Seminal fluid mediates ejaculate competition in social insects

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The implication of our results for dynamic combinatorial chemistry is that this technique need not be limited to exploring the thermodynamic minima of molecular networks; kinetic control can dominate, provided that the noncovalent interactions are sufficiently strong and/or numerous. Our results further show that it is possible to obtain kinetic products from an assembly process where all the individual steps (covalent disulfide exchange and noncovalent peptide-peptide interactions) are reversible. Such a transition from thermodynamically controlled self-assembly to kinetic control must have been an important step in the origin of life, as life is far from equilibrium (35). Finally, our approach represents a promising method for the discovery of self-synthesizing materials in general and noncovalent polymers in particular (36).

References and Notes
spermathecal fluid on sperm survival in two species of corbiculate bees and three species of fungus-growing ants. This assay (18) provides relative sperm survival data that can be directly compared within experiments, but does not allow accurate comparisons of absolute sperm survival percentages across species, because sperm and seminal fluid contributions may vary across natural ejaculates (19).

Our choice of species exploited the sharp evolutionary transition shown by both the corbiculate bees and the fungus-growing ants from exclusive single mating of queens, i.e., storing sperm from a single ejaculate (Bombus terrestris bumblebees and Trachymyrmex cf. zeteki ants), to multiple mating, i.e., queens storing sperm from multiple males with which they mate in quick succession (Apis mellifera honeybees and Atta colombica and Acromyrmex echinatior leafcutter ants) (6, 20). We found that providing sperm with AG secretion from the same male significantly increased sperm survival in all five species (Fig. 1), indicating that sperm is consistently protected by the quantities of AG secretion that we used in our assays. The absolute sperm survival values are almost certainly underestimates for sperm viability in natural ejaculates, because the Hayes saline buffer used does not nourish sperm, so that higher AG concentrations may be needed to reach the close to 100% in vitro sperm survival that can be achieved with this assay (16).

We next investigated whether the AG secretion of other conspecific males would be equally effective in enhancing sperm survival (18). We expected that AG secretions might be at least partially hostile to other males' sperm in the polyandrous species, but that no such effects should occur in their monandrous sister groups where ejaculates never interact in vivo. We used generalized estimating equations, nesting species within mating systems and using individuals as repeated measures (18), to compare the effects of AG secretions from a focal male, brothers of the focal male, and unrelated males on sperm survival. We found significant effects of mating system (polyandrous versus monandrous, $\chi^2 = 22.33$, df = 1, $P < 0.001$) and treatment (AG origin, $\chi^2 = 19.17$, df = 2, $P < 0.001$). The overall mating system difference may not be biologically meaningful because the absolute sperm survival percentages across species (nested within mating system) are not directly comparable. However, a significant interaction between mating system and treatment ($\chi^2 = 18.62$, df = 2, $P < 0.001$) indicated that sperm exposed to alien seminal fluid showed reduced levels of sperm survival in polyandrous species, but not in monandrous species (Fig. 2). This was confirmed by a rerun of the analysis for the monandrous species separately, where no significant effect of treatment could be detected ($\chi^2 = 2.13$, df = 2, $P = 0.346$ for Bombus and $\chi^2 = 0.02$, df = 1, $P = 0.883$ for Trachymyrmex). The origin of nonsignificant effects of own, related (brother), and unrelated male AG secretion on sperm survival (mean ± SEM) in the monandrous bumble bee B. terrestris and fungus-growing ant Trachymyrmex cf. zeteki, and the polyandrous honeybee A. mellifera and fungus-growing ants A. echinatior and A. colombica. Photos of males are given in the panels. The brother treatment could not be performed for Trachymyrmex cf. zeteki (18). Those bars labeled with different letters (a or b) differ significantly (all $P < 0.001$), whereas those with the same label do not (all $P > 0.1$).

Fig. 1. Positive effects of male AG secretion on sperm survival across three species of fungus-growing ants (Trachymyrmex cf. zeteki, Acromyrmex echinatior, Atta colombica), a bumblebee (Bombus terrestris), and a honeybee (Apis mellifera). The upper five charts show the absolute sperm viability values in the control treatments with Hayes saline (left) and the AG supplementations (right) that produced the AG/control survival ratios in the lower panel. The data for A. colombica and A. mellifera are from previous studies (15, 16), whereas those for the other three species were collected in the present study. The slope of the regression in the lower panel ($y = 0.824x + 0.784; r^2 = 0.876; P = 0.019$) is not significantly different from 1 (i.e., approximately parallel to the diagonal: 95% confidence interval slope: 0.254–1.395). The intercept of the regression is significantly different from 1 (zero after log-transformation: $t_1 = 7.196; P = 0.006$), indicating that the AG treatment had a consistently positive effect relative to control exposure to Hayes saline. The inset shows the male AGs and accessory testes (ATs) of a representative species (B. terrestris) as they were dissected. All bars are SEM.
AG secretion, a brother or an unrelated male, did not differentially affect sperm survival ($\chi^2 = 2.44$, df = 1, $P = 0.118$ for Apis; $\chi^2 = 1.16$, df = 1, $P = 0.282$ for Acromyrmex; and $\chi^2 = 0.25$, df = 1, $P = 0.616$ for Atta). This suggests that the negative effects on sperm survival are triggered by a self versus nonself recognition process.

These results are consistent with some form of ejaculate competition in polyandrous honeybees and leafcutter ants, and suggest that AG secretions contain both compounds that are favorable for sperm survival (Fig. 1) and substances that may incapacitate sperm of competing males (Fig. 2). To assess the combined effect of these putative forces on sperm survival, we repeated the second experiment for the three polyandrous species (but without the brother treatment), while adding an equal mix of own and alien AG secretion as an additional treatment (18) (Fig. 3). Overall treatment effects were significant in all cases ($\chi^2 = 8.31$, df = 2, $P = 0.016$ for Apis; $\chi^2 = 7.26$, df = 2, $P = 0.027$ for Acromyrmex; and $\chi^2 = 10.82$, df = 2, $P = 0.005$ for Atta). However, own AG secretion does not appear to offset the negative effects of alien AG secretion, as pure alien and mixed AG treatments always resulted in similar but reduced sperm survival compared to the pure own AG treatment (detailed statistics are in the legend to Fig. 3).

After 30 min of exposure to alien AG secretion, sperm survival was reduced by 6.6% in Apis, 14.7% in Atta, and 18.8% in Acromyrmex relative to treatment with own AG secretion (Fig. 2). However, the residence time of inseminated honeybee sperm in the bursa copulatrix and lateral oviducts before being stored or discarded is 40 to 90 hours (21), whereas ejaculates of Atta colombica are probably transferred to the spermatheca almost immediately.

Fig. 3. Own AG secretion does not counteract the negative effects on sperm survival (mean ± SEM) of the AG secretion of other males in polyandrous ants and bees: A. mellifera, A. echinatior, and A. colombica. Overall treatment effects were significant in all three cases (see text). Specific contrasts were not significant for pure alien AG secretion versus a mixture of own and alien AG secretion ($\chi^2 = 0.00$, df = 1, $P = 0.964$ for Apis; $\chi^2 = 0.05$, df = 1, $P = 0.823$ for Acromyrmex; and $\chi^2 = 0.40$, df = 1, $P = 0.529$ for Atta). However, contrasts were significant for pure own versus pure alien AG secretion ($\chi^2 = 4.86$, df = 1, $P = 0.028$ for Apis; $\chi^2 = 6.75$, df = 1, $P = 0.009$ for Acromyrmex; and $\chi^2 = 9.25$, df = 1, $P = 0.002$ for Atta), and for pure own versus a mixture of own and alien AG secretion ($\chi^2 = 6.58$, df = 1, $P = 0.010$ for Apis; $\chi^2 = 4.62$, df = 1, $P = 0.032$ for Acromyrmex; and $\chi^2 = 9.89$, df = 1, $P = 0.002$ for Atta).

Because every sperm cell provides a potential fitness benefit after the sperm storage process is complete (14, 15), we expected queens to either prevent hostile AG secretion from being stored, or to neutralize antagonistic interactions between ejaculates shortly after they enter the spermatheca. We tested this by collecting virgin A. colombica queens and artificially inseminating them with Hayes solution to obtain spermathecal fluid suspensions (18). Exposure of freshly dissected sperm from male accessory testes to mixtures of spermathecal fluid and seminal fluid of another male showed that spermathecal fluid maintains sperm survival at normal levels (Fig. 4). Thus, we conclude that spermathecal fluid has the potential to prevent the negative effects of AG secretion on alien sperm.

These results reveal consistent postmating sexual selection and sexual conflict in eusocial insects. They complement work elucidating why multiple queen-mating evolved (9, 25–27) and show that ants and bees are suitable models for testing sperm competition theory. This is because males have no influence on the fate of ejaculates after mating, and sperm storage has two distinct phases: a provisional one, varying across species from seconds to a few days, during which sperm competition may serve female interests; and a much longer permanent phase during which queens are expected to maximize the survival of all sperm. It therefore seems reasonable to expect that selection on male traits that enhance ejaculate competition is proportional to the duration of prestorage ejaculate interaction and to the ratio of inseminated versus long-term–stored sperm.

Antagonistic effects similar to those reported here may have arisen in other eusocial Hymenoptera that have evolved from single to multiple queen-mating (6, 25–27), and spermathecal fluids that neutralize aggressive male AG compounds (compare to Fig. 4) may also be found in dwarf honeybees where sperm is directly transferred to the spermatheca (28), as in Atta (22). However, although phenotypic expressions of these sexual conflicts might be similar, their independent evolutionary origins suggest that the genes and pathways involved are different (7). Clarifying such molecular mechanisms is now feasible, as recent studies have shown that honeybee spermathecal proteomes differ appreciably from male AG proteomes (17, 29, 30), consistent with functional differences connected with operating when sperm is in a state of long-term dormancy or metabolically active.

Fig. 4. Spermathecal fluid eliminates the negative effects of other males’ AG secretions on sperm survival in A. colombica (mean ± SEM). The inset shows a dissected spermatheca 1 hour after having been artificially inseminated with Hayes saline. The first two bars differ significantly ($\chi^2 = 15.04$, df = 1, $P < 0.001$), as do the second and third bar ($\chi^2 = 13.59$, df = 1, $P < 0.001$), but the bar on the right does not differ significantly from the bar toward the left ($\chi^2 = 2.38$, df = 1, $P = 0.123$).
Patterns of Diversity in Marine Phytoplankton

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Spatial diversity gradients are a pervasive feature of life on Earth. We examined a global ocean circulation, biogeochemistry, and ecosystem model that indicated a decrease in phytoplankton diversity with increasing latitude, consistent with observations of many marine and terrestrial taxa. In the modeled subpolar oceans, seasonal variability of the environment led to competitive exclusion of phytoplankton with slower growth rates and lower diversity. The relatively weak seasonality of the stable subtropical and tropical oceans in the global model enabled long exclusion time scales and prolonged coexistence of multiple phytoplankton with comparable fitness. Superimposed on the decline in diversity seen from equator to pole were “hot spots” of enhanced diversity in some regions of energetic ocean circulation, which reflected lateral dispersal.

In both marine and terrestrial environments, many taxa exhibit a decline in species diversity with increasing latitude (1, 2), and this pattern has important implications for ecosystem structure and function (3). The extent to which and why marine phytoplankton may follow such patterns is not yet clear, although it has been argued that the biogeography of microbes is governed by a similar set of processes as for macroorganisms (4). There is some evidence of latitudinal diversity gradients among certain taxa of marine microbes, including bacterioplankton (5, 6) and coccolithophorids (7, 8), although the generality of these patterns, particularly in the open ocean, is, as yet, equivocal (9, 10).

In a recent study, a three-dimensional and time-varying global ocean circulation, biogeochemistry, and ecosystem model was initialized with a relatively large number (78) of virtual phytoplankton types whose traits were assigned stochastically from plausible ranges of possibilities (10–12). The modeled phytoplankton communities “self-assembled” according to the relative fitness of the phytoplankton types in the regionally and seasonally varying resource and predatory environment. The emergent phytoplankton populations captured the observed large-scale oceanic patterns in the distribution of phytoplankton biomass and community structure, including the observed niche differentiation among ecotypes of the cyanobacterium Prochlorococcus in the Atlantic Ocean (11).

Here, we have studied an ensemble of 10 integrations of the global model, each member having a different, stochastically seeded selection of phytoplankton types, to examine and interpret the emergent patterns of phytoplankton diversity. In each of the solutions, after a decade of integration, a dozen or so phytoplankton types account for more than 99% of the total global phytoplankton biomass. Others persist at low abundance or with limited geographic distribution, and some decline toward virtual extinction. Fast-growing “opportunist” phytoplankton tend to dominate the biomass of the variable high latitudes, whereas “gleaners” (those best able to survive on minimal resources) dominate the stable, low-latitude seas (12, 13). There is also a degree of local coexistence among phytoplankton types. On an annual, vertically averaged basis, the phytoplankton diversity in the euphotic zone (here assumed to be 0– to 260-m depth) is lower in the polar and subpolar oceans and higher in tropical and sub tropical latitudes (Fig. 1A).

This meridional gradient is clearly seen in the zonally averaged view (Fig. 1B) and is consistent with numerous observations of marine and terrestrial ecosystems (1, 2), including the sparse observations of marine microbial diversity (5–8). Superimposed on the model’s meridional gradient are “hot spots” of highest diversity, which are generally associated with regions of energetic circulation such as the western boundary currents. The Atlantic Ocean hot spots appear to be consistent with observations of increased diatom diversity near the North African and South American coasts (8).

The mechanisms for maintaining the diversity of life on Earth have long interested ecologists (14, 15), and the explanations for the meridional diversity gradient have been classified as historical, evolutionary, or ecological in nature (6, 16). Historical explanations invoke events and changes in Earth history, such as Milankovitch cycles, in setting current species diversity. Evolutionary explanations examine the rates of speciation and extinction and their balance through time (17, 18). These processes are not resolved in...