



Social Work PhD programme

Open Seminars
Fall Semester 2026-2027

Hes·so
Haute Ecole Spécialisée
de Suisse occidentale

n|w Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz
Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit
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General information

Audience

The ITTS *seminars* and *workshops* are each open to specific publics. If nothing else is mentioned, they are open to:

- Scientific collaborators in UAS/ HES/ FH Social work with a MA
- Registered PhD students (in Switzerland and abroad)
- Notified future PhD student of the ITTS

Registration procedure and fees

You may inform our administration service messagerie.itts@unine.ch, which seminar or workshop you would like to attend. Please respect the deadlines of the chosen seminar or workshop.

For *seminars*, additional steps are required (except from UniNE students):

- PhD students & students from universities in French-speaking Switzerland (UniGE, UniL, UniFR, UniBE) need to register via the mobility program of their home institution (BENEFRI, Triangle Azur). Their participation is free of charge. Please note that the registration deadlines via those programs may differ.
- PhD students & students from HES-SO & FHNW will need to fill in a document provided by messagerie.itts@unine.ch, and provide the required documents. Their participation is free of charge.
- All other participants and PhD students may enroll as auditor at the University of Neuchâtel. Fees will apply. More information on this page: <https://www.unine.ch/admission/auditrices-et-auditeurs/>

The *workshops* are free of charge.

ECTS and validation

UniNE, BENEFRI, Triangle Azur, HES-SO, and FHNW participants can earn ECTS upon validation of the seminars.

Auditor students will receive a certificate of attendance. They may choose to participate in the examinations and receive a certificate for a successful examination, but no ECTS.

For future PhD students at the ITTS, the successfully passed seminars can be validated as equivalences (up to 6 ECTS) once they have officially enrolled.

Practical information

Seminars and workshops are held in Neuchâtel and taught in English. Attendance is *in person* only.

For all other questions you may contact ophelie.bidet@unine.ch



Program of Fall Semester 2026-2027

Seminars	Dates	Page
Starting your PhD thesis	Friday 11 September (full day 9h15-17h15)	X
PhD colloquium	Friday 25 September (full day 9h15-17h15) Friday 29 January (full day 9h15-17h15)	X
Social Work Research Design: From Ideas to PhD Proposals	Thursday 1 October & Friday 2 October (full days 9h15-17h15), Thursday 19 November & Friday 20 December (full days 9h15-17h15)	4
Social Work Theories I	Thursday 22 October & Friday 23 October (full days 9h15-17h15), Thursday 3 December & Friday 4 December (full days 9h15-17h15)	7
Making Sense of Data: An Introduction to Quantitative Reasoning in Social Sciences	Friday 16 October (9h15-12h45) Friday 30 October (9h15-12h45) Friday 13 November (9h15-12h45) Friday 27 November (full day 9h15-17h15) Friday 11 December (full day 9h15-17h15)	10
Current Issues in Social Work: Digitalization, AI and Welfare	Thursday 17 September & Friday 18 September (full days, 9h15-17h15) Thursday 5 November & Friday 6 November (full days, 9h15-17h15)	12



Social Work Research Design: From Ideas to PhD Proposals (3 ECTS)

Teaching periods

- Thursday 01.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 02.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Thursday 19.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 20.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15

Venue

Rooms B29 (Thursdays) and C43 (Fridays) Av. du 1er-Mars 26, University of Neuchâtel

Teaching team

Lisa Marie Borrelli, Professor ITTS, UniNe

Swetha Rao Dhananka, Professor, HES-SO – Haute école de travail social Fribourg
 (swetha.raodhananka@hefr.ch)

S. Cotelli Kureth, Professor, UniNe (sara.cotelli@unine.ch)

Content of the lecture

How to elaborate a PhD project? This is the first key question of this class. How to grasp the gaps in the existing literature on a specific topic? How to consider social work practice relating to the PhD subject? How to formulate a research problem and research goals? Which methodology allows best to find answers to the research questions? How about different techniques for scientific work (e.g. literature review, using AI-tools)? What is specific for social work in terms of participation and research ethics? The seminar proposes inputs, application of different working tools, communities of practice, and presentation of PhD students and their PhD project. As much as possible PhD students should work and progress on their own project. The seminar is divided into the following parts:

L. M. Borrelli (1 October 2026): The specificity of social work research as an action science asks for a disciplinary bound reflection and it does entail theoretical, conceptual, empirical and professional orientation for the PhD project. As social work builds upon egalitarian collaboration with users and their perspectives, ethical questions of participation are key for research. The session will start with a general brainstorming and in-depth reflection on the “pieces” of a PhD research project (what makes up a research project, what aspects need to be there, how to implement them wisely?). The brainstorming will guide the following sessions and is used as a red thread to which the students can come back to in the years of their PhD.

L. M. Borrelli (2 October 2026, ½ day): The first half of the day will be dedicated to literature and its quality. Together with all the existing electronic means and programs, literature research becomes a highly complex and delicate issue. A (systematic) literature review and the state of the art for the PhD project are intrinsically connected with the formulation of the research questions and influence significantly the quality of the research design.



S. Rao Dhananka (2 October 2026 ½ day; 20 October 2026 ½ day):

Both sessions delve into the research design. Special attention is given to the question of internal cohesion, the research design. The aim of this part is to equip the PhD students with methodological knowledge, patterns of thought and concrete application to elaborate their own research design for their PhD study. Research design is the “glue” that holds the theoretical and empirical parts of the research together. It structures the research, builds its coherence and presents a roadmap for its execution. It is an arrangement of conditions that allows to control the variance and to conceive data collection and analysis in a manner that presents a logical basis for countless decisions with adequate feasibility and procedure.

L. M. Borrelli (19 November 2026): This day will be dedicated to theory, write, establishing your own contribution and your position in the field. We will discuss what is new in your work, why do we need it? Proposal needs to be motivated and show what the value of research is. We will also delve into questions of ethics and power dynamics.

S. Cotelli Kureth (20 October 2026, ½ day):

To close the module, this last half day deals with writing. For academic writing it is important to understand how generative AI tools work. If not used critically, AI tools can be detrimental to learning. In order to enhance critical thinking and analytical skills, it is crucial to be transparent about the strengths, purpose and limitations of AI. It does not replace human thinking but should not be banned. The goal is to develop a culture of trust and academic integrity.

Form of teaching

Presentations, discussions, groupwork, guided reflection to directly apply lessons to your own project

Form of evaluation

Within the module you will:

Submit 1-3 A4 pages until **15 December 2026**:

- graphically representing the (potential) research design
- situating the research question in a possible theoretical framework, or at least in a body of literature
- indicating the constants, the variables / the cases
- discussing the type of control and the comparative axis
- arguing the pertinence of the research design for the research question, based on the quality criteria
- discussing potential biases
- indicating potential data-gathering methods

You will further be asked to actively participate in the classes and work with your PhD project, preparing potential readings and contribute to exercises.

In case this course needs to be retaken, the submission (see above) will need to be redone, and an additional written assignment will be given (suited to the seminar), of about 5 pages. Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS.

Learning objectives

At the end of this seminar, the participants will be able to:

- Prepare comprehensive literature research
- Write a literature review
- Formulate research problems and questions
- Select an appropriate empirical field and research method aligned with the research question (initial)
- Use generative AI tools while adhering to academic integrity standards and ethical use.
- Develop a preliminary comprehensive research design for the PhD project

Transferable skills

At the end of this seminar, the participants will be able to:

- Integrate theoretical frameworks with empirical research design in a coherent manner.
- Choose an empirical field and research methods aligned with the research question

Pre-condition and registration

Registration as a PhD student at the ITTS, a Swiss university or as auditor in the perspective of being a future PhD student of the ITTS.

Registration at messagerie.itts@unine.ch until **23 September 2026**.

Documentation & literature

All the documentation will be available on Moodle.

Date	Topic
Thursday 01.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15 L. M. Borrelli	Social work research & literature research
Friday 02.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15 L. M. Borrelli / S. Rao Dhananka	Systematic literature review, tools for literature research Nexus literature review & problem formulation Research Design I
Thursday 19.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15 L. M. Borrelli	Ethics and Participation in social work research
Friday 20.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15 S. Rao Dhananka / S. Cotelli Kureth	Research design II AI tools for academic writing

Social Work Theories I (3 ECTS)

Subtitle: Anthropology of the State and its Role for Social Work

Teaching periods

- Thursday 22.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 23.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Thursday 03.12.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 04.12.2026; 09:15 – 17:15

Venue

Room B29, Av. du 1er-Mars 26, University of Neuchâtel.

Teaching team

Lisa Marie Borrelli, Professor ITTS, UniNE

Francesca Morra, PostDoctoral Researcher, HES-SO Valais-Wallis

Martina Ambruso, Doctoral Researcher, HES-SO Valais-Wallis

Course Content

This course introduces key approaches from the anthropology of the state and examines their relevance for social work theory, research, and practice. Drawing on classical and contemporary contributions by authors such as Max Weber, Philip Abrams, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Timothy Mitchell, Veena Das and Deborah Poole, as well as Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, participants will critically explore how the state is produced and experienced through bureaucracy, authority, governmentality, coercion, civil society, and everyday institutional practices. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which social work is embedded in these relations of power and participates in mediating encounters between individuals and state institutions.

The first two sessions introduce and critically discuss foundational theoretical perspectives on the state and their implications for understanding social work. The third session focuses on participants' PhD projects, using the course literature to reflect on their own research questions, theoretical positioning, and empirical material. The final session, organised by Francesca Morra and Martina Ambruso within the "Social Work as Police Work" research project, brings these debates into dialogue with concrete empirical cases, examining the intersections between social work, state authority, control, and professional practice.



Form of evaluation

The evaluation will take place within the course, via a threefold structure:

- 1) Questions and comments need to be sent BEFORE the class on the texts that are discussed in the respective session. For each reading there will be “discussants” attributed, who are supposed to be bring in a reflected view on the texts.
- 2) Written reflection of the discussed texts after each class (1/2 page per date) and its potential role for the PhD topic.
- 3) Presentations and practical exercises during the class (third session in particular)

Conditions/ format/ temporality of the retake exam: In case of a first failed attempt to pass the course the retake will include a presentation and a longer written assignment that builds on the presentation (5 pages). Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this seminar, the participants will be able to:

- Analyse critically foundational texts in social work/sociological/anthropological theory
- Explain the development of anthropological state theory an international and comparative perspective
- Present the relation between this classic literature and social work theory
- Present various schools of thought in the discussed field
- Discuss the relevance of theoretical approaches and concepts to professional practice

Transferable skills

At the end of this seminar, the participants will be able to:

- Integrate the societal context in theory development
- Discuss the relevance of a theoretical approach for a specific research question
- Apply the concept of situated knowledge when dealing with theories

Pre-condition and registration

Registration as a PhD student at the ITTS, a Swiss university or as auditor in the perspective of being a future PhD student of the ITTS.

Registration at messengerie.itts@unine.ch until **23 September 2026**.

Documentation & literature

Some preliminary **mandatory readings** (to be read and prepared before the class):

Abrams, Philip (1988). Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1(1): 58-89. (the chapter is also available in the Sharma/Gupta Reader)

Das, Veena, & Poole, Deborah (2004). *Anthropology in the margins of the state*. School of American Research Press ; James Currey. (Selected chapters)

Foucault, M. (1978). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect, Studies in Governmentality, with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 87-104. (the chapter is also available in the Sharma/Gupta Reader)

Sharma, Aradhana, & Gupta, Akhil (Eds.) (2006). *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (1 edition). Wiley-Blackwell. (selected chapters)

Weber, Max (1921/1968). Chapter: Bureaucracy. In *Economy and Society*. (G. Roth, C. Wittich, Eds., G. Roth, & C. Wittich, Trans.) Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 956-1005.

(the chapter is also available in the Sharma/Gupta Reader)

Potential readings:

Gramsci, Antonio (2012). Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (Repr.). Lawrence & Wishart. (selected chapter). (the chapter is also available in the Sharma/Gupta Reader)

Mitchell, Timothy (1999). Society, Economy, and the State Effect. In G. Steinmetz (Hrsg.), *State/Culture. State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*. Cornell University Press, (pp. 76–97). (the chapter is also available in the Sharma/Gupta Reader)

Thelen, T., Vetter, Larissa, & Benda-Beckmann, Keebet, von (2017). *Stategraphy. Toward a Relational Anthropology of the State*. Berghahn. (selected chapters)

Other documentation will be available on Moodle.

Making Sense of Data: An Introduction to Quantitative Reasoning in Social Sciences (3 ECTS)

Teaching periods

Fridays 16.10.2026 (am), 30.10.2026 (am), 13.11.2026 (am), 27.11.2026 (fd), 11.12.2026 (fd)
 (am = half-day 09:15–12:45; fd = full-day 09:15–17:15)

Venue

Room D59, Av. du 1er-Mars 26, University of Neuchâtel

Teaching team

Prof. Michaela Slotwinski, ITTS, UniNE
 Mohammad Zreik, Teaching Assistant, ITTS, UniNE

Course content

In a data-driven world, the ability to think clearly and critically about quantitative information is essential. Quantitative reasoning—and the ability to assess quantitative claims—is important not only in traditionally data-focused fields but also in broader social, political, and economic contexts.

This course is explicitly designed for students with little or no prior experience in quantitative methods. It is therefore not suitable for students who already have an advanced background in the subject.

The practical components of the course use Stata. No prior experience with the software is required, as students will receive an introduction to its basic use.

The course introduces key tools for quantitative data analysis in the social sciences. It prioritizes intuitive understanding and introduces formal or technical concepts only where necessary. The course also provides a foundation for students who may wish to pursue more advanced methods courses later.

The course has three primary goals:

- To lower the barriers to reading, understanding, and critically evaluating quantitative studies, and to help students begin thinking about how quantitative analysis might inform their own work.
- To introduce basic statistical methods used by researchers and policymakers to investigate social, political, and economic questions.
- To provide students with a foundation for considering to apply one or more of the methods covered in the course in a thesis, dissertation, or professional project.



By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Explain the intuition behind core quantitative methods used in social science research, including descriptive statistics, data visualization, hypothesis testing, regression analysis, and experimental methods.
- Understand the distinction between correlation and causation and recognize the basic conditions under which causal conclusions may be drawn.
- Read, interpret, and critically evaluate introductory quantitative studies.
- Conduct and visualize basic data analyses using Stata.
- Interpret and communicate the results of basic quantitative analyses.

Assessment

The course assessment takes place during the teaching period (*examen intermédiaire*).

- 15%: Graded homework assignments and participation throughout the semester.
- 85%: In-person written examination during the final class.

Examinations and retake examinations are organized by the ITTS. The relevant procedures will be explained in class or communicated separately where necessary.

Learning Outcomes

- Develop understanding of quantitative tools employed in political, social, and economic research
- Carry out basic data analysis using the statistical software STATA
- Interpret results

Transferable skills

- Criticise research methodology
- Evaluate research methodology
- Develop basic skills to quantitatively analyze social phenomena
- Practice basic coding skills
- Develop proper technical language when reading, analyzing, and presenting quantitative research

Pre-condition and registration

No prior knowledge of quantitative methods or Stata is required. Students will receive instructions on how to obtain access to Stata.

The course is open to:

- Registered PhD students at the ITTS and other institutions or programmes.
- Registered Master's students.
- Prospective ITTS PhD students whose eligibility for admission has been formally assessed and confirmed by the ITTS.

Please register by emailing messagerie.itts@unine.ch **no later than 23 September 2026**. The number of participants is limited to 15.

Course material and organization

All course materials, required readings, and further organizational information will be made available on Moodle.

Current Issues in Social Work: Digitalization, AI and Welfare: An STS Perspective on Social Work (3 ECTS)

Teaching periods

17 & 18 September, 5 & 6 November 2026

Venue

Room B29, Av. du 1er-Mars, University of Neuchâtel

Teaching team

Dr. Melike Şahinol, Lecturer

Content of the lecture

Digital technologies increasingly shape welfare institutions and social work practice. Algorithmic decision systems, digital infrastructures, AI-based documentation tools, and automated eligibility systems are transforming how social services are organized, delivered, and evaluated. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS), the seminar approaches these technologies as socio-technical arrangements that co-produce professional practices, institutional structures, and relations of power, responsibility, and care. The seminar therefore also invites a transdisciplinary dialogue between STS, social work research, welfare studies, and digital governance research.

Over four days, the seminar introduces key STS concepts and applies them to empirical cases in digital welfare and social work, including algorithmic governance, digital welfare infrastructures, AI-based tools in social work practice, and technologies that mediate care relationships. Short lecture inputs are combined with discussion of core readings, case-based group work, and a methodological reflection on possible approaches for empirically studying digital welfare infrastructures (e.g. organizational ethnography, policy and document analysis, interface analysis). In addition to foundational STS literature, the seminar includes a dedicated session on the current research frontier, introducing newer empirical and applied work on digitalization, AI, welfare, and social work. Participants are invited to relate these debates to broader questions of fairness, accountability, trust, professional practice, and care.

Form of evaluation

- Active participation during all seminar days (preparation of readings, contribution to discussions and group work).
- Oral presentation (20–25 minutes) during the seminar, followed by three questions posed by the instructor to assess understanding and independent engagement with the material. Participants may choose one of the following formats:
 - (a) applying one STS concept discussed in the seminar to their own doctoral research project, or
 - (b) presenting a critical analysis of a specific seminar theme, case, or text of their choice.
- Presentations and oral examination take place on Day 4.



The presentation is assessed on the clarity of the argument, accurate and productive use of STS concepts, engagement with relevant literature or empirical material, and the participant's responses to the questions raised in the discussion.

Re-take: Students who receive a non-passing grade on the oral presentation may submit a revised written reflection (3–4 pages, in English) within 30 days of receiving the original grade, unless otherwise agreed with the instructor.

Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the seminar, participants will be able to:

- Develop understanding and explain key STS concepts relevant to digitalization and welfare institutions (e.g. socio-technical systems, co-production, politics of artifacts)
- Explain how algorithmic and data-intensive systems shape professional practice, institutional decision-making, and relations of care and responsibility
- Analyse critically digital technologies used in social work and welfare systems, including algorithmic decision systems and digital infrastructures
- Examine issues of power, inequality, and discrimination in digital welfare infrastructures, including race, class, gender, disability and other axes of difference
- Rate critically recent empirical and applied research on generative AI, digital welfare, and social work.
- Apply STS perspectives on digitalization and AI to empirical cases in social work, welfare, and related fields, and, where relevant, connect them to their own doctoral research projects.

Transferable skills

By the end of this seminar, doctoral students will have developed transferable skills in:

- Analyse critically the role of digital technologies and AI systems in welfare institutions and social work practice
- Identify basic strategies and methods for empirically studying digital welfare infrastructures (documents, practices, interfaces)
- Analyse and discuss recent interdisciplinary research literature
- Communicate complex arguments about technology, power, and inequality in oral form
- Apply abstract theoretical concepts (STS) to concrete empirical cases and their own research design

Pre-condition and registration

- Pre-condition: Registration as a PhD student at the ITTS or another doctoral programme in the social sciences or related disciplines. No prior knowledge of STS or AI is required. Basic familiarity with social theory, social work research, or qualitative social research is an advantage.
- Open to: Registered PhD students only (ITTS and other doctoral programmes). Not open to Master students.
- Registration at messagerie.itts@unine.ch until 15 September 2026.
- Maximum number of participants: 15.

Documents (available on Moodle)

All core readings, slides, and additional materials will be made available on Moodle before the start of the seminar. Participants are expected to read the assigned texts in advance and bring notes or questions to the seminar.

Core readings

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press.

Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. St. Martin's Press.

Jasanoff, S. (2004). The idiom of co-production. In S. Jasanoff (Ed.), *States of knowledge: The co-production of science and social order* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.

Mol, A. (2008). *The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice*. Routledge.

Pols, J. (2012). *Care at a distance: On the closeness of technology*. Amsterdam University Press.

Winner, L. (1980). Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus*, 109(1), 121–136.

Rommes, E. (2014). Feminist interventions in the design process. In W. Ernst & I. Horwath (Eds.), *Gender in science and technology* (pp. 41–56). transcript.

Ait Si Abbou Lyadini, K. (2019). *We need more diversity in AI development now!* TEDxHamburg (video).

Recommended readings

Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2018). Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 973–989.

O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Crown.

Kitchin, R. (2017). Thinking critically about and researching algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 14–29.

Suchman, L. A. (2007). *Human-machine reconfigurations: Plans and situated actions* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Weber, R. N. (1997). Manufacturing gender in commercial and military cockpit design. *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 22(2), 235–253.

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York University Press. (Introduction)

Jasanoff, S., & Kim, S. (2015). *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*. (Introduction)

Škorić, J., & Galetin, M. (2024). Artificial intelligence and social work: Ethical dilemmas and challenges in the protection of human rights. *Teme*, 563–575.