

dramatic effects of *An. gambiae* *Serpin2* [20], *LRIM1* and *CTL4* [16] knockdown on *P. berghei* development do not affect *P. falciparum* [21,22] indicates that there are important differences in regulation of the PO cascade between these two *Plasmodium* species. Thus, at this time, it is unclear whether the same *CLIP* genes that regulate melanization of *P. berghei* mediate similar responses to *P. falciparum*. The mechanism by which *P. falciparum* strains of African origin avoid melanization in the R strain also remains an open question.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Division of Intramural Research, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health. We thank NIAID intramural editor Brenda Rae Marshall for assistance.

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1471-4922/\$ - see front matter. Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.pt.2007.05.001

Virulence and resistance in malaria: who drives the outcome of the infection?

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Theoretical and experimental studies have established the dynamic nature of virulence and that, like all traits, it has evolved. Understanding parasite evolution offers a conceptual framework for diverse fields and can contribute greatly to decision-making in disease control. Recently, Grech *et al.* investigated the effects of host genotype-by-parasite genotype interactions on the expression of virulence in an artificial rodent-malaria system. They found that both parasite and host effects

explained most of the variance in the virulence, resistance and transmission potential. These findings are a major contribution to the emerging debate on the pros and cons of a coevolutionary approach of virulence evolution; they also hold great potential for more effective control strategies.

Predicting the evolution of virulence

Predicting the conditions that cause parasites to harm their hosts is of central importance in biological sciences, not only because parasites vary in how they interfere with

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Available online 10 May 2007.

Glossary

Fully cross-factored experiment: experimental design in which all levels of one treatment are tested in combination with all levels of the other treatment.

Gene-for-gene model: for a host resistance gene, there is a corresponding avirulence gene in the parasite with which it interacts. The outcome of the interaction depends on the combination of alleles at the locus in the genomes of the two interacting species. In host–parasite interactions, it means that one parasite genotype has ‘universal virulence’ (i.e. it can infect all host genotypes).

Matching-allele model: each parasite genotype functions as either an avirulence allele or a virulence allele depending on the host genotype. Similarly, each host genotype functions as either a resistance or a susceptibility allele depending on the parasite genotype. Here, infection (or resistance) requires an exact match between resistance and virulence genotypes.

Optimality problem: optimality theory in evolutionary biology aims to test insights into the biological constraints that influence the outcome of evolution. Optimality models serve to improve our understanding of adaptations, rather than to demonstrate that natural selection produces optimal solutions (for more details see Ref. [20]).

Proximate mechanisms: the biochemical, developmental and physiological mechanisms that determine a trait of an organism. [As opposed to ultimate mechanisms: all evolutionary mechanisms (i.e. natural selection, genetic drift, migration and mutations) that determine a trait.]

State-dependent nature of virulence: the plastic part of virulence owing to environmental conditions (i.e. phenotypic plasticity). Parasites might perceive their immediate and external environment, and respond appropriately through adaptive phenotypic plasticity (i.e. in a state-dependent manner) to maximize their fitness.

the ecology and evolution of free-living organisms, but also because of applied benefits in medicine (particularly public health strategies) and epidemiology. There is increasing interest in the effects that natural selection has on the traits of parasites, and on virulence in particular.

Despite considerable progress made by evolutionary biologists in understanding the factors that influence the outcome of infections, scientists are still divided on the way to assess the problem. As pointed out by Grech *et al.* [1], ‘two not mutually exclusive literatures’ coexist on this topic: parasite-centred and coevolutionary models. The

parasite-centred approach typically assumes that virulence is determined mainly by the parasite genotype. In parasite-centred models, virulence is then modelled as an optimality problem (see Glossary), which assumes that a given pathogen strain has a virulence phenotype that is stable across a range of host genotypes. Conversely, coevolutionary models, such as the gene-for-gene and matching-allele models, emphasize that the parasite and the host genotypes together determine virulence. The fitness loss is then determined by interactions between parasite and host genotypes, with particular parasite strains being harmful for some host genotypes, and benign in others (Figure 1). Analogous arguments can be made for host resistance. For instance, if genetic variation for resistance depends mainly on a host effect, then the evolution of resistance can (as before) be modelled as a host-centred optimality problem.

Despite the existence of suitable systems with which to test these hypotheses (e.g. Refs [2,3]), theoretical speculation has proven more attractive than data collection (e.g. Refs [4–9]), and a real understanding of the interactions between host and parasite is still lacking.

The rodent-malaria system as a model for virulence evolution

An attempt to combine the two approaches has been described by Grech *et al.* [1], who used a rodent (laboratory mice)-malaria (*Plasmodium chabaudi*) model system to determine whether host-by-parasite interactions were involved in determining factors such as the virulence, resistance and transmission potential of the pathogen.

There are several advantages to using *P. chabaudi* to assess such questions. The availability of a range of *P. chabaudi* clones and of distinct hosts enabled the authors to test distinct assumptions derived from the two kinds of model. Importantly, this study was performed through a fully cross-factored experiment, using four parasite genotypes of *P. chabaudi* and four inbred mouse strains. The results indicated that all possible scenarios are met (Figure 1), depending on the measure of virulence chosen. However, most of the variance in virulence, in resistance to

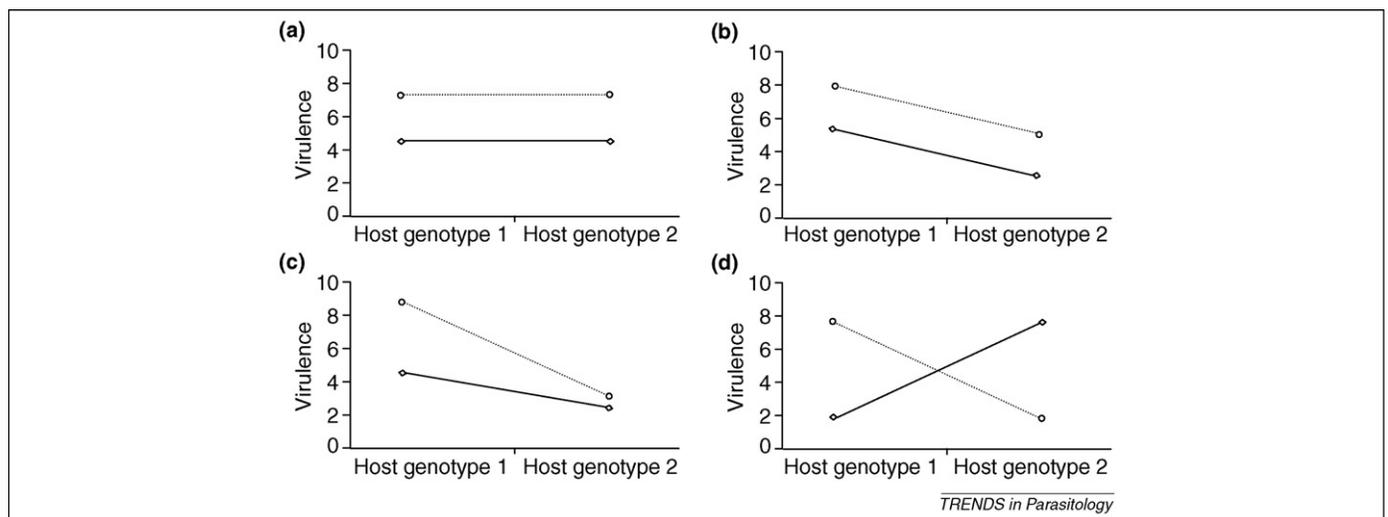


Figure 1. Host, parasite and host-by-parasite interaction effects, showing a parasite main effect only (a); additive parasite and host main effects (b); nonadditive host and parasite interactions without crossing reaction norms where pathogen differences are more apparent in one of the host genotypes (c); and host-by-parasite interactions with crossing reaction norms of the sort assumed in most coevolutionary models (d). In (d), parasite genotypes that are virulent in one host genotype are less virulent in the other and vice versa. Parasite 1 is indicated by a broken line and parasite 2 by an unbroken line. Modified, with permission, from Ref. [1].

parasites and in transmission potential, is explained mainly by parasite and host effects. Host-by-parasite interactions, although significant, had limited effects.

Such conclusions are in accordance with those obtained in two other malaria studies, which examined both host and parasite genotypes simultaneously [10,11]. Thus, Grech *et al.* [1] suggest that parasite responses to selection on virulence depend mainly on host heterogeneity, at least in the context of malaria infections. In other words, they give more support to parasite-centred approaches than to the prevailing paradigm of a coevolutionary approach in which host-by-parasite interactions predominate.

Relevance for the human-malaria system?

The study performed by Grech and colleagues is important for several reasons. Understanding the processes that determine parasite evolution is of interest for scientists attempting to establish links between fundamental ecology and applied disciplines (e.g. epidemiology and medicine). This study [1] is one of the few times that host-by-parasite interactions have been tested for in a vertebrate system. Even if the model studied is an artificial rodent-malaria system, links with the human-malaria system exist. For example, large variation in virulence and resistance is observed [12]. People infected with each of the four human *Plasmodium* species (*Plasmodium vivax*, *Plasmodium falciparum*, *Plasmodium ovale* and *Plasmodium malariae*) can be asymptomatic or might present different degrees of disease symptoms. Large variation in symptoms is observed from relatively minor symptoms (e.g. temporary fever, chills, headache, sweats, nausea and vomiting) to severe fever, cerebral malaria, coma and death. In Thailand, for example, Chotivanich *et al.* [13] reported that 'a patient may arrive at the hospital with a parasitemia >40% and be able to walk, whereas others may die with <1% parasitemia'. In addition, parasite variation in immunogenic antigens, variation in host immune memory [14] and variation owing to environmental features, such as seasonality, make understanding why the outcome of infection in humans is so variable difficult.

A potential limitation of this work (which is acknowledged by the authors) is that the choice of host strains and/or of parasite clones might not be representative of the genetic diversity of *Plasmodium*-host interactions in the field. No one system is going to give all the answers and, even if it does, there is no guarantee that those answers are generally applicable to the real world. Further examples are needed before generalizations can be made.

Another limitation of the Grech *et al.* study is linked to the choice of model. First, they describe their host-parasite system as a medically relevant model; however, *P. chabaudi* does not infect humans. Second, using laboratory mice can be problematic because mice are not a natural host of *P. chabaudi* and, therefore, evolution is unlikely to have acted on this system. Thus, care must be taken in extrapolating results from these models to human malaria [15]. In our opinion, this work is an example of the kind of research that should be conducted and extended upon to explain virulence variation rather than a demonstration of which party drives the outcome of host-parasite interactions.

Beyond genetic factors

When a character is variable for both genetic and environmental reasons, two individuals might differ because they have: (i) different genotypes; (ii) different environmental experiences; or (iii) both. Virulence is a character whose phenotypic expression depends on both genetic (two genomes; the parasite and the host) and environmental factors. By adopting the same experimental design, it would be interesting to investigate, for a given host genotype, the effect of: (i) age of the host; (ii) body condition; and (iii) immunocompetence. For example, all things being equal, *P. falciparum* is more virulent in children than in adults. In children, the fitness cost of host mortality for the parasite might balance the fitness benefits of higher transmission rates and slower clearance rates [16].

Unfortunately, the extent to which the interactions between host environmental experiences and parasite genotypes influence the expression of virulence is poorly documented and would benefit from being studied with the approach proposed by Grech *et al.* Such a study, using laboratory systems, would enable examination of the state-dependent nature of variations in virulence and resistance, and its causes (i.e. state-dependent adaptive response of the parasite and/or of the hosts, or consequences of other phenomena). Additionally, the experimental design proposed by Grech *et al.* is a promising approach to explore questions related to mixed infections.

Future challenges

Because of its central role in the study of host-parasite interactions, virulence is extensively studied by biologists across disparate disciplines. There have been several efforts to bring together the different approaches to virulence theory [17]. However, the continued separation between subdisciplines, such as evolutionary ecology and medicine, is a limitation that needs to be overcome if we are to understand complex processes such as virulence.

One possible solution is the use of emerging technologies to address the proximate mechanisms involved during the interactions between host and pathogen. Techniques taken from the field of post-genomics provide a comprehensive view of the expression of entire genomes, and might help to decipher the molecular and physiological basis of virulence and resistance variation. Here exists an opportunity for evolutionary ecologists and molecular biologists to address jointly exciting questions, such as what a host effect, a parasite effect and an interaction between the effects means at the proximate level. Having such answers, which are then framed within a solid theoretical framework and complemented by accurate understanding of other important ecosystem properties, we are more able to guide effective control of malaria, in what Grech *et al.* term 'a real-world approach' [18,19].

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doi:10.1016/j.pt.2007.04.012

Letters

Taxonomic changes: disprove or accept them

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Over the past decade, several groups of mosquitoes have been researched thoroughly, resulting in the reorganization of the species and in changes in the taxonomic status of some of the groups. In 2000, the mosquito subgenus *Ochlerotatus* was raised to the status of genus, based on characteristics of 4th instar larvae and of the genitalia of both genders [1]. As a result of the analysis of the status and phylogenetic polarity of 165 characteristics of all life stages of Aedini [2], a new genus (*Finlaya*) was created and 32 subgenera of *Aedes* were raised to the status of genus. This rearrangement [2] includes the medically important species *Aedes aegypti* and has caused considerable controversy [3]; according to the new classification of Aedini [2], this species should be called *Stegomyia aegypti*, as it had been until it was included in the *Aedes* genus as a result of a decision of the ICZN.

The objective of taxonomy is the organization of taxonomic entities, according to certain rules, to facilitate the understanding of their biology, ecology and other characteristics. The adoption of informal groups (including groups and series, but not formal ones, such as genera) appears attractive for maintaining a stable classification, but can cause loss of additional information, such as distribution, vectorial role and feeding habits. Because the name of the informal group is not usually cited when referring to the species name, it is difficult to associate the species with biological and epidemiological information. In addition, new classifications can cause difficulty to medical

personnel who are unfamiliar with taxonomy. However, the work of taxonomists is important and there are sound reasons to propose substantial modifications such as those described above.

A change to the taxonomy and classification of an organism should be based on a careful study of several characteristics (including molecular ones), preferably from several stages of its lifecycle. Careful analysis of the significance (i.e. polarity) of the characteristics can result in a phylogenetic classification. Numerical taxonomy, the Linnean system (based on Aristotelian ‘essences’) and the gradist theory, all reviewed by Amorim [4], are taxonomic systems that are less useful and less accepted in biology compared with the phylogenetic classification system.

A response to a proposal for a taxonomic change could be either: (i) to show that it was based on false premises or insufficient evidence; or (ii) to accept it. I propose that, if no good evidence against the modification is presented in a certain timescale (e.g. 1–2 years), the modified names and classification should be adopted. For example, a transition mode would be to utilize *Stegomyia aegypti* (= *Aedes aegypti*, [2]) and *Ochlerotatus triseriatus* (= *Aedes triseriatus* [1]) for some frequently studied mosquito species, for a certain length of time. Black [5] analysed the controversy caused by publication of a proposal by Savage and Strickman to maintain *Ochlerotatus* as a subgenus of *Aedes* to avoid annoying public health workers [6]. He proposed *Ochlerotatus* as a genus, because he believes in natural systems and considers that its maintenance as a subgenus was based on the

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