Annonce de thèse Octobre 2026

Sujet de thèse :
Apprentissage social des comportements alimentaires chez les nourrissons et les jeunes enfants (Social learning about food in early life: How infants and young children learn what to eat with the help of others?)

Lieu de thèse :
Cette thèse se déroulera à Dijon au sein du Centre des Sciences du Goût et de l'Alimentation (UMR CSGA 1324 – CNRS, INRAE, Institut Agro, Université Bourgogne Europe)

Encadrants :
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Claire Sulmont-Rossé, Directrice de recherche INRAE

Profil recherché :
- Candidat.e avec un Master 2 de Psychologie, Science Cognitive ou similaire ou diplôme d'ingenieur.e Agro ;
- Candidat.e dynamique et motivé.e. La/le doctorant.e travaillera en contact direct avec les jeunes enfants invités aux expériences et leurs parents ;
- Bon niveau de français et d'anglais ;
- Une maitrise de logiciels d'analyse statistique/programmation type Matlab ou R est un plus.

Début de thèse souhaitée :
Octobre 2026

Date de clôture et modalités des candidatures :
Clôture : 30 juin 2026
Les candidatures doivent être envoyées à camille.rioux@inrae.fr et inclure :
• une lettre de motivation ;
• un CV ;
• les coordonnées de deux référent·es ;
• les relevés de notes universitaires (licence et master).

Mots clés :
Aliment (Food) ; Apprentissage (Learning) ; Apprentissage social (Social Learning) ; Apprentissage alimentaire (Food learning) ; Nourrisson (Infant) ; Jeune enfant (Toddler) ; Comportement alimentaire (Food behavior) ; Psychologie du développement (Developmental Psychology)

Description du sujet de thèse :

Context

Learning what to eat is a crucial and difficult task. Humans are omnivores and need to gather a wide variety of foods to ensure nutritional health and well-being and infants are born into a world replete with objects that have different colors, shapes, odors... A few common taste preferences - such as tendencies to like sweet and salty tastes and dislike sour and bitter tastes - are evident very early in life and likely emerged to guide human learners toward substances that are both safe to eat and nutritious (Schwartz et al., 2009, Ustun et al., 2022). However, these common taste preferences do not account for the great complexity and diversity of human diets. Given the broad possibility space of potential foods and risks (e.g., ingesting harmful entities) across different environments, **infants and young children instead must learn what to eat over the course of development, going away from eating just milk after weaning**. This food learning task is particularly complex given that infants and young children do not only need to learn about the safety and palatability of the different entities in their environment but also about who eats what foods in what context, absorbing social and cultural traditions surrounding food selection, as eating is largely a social phenomenon. Given the complexity of the food learning task, it is simply neither possible nor risk-free for infants and young children to construct a diverse and nutritious diet using trial-and-error individual learning. In fact, research investigating food learning processes in early life highlights that **food knowledge is largely acquired via social learning from more knowledgeable individuals, including observation, imitation and teaching**, (e.g., Addessi et al., 2005; DeJesus et al., 2018). Notably, this work shows that observing what others eat is a particularly influential social cue (e.g., seeing an adult or an older peer eating an unfamiliar food increases children's willingness to taste that food, Addessi et al., 2005).

Objectives of the PhD project

A caveat in the line of work investigating social learning about food is that most of the studies have been conducted with children from 3 to 4 years of age and research with infants and toddlers remains particularly sparse. Yet, it is in the first years of life that we transition from exclusive breastfeeding to eating solid foods and introduce various new foods in our diet, making infancy a crucial period for food learning. Indeed, many food habits are acquired in early life and, in addition, have a large influence on dietary patterns later in life (Luque et al., 2018; Nicklaus et al., 2005). In that context, **the overarching aim of the PhD project is to investigate in detail how infants and toddlers learn and choose what to eat, with the help of their social partners (e.g., caregivers, peers).**

Specifically, we aim to examine:

(i) **What kind of social information they use to learn what to eat**.

(ii) **From whom they learn best**.

(iii) **Whether social learning about food is selective**, i.e., differ from learning processes in other domains (e.g., learning about objects).

Planned schedule

Year 1

- Systematic literature review
- Preparation and submission of the PhD experimental protocols to an ethical committee
- Study 1: Exploring what kind of social information infants and young children use to learn what to eat
- Preparation of a systematic literature review manuscript about social food learning in infancy

Year 2

- Study 2: Exploring whether social learning about food is selective, i.e., differ from learning processes in other domains
- Presentation of the PhD results to international conferences and preparation of a manuscript about studies 1 and 2

Year 3

- Study 3: Exploring from whom infants and young children learn best about food
- Presentation of the PhD results to international conferences and preparation of a manuscript about study 3
- PhD manuscript preparation

Bibliography

Addessi, E., Galloway, A. T., Visalberghi, E., & Birch, L. L. (2005). Specific social influences on the acceptance of novel foods in 2–5-year-old children. *Appetite*, *45*(3), 264–271.

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Nicklaus, S., Boggio, V., Chabanet, C., & Issanchou, S. (2005). A prospective study of food variety seeking in childhood, adolescence and early adult life. *Appetite*, *44*(3), 289–297.

Schwartz, C., Issanchou, S., & Nicklaus, S. (2009). Developmental changes in the acceptance of the five basic tastes in the first year of life. *The British journal of nutrition*, *102*(9), 1375–1385.

Ustun, B., Reissland, N., Covey, J., Schaal, B., & Blissett, J. (2022). Flavor Sensing in Utero and Emerging Discriminative Behaviors in the Human Fetus. *Psychological science*, *33*(10), 1651–1663.