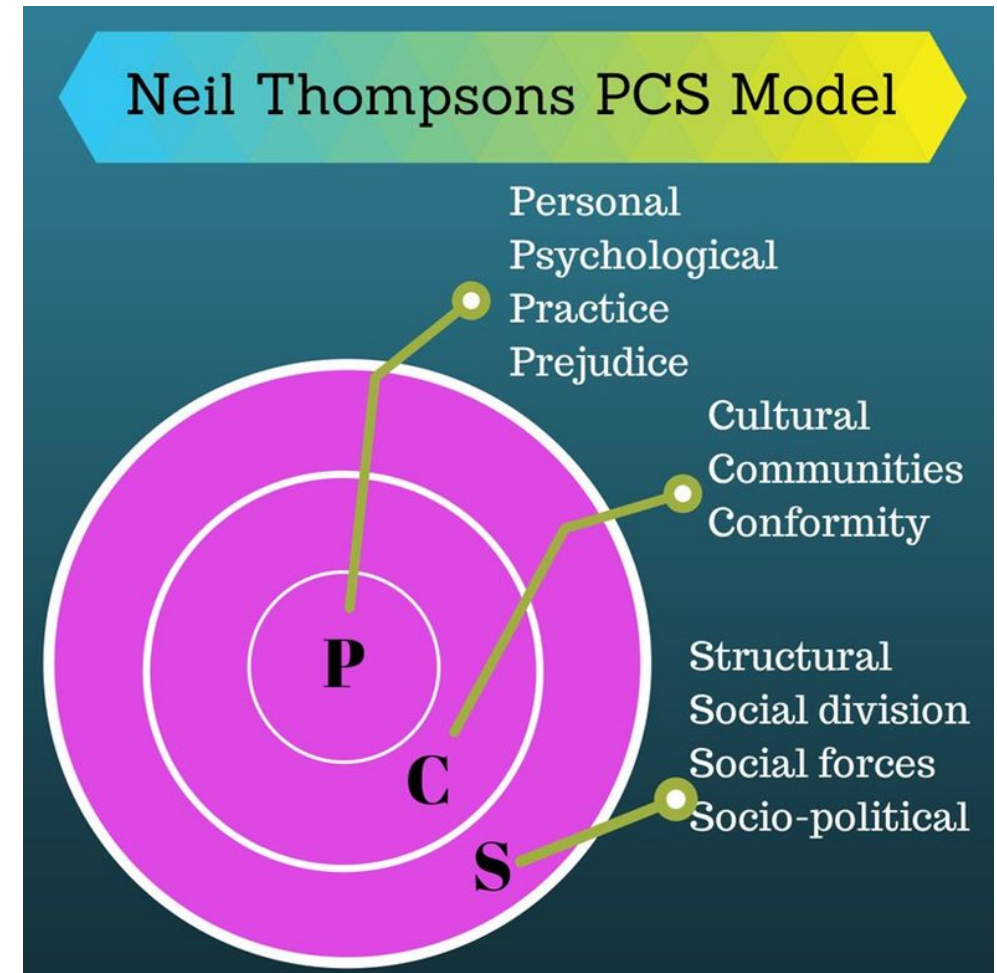
Anti-oppressive approaches are concerned with the implementation of social justice. They aim to challenge the structure of society, and the use of power, where they are being used to maintain some groups in disadvantaged positions. This is rooted in the notions of improving the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities and the intrinsic value of a diverse society.



Concepts of power, and how groups use power to achieve their mutual aims, underpin the ideas of oppression and anti-oppressive practice seeks to redistribute power by challenging structures and championing rights.

The Personal, Cultural, and Structural Analysis (PCS) Model

- This model by Neil Thompson explains how power relationships are expressed between individuals, groups, and in the wider society
- The application of the PCS model to a particular social setting will help in understanding how personal beliefs, cultural norms, and structural institutions can lead to the oppression of people in societies.
- He described how oppression and discrimination operate at three different levels,
 - ❖ the personal or psychological level,
 - ❖ the cultural level and
 - ❖ the structural level.
- Each of them interact and influence the other to maintain power relationships.



P - Personal and Psychological Level

- This level is concerned with individual views and opinions.
- It refers to the way in which thoughts and emotions can have an impact on the inequality and oppression that are prevalent in societies.
- At this level, individuals form and express their beliefs and values based on their interaction with others.
- For example, at the personal level, people might express prejudice against a person or a group of persons. Ideals that are developed by people like patriotism or commitment to the family are mainly based on personal experiences.

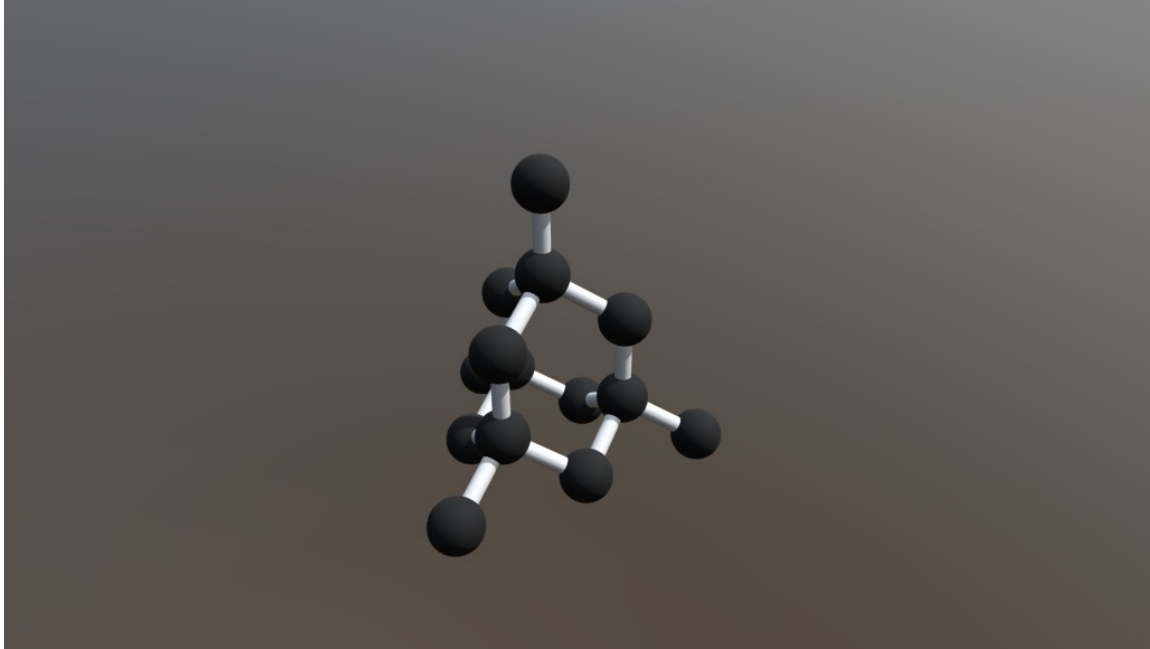


C - Cultural Level

- At this level, the social norms of people are created through a consensus and conformity with the views and opinions of others.
- Shared beliefs regarding what is considered acceptable and what is good or bad can create a consensus with other members of the society.
- The cultural level explains why stereotypes are born, etiquette norms are expressed relying on social expectations, and personal beliefs are reinforced.
- The cultural level also recognises that personal beliefs and values are mere social patterns that are shared and reinforced by some influence groups.



S - Structural Level



- The structural level is the final level at which prejudice and oppression are firmly embedded into the fabric of the society.
- This level deals with the influences of multiple social, economic, and political factors that constantly interact with a person and with each other.
- Structural institutions support personal beliefs developed by a person as well as cultural norms reinforced by groups.
- Specific institutions that can cement the beliefs of people include media, religious organisations, and even the government.



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Ethical dilemmas and moral injury

Ethical issues / dilemmas in social work



- Use of resources
- Eligibility for services
- Self-funding / charging
- Positive risk-taking vs safeguarding responsibilities
- Trying to work with people who won't engage
- Coping with abusive clients (when can we draw the line?)
- Self-determination vs safety
- Equity vs personalisation

Moral Injury

Moral injury is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct

People who develop moral injuries are likely to experience negative thoughts about themselves or others and feelings of shame, guilt or disgust are common (Greenberg et al 2020).

The following factors might mitigate the potential for 'injury':

- Team working and a strong community of practice
- A strong reflective culture
- Good quality emotionally supportive, reflective supervision
- In depth reflection with a particular focus on feelings and emotions
- 'Education' about the potential of moral injury and permission to talk about and explore the depth of the injury with colleagues
- Clear recognition of the importance of your work and value being placed upon this



Moral Injury resources

- [The History of Moral Injury](#) – Video, 4.30
- [Siobhan Maclean Moral Injury and Covid 19](#)
- [Moral Injury in Social Work - Social Work Today article](#)



Good practice checklist to take away

You have **knowledge** of the legal framework underpinning equalities and in relation to the area you are practising in e.g. Children Act 1989, Children and Adoption Act 2002.

You have an **awareness** of your **personal values** and how they **impact on practice**.

You are **self-aware and reflective**, taking a **critical approach** to your own decision making and **open to challenge**.

You are able to **examine and question sources of your own power** and the ways in which you exercise it in your practice with children and families.

You are able to **own up to, and learn from**, your mistakes.

You practise, and continue to develop, the **capabilities** (e.g. communication, partnership working etc.) expected of a professional social worker.

You **research areas** you are not familiar with and **reflect** on how what you learn is applied to your practice



- Power and Authority in Social Work Practice: Some Ethical Issues – Richard Hugman
- Power, Authority and Responsibility in Social Services – Malcolm Payne
- Anti-Discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice – Neil Thompson
- Values and Ethics in Social Work – Beckett, Maynard and Jordan
- Social Problems and Social Justice – Neil Thompson
- [BASW Code of Ethics](#)
- [Siobhan Maclean Moral Injury and Covid 19](#)
- [BASW Module Equality and Diversity](#)
- [Rethinking Rights, Responsibilities and Risks - Ethical Challenges for UK Social Workers during Covid-19](#) – Nikki Rutter and Sarah Banks

