Multiplexing droplet-based single cell RNA-sequencing using natural genetic barcodes

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The confluence of microfluidic and sequencing technologies has enabled profiling of the

transcriptome[1, 2], epigenome[3], and chromatin conformation of single cells[4] at an

unprecedented scale. Initial applications of single cell RNA-sequencing have characterized

cellular heterogeneity in tumors[5, 6], tissues[7, 8], and response to stimulation[9]. More recently,

droplet-based technologies have significantly increased the throughput of single cell capture

and library preparation[1, 10], enabling transcriptome sequencing of thousands of cells from one

microfluidic reaction.

While improvements in biochemistry[11, 12] and microfluidics[13, 14] continue to increase the

number of cells that can be sequenced per sample, for many applications (e.g. differential

expression and genetic studies), sequencing thousands of cells each from many individuals

would better capture interindividual variability than sequencing more cells from a few

individuals. However, in standard workflows, running a separate microfluidic reaction for each

sample remains cost prohibitive[15]. Multiplexing could significantly reduce the per sample cost

by allowing cells from several individuals to be processed simultaneously, and reduce the per

cell cost by allowing higher flow rates due to the ability to detect and exclude doublets that

contain cells from two different individuals. Further, sample multiplexing limits the technical

variability associated with sample and library preparation, improving statistical power to

accurately estimate true biological effects[16].

We present a simple experimental design and computational algorithm, demuxlet, to

multiplex samples in dscRNA-seq without additional experimental modification (**Fig. 1A**). While

strategies to demultiplex cells from different species[1, 10, 17] or host and graft samples[17] have

been reported, no method is available for simultaneous demultiplexing and doublet detection

of cells from > 2 individuals. Inspired by models and algorithms developed for contamination

detection in DNA sequencing data[18], demuxlet is fast, accurate, scalable and works with

standard input formats[17, 19, 20].

At the heart of our strategy is a statistical model for predicting the probability of

observing a consistent 'genetic barcode', a set of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), in

the RNA-seq reads of a single cell and the genotypes (from SNP genotyping, imputation or DNA

sequencing) of donor samples. The model accounts for the base quality score of the RNA-

sequencing reads as previously described[18] and genotype uncertainties at unobserved SNPs

from imputation to large reference panels[21]. It then uses maximum likelihood to determine the

most likely sample identity for each cell using a mixture model. A small number of reads

overlapping common SNPs is sufficient to accurately identify the sample of origin. For a pool of

8 samples, 4 SNPs can uniquely assign a cell to the donor of origin (**Fig. 1B**), and 20 SNPs each

with minor allele frequency (MAF) of 50% can distinguish every sample with 98% probability.

The mixture model in demuxlet also uses genetic information to identify doublets

containing two cells from different individuals, which comprise most droplets containing

multiple cells. By multiplexing even a small number of samples, a doublet will have a high

probability ($1 - 1/N$, e.g. 87.5% for $N = 8$ samples) of containing cells from two individuals which

is detectable by the demuxlet model (**Fig. 1C**). The ability to recover the sample identity of each

cell ("demuxing") and identify most doublets enables experimental designs that significantly

increase the per sample throughput of current dscRNA-seq workflows.

We first assess the feasibility of our strategy and the performance of demuxlet by

analyzing multiplexed peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) from 8 patients with

systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Using a sequential pooling strategy, three pools of

equimolar concentrations of cells were generated (W1: patients S1-S4, W2: patients S5-S8 and

W3: patients S1-S8) and each loaded in a well on a 10X Chromium Single Cell instrument (**Fig.**

2A). 3,645, 4,254 and 6,205 single cells were obtained from each well and sequenced to an

average depth of 23k, 17k and 13k reads per cell.

Demuxlet identified 91% (3332/3645), 91% (3864/4254), and 86% (5348/6205) of

droplets as singlets from wells W1, W2 and W3, respectively. 25% (+/- 2.6%), 25% (+/- 4.6%)

and 12.5% (+/- 1.4%) of singlets from wells W1, W2 and W3 mapped to each donor, consistent

with equal mixing of 8 individuals. We estimate an error rate (number of cells assigned to

individuals not in the mixture) of 2/3332 (W1) and 0/3864 (W2) singlets by analyzing wells W1

and W2, each containing cells from two disjoint sets of 4 individuals (**Fig. 2B**), suggesting > 99%

of singlets were assigned to individuals correctly.

We next assess the ability of demuxlet to detect doublets in both simulated and real

data. 466/3645 (13%) cells were simulated as synthetic doublets by setting the cellular

barcodes of two sets of 466 cells from individuals S1 and S2 to be the same. Applied to the

simulated data, demuxlet identified 91% (426/466) of synthetic doublets as doublets or

ambiguous, correctly recovering the sample identity of both cells in 403/426 (95%) doublets

(**fig. S1**). Applied to real data from W1, W2 and W3, demuxlet identified 138/3645, 165/4254,

and 384/6205 doublets, corresponding to 5.0%, 5.2% and 7.1%, consistent with the linear

relationship between the number of cells sequenced and doublet rates estimated using a mixed

species experiment (**Fig. 2C**).

Sample demultiplexing enables individual-specific visualization of single cell data we call

'drop prints'. While both variability in cell type proportion and gene expression have been

previously observed in PBMCs, it has not been possible to fully control for batch effects due to

separate processing of samples[22, 23]. Singlets identified by demuxlet in all three wells cluster

into known PBMC subpopulations (**Fig. 2D**) and are not confounded by well to well effects (**fig.**

S2A)**.** While we found 6 differentially expressed genes (FDR < 0.05) between wells W1 and W2,

only 2 genes were differentially expressed in well W3 between W1 and W2 individuals (FDR <

0.05) (**fig. S2B**) suggesting sample multiplexing could reduce confounding such as library

preparation batch effects. Furthermore**,** for the same individuals, drop prints from two

different wells are qualitatively consistent, the estimates of cell type proportions for the same

individuals in W1 or W2 and W3 are highly correlated (R = 0.99) (**Fig. 2E** and **fig. S3**), and the

inferred cell type-specific expression profiles are correlated with bulk sequencing of sorted cell

populations (R=0.76-0.92) (**fig. S4**)**.** These results demonstrate that demuxlet recovers the

sample identity of single cells with high accuracy, identifies doublets at the expected rate, and

can allow for comparison of individuals within and across wells.

Demuxlet enables multiplexed experimental designs that increase the sample

throughput for profiling of interindividual responses across a variety of conditions. We applied

such a multiplexing strategy to characterize cell type-specific responses to IFN-β, a potent

cytokine that induces genome-scale changes in the transcriptional profiles of immune cells[24, 25].

From 8 lupus patients, 1M PBMCs each were isolated, sequentially pooled, and divided in two

aliquots. One sample was activated with recombinant IFN-β for 6 hours, a time point we

previously found to maximize the expression of interferon-sensitive genes (ISGs) in dendritic

cells (DCs) and T cells[26, 27]. A matched control sample was also cultured for 6 hours. From this

experiment, we captured and sequenced 14,619 control and 14,446 stimulated cells.

In control and stimulated experiments, demuxlet identified 83% (12138/14619) and 84%

(12167/14446) of droplets as singlets, and recovered the sample identity of 99% (12127/12138

and 12155/12167) of singlets. Detected doublets form distinct clusters in t-SNE space at the

periphery of other cell types, indicative of the expected enrichment of doublets for mixed cell

types in a heterogeneous population (**fig. S5**). The estimated doublet rate of 10.9% is consistent

with predicted rates based on the number of cells recovered, and the observed proportion of

doublets from each pair of individuals is highly correlated with the expected proportions

(R=0.98) (**Fig. 2C** and **fig. S6**).

Demultiplexing individuals enables the use of the 8 samples within a pool as biological

replicates to quantitatively assess cell type-specific responses to IFN-β stimulation. Consistent

with previous reports from bulk RNA-sequencing data, IFN-β stimulation induces widespread

transcriptomic changes observed as a shift in the t-SNE projections of singlets (**Fig. 3A**)[24]. After

assigning each singlet to a reference cell population[17], we identified 2,686 differentially

expressed genes (logFC > 2, FDR < 0.05) in at least one cell type in response to IFN-β stimulation

(**table S1**). These genes cluster into modules of cell type-specific responses enriched for distinct

gene regulatory processes (**Fig. 3B, table S2**). For example, the two clusters of upregulated

genes, pan-leukocyte (Cluster III: 401 genes, logFC > 2, FDR < 0.05) and CD14$^+$ specific (Cluster I:

767 genes, logFC > 2, FDR < 0.05), were enriched for general antiviral response (e.g. KEGG

Influenza A: Cluster III $P < 1.6 \times 10^{-5}$), chemokine signaling (Cluster I $P < 7.6 \times 10^{-3}$) and genes

implicated in SLE (Cluster I $P < 4.4 \times 10^{-3}$). The five clusters of downregulated genes were

enriched for antibacterial response (KEGG Legionellosis: Cluster II monocyte down $P < 5.5 \times 10^{-3}$)

and natural killer cell mediated toxicity (Cluster IV NK/Th cell down: $P < 3.6 \times 10^{-2}$). The

differential expression using cell type-specific estimates from single cell data recovers known

gene regulatory programs affected by interferon stimulation.

We next characterize interindividual variability in PBMC expression at baseline and in

response to IFN-β stimulation. In both control and stimulated cells, the variance of mean

expression among individuals is substantially higher than expected from synthetic replicates

(**Fig. 3C**). As previously reported[22, 28], cell type proportion varied significantly among individuals

and contributes to variability in gene expression **(fig. S7)**. The variance estimated from synthetic

replicates with matched cell type proportions is more concordant with the observed variance

(Lin's concordance = 0.54 versus 0.022, Pearson correlation = 0.78 versus 0.69, **Fig. 3C**-**D**).

However, comparing mean expression from synthetic replicates within cell types (Lin's

concordance = 0.007 - 0.20, Pearson correlation = 0.27 – 0.68) shows that there is

interindividual variability not explained simply by cell type proportion (**fig. S8**).

We then explored interindividual variability in expression within one cell type,

CD14$^+$CD16$^-$ monocytes. The correlation of mean expression between pairs of synthetic

replicates from the same individual (>99%) was greater than between different individuals

(~97%), indicating variation beyond sampling (**Fig. 3E**). We found 585 genes that have

significant interindividual variability in stimulated CD14$^+$ CD16$^-$ monocytes and 827 in control by

correlating the synthetic replicates across individuals (Pearson correlation, FDR < 0.05). The

variable genes in stimulated CD14$^+$CD16$^-$ monocytes and to a lesser extent in CD4$^+$ T cells ($P <$

9.3×10^{-4} and 4.5×10^{-2}, hypergeometric test, **Fig. 3F**) are enriched for differentially expressed

genes, consistent with our previous discovery of more IFN-β response-eQTLs in monocyte-

derived dendritic cells than CD4$^+$ T cells[26, 27]. We hypothesize that natural genetic variation

could explain interindividual variability in gene expression in our multiplexed data. For example,

schlafen family member 5 (SLFN5) and guanylate binding protein 3 (GBP3) expression are highly

correlated between replicates after IFN-β stimulation (R=0.92, P < 0.0011 and 0.80, P < 0.017).

The average expression of the two synthetic replicates are associated with known eQTLs in

CD14$^+$ monocytes and lymphoblastoid cell lines, respectively (SLFN5: rs11080327 P < 3.1x10^{-4},

GBP3: rs10493821 P < 2.1x10^{-2}, **Fig. 3G**)[26, 29]. These results suggest that single cell sequencing

recovers repeatable interindividual variation in gene expression and in two genes, is associated

with known genetic determinants.

We introduce demuxlet, a new computational method that enables simple and efficient

sample multiplexing for dscRNA-seq, validate its performance in simulated and real data, and

characterize single cell expression of PBMCs from SLE patients in several different conditions.

Our results demonstrate demuxlet provides reliable estimation of cell type proportion across

individuals, recovers cell type-specific transcriptional programs from mixed populations

consistent with previous reports, and identifies genes with interindividual variability[24]. The

capability to demultiplex and identify doublets using natural genetic variation significantly

reduces the per-sample and per-cell cost of single-cell RNA-sequencing, does not require

synthetic barcodes or split-pool strategies[30-34], and captures biological variability among

individual samples while limiting the effects of unwanted technical variability.

The application of single cell sequencing methods such as dscRNA-seq to larger numbers

of individuals is a promising approach to characterizing cellular heterogeneity among

individuals at baseline and in different environmental conditions, a crucial area for further

understanding of health and disease[35-37]. Experimental and computational methods for reliable

and efficient sample multiplexing could enable broad adoption of droplet-based RNA-seq for

population-scale studies, facilitating genetic and longitudinal analyses in relevant cell types and

conditions across a range of sampled individuals[38].

Fig. 1

Figure 1 – Demuxlet: demultiplexing and doublet identification from single cell data.

A) Pipeline for experimental multiplexing of unrelated individuals, loading onto droplet-based

single cell RNA-sequencing instrument, and computational demultiplexing (demux) and doublet

removal using demuxlet. Assuming equal mixing of 8 individuals, B) 4 genetic variants can

recover the sample identity of a cell, and C) 87.5% of doublets will contain cells from two

different samples.

Figure 2

Figure 2 – Performance of demuxlet. A) Experimental design for equimolar pooling of cells

from 8 unrelated samples (S1-S8) into three wells (W1-W3). W1 and W2 contain cells from two

disjoint sets of 4 individuals. W3 contains cells from all 8 individuals. B) Demultiplexing single

cells in each well recovers the expected individuals. C) Estimates of doublet rates versus

previous estimates from mixed species experiments. D) Cell type identity determined by

prediction to previously annotated PBMC data. E) t-SNE plot of two individuals (S1 and S5) from

different wells are qualitatively concordant.

Figure 3

Figure 3 – Interindividual variability in IFN-β response. A) t-SNE plot of unstimulated (blue) and

IFN-β-stimulated (red) PBMCs and the estimated cell types. B) Cell type-specific expression in

stimulated (left) and unstimulated (right) cells. Differentially expressed genes shown (FDR <

0.05, |log(FC)| > 1). Each column represents cell type-specific expression for each individual

from demuxlet. C) Cell type proportions for each individual in unstimulated and stimulated

cells. D) Observed variance (y-axis) in mean expression over all PBMCs from each individual

versus expected variance (x-axis) over synthetic replicates sampled across all cells (light blue,

pink) or replicates matched for cell type proportion (blue, red). E) Correlation between sample

replicates in control and stimulated cells. F) Number of significantly variable genes in each cell

type and condition. G) Mean expression of SLFN5 and GPB3 in two sample replicates labeled by

genotype.

Methods

Identifying the sample identity of each single cell.

We first describe the method to infer the sample identity of each cell in the absence of

doublets. Consider RNA-sequence reads from C barcoded droplets multiplexed across S

different samples, where their genotypes are available across V exonic variants. Let d_{cv} be the

number of unique reads overlapping with the v-th variant from the c-th droplet. Let $b_{cvi} \in$

$\{R, A, O\}, \ i \in \{1, \cdots, d_{cv}\}$ be the variant-overlapping base call from the i-th read, representing

reference (R), alternate (A), and other (O) alleles respectively. Let $e_{cvi} \in \{0,1\}$ be a latent

variable indicating whether the base call is correct (0) or not (1), then given $e_{cvi} = 0, b_{cvi} \in$

$\{R, A\}$ and $\sim \mathrm{Binomial}\left(2, \frac{g}{2}\right)$ when $g \in \{0,1,2\}$ is the true genotype of sample corresponding

to c-th droplet at v-th variant. When $e_{cvi} = 1$, we assume that $\mathrm{Pr}(b_{cvi}|g, e_{cvi})$ follows table S3.

e_{cvi} is assumed to follow $\mathrm{Bernoulli}\left(10^{-\frac{q_{cvi}}{10}}\right)$ where q_{cvi} is a phred-scale quality score of the

observed base call.

We allow uncertainty of observed genotypes at the v-th variant for the s-th sample

using $P_{sv}^{(g)} = \mathrm{Pr}(g|\mathrm{Data}_{sv})$, the posterior probability of a possible genotype g given external

DNA data Data_{sv} (e.g. sequence reads, imputed genotypes, or array-based genotypes). If

genotype likelihood $\mathrm{Pr}(\mathrm{Data}_{sv}|g)$ is provided (e.g. unphased sequence reads) instead, it can be

converted to a posterior probability scale using $P_{sv}^{(g)} = \mathrm{Pr}\left(\mathrm{Data}_{sv}|g\right)\mathrm{Pr}\left(g\right)$ where

$\mathrm{Pr}(g) \sim \mathrm{Binomial}(2, p_v)$ and p_v is the population allele frequency of the alternate allele. To

allow errors ε in the posterior probability, we replace it to $(1 - \varepsilon)P_{sv}^{(g)} + \varepsilon\mathrm{Pr}\left(g\right)$. The overall

likelihood that the c-th droplet originated from the s-th sample is

$$L_c(s) = \prod_{v=1}^{V}\left[\sum_{g=0}^{2}\left\{\prod_{i=1}^{d_{cv}}(\sum_{e=0}^{1}\Pr(b_{cvi}|g,e))P_{sv}^{(g)}\right\}\right] \tag{1}$$

In the absence of doublets, we use the maximum likelihood to determine the best-matching

sample as $\text{argmax}_s[L_c(s)]$.

Screening for droplets containing multiple samples.

To identify doublets, we implement a mixture model to calculate the likelihood that the

sequence reads originated from two individuals, and the likelihoods are compared to determine

whether a droplet contains cells from one or two samples. If sequence reads from the *c*-th

droplet originate from two different samples, s_1, s_2 with mixing proportions $(1 - \alpha) : \alpha$, then

the likelihood in (1) can be represented as the following mixture distribution[18],

$L_c(s_1, s_2, \alpha) = \prod_{v=1}^{V}\left[\sum_{g_1,g_2}\left\{\prod_{i=1}^{d_{cv}}(\sum_{e=0}^{1}(1-\alpha)\Pr(b_{cvi}|g_1,e) + \alpha\Pr(b_{cvi}|g_2,e))P_{sv}^{(g_1)}P_{sv}^{(g_2)}\right\}\right]$

217   To reduce the computational cost, we consider discrete values of $\alpha \in \{\alpha_1, \cdots, \alpha_M\}$, (e.g.

5 - 50% by 5%). We determine that it is a doublet between samples s_1, s_2 if and only if

$\frac{\max_{s_1,s_2,\alpha} L_c(s_1,s_2,\alpha)}{\max_s L_c(s)} \geq t$ and the most likely mixing proportion is estimated to be

$\text{argmax}_\alpha L_c(s_1, s_2, \alpha)$. We determine that the cell contains only a single individual *s* if

$\frac{\max_{s_1,s_2,\alpha} L_c(s_1,s_2,\alpha)}{\max_s L_c(s)} \leq \frac{1}{t}$. The less confident droplets, we classify cells as ambiguous. While we

consider only doublets for estimating doublet rates, we remove all doublets and ambiguous

droplets to conservatively estimate singlets. Figure S1 illustrates the distribution of singlet,

doublet likelihoods and the decision boundaries when t = 2 was used.

Isolation and preparation of PBMC samples.

Peripheral blood mononuclear cells were isolated from patient donors, Ficoll separated, and

cryopreserved by the UCSF Core Immunologic Laboratory (CIL). PBMCs were thawed in a 37°C

water bath, and subsequently washed and resuspended in EasySep buffer. Cells were treated

with DNAseI and incubated for 15 min at RT before filtering through a 40um column. Finally,

the cells were washed in EasySep and resuspended in 1x PBMS and 0.04% bovine serum

albumin. Cells from 8 donors were then re-concentrated to 1M cells per mL and then serially

pooled. At each pooling stage, 1M cells per mL were combined to result in a final sample pool

with cells from all donors.

IFN-β stimulation and culture.

Prior to pooling, samples from 8 individuals were separated into two aliquots each. One aliquot

of PBMCs was activated by 100 U/mL of recombinant IFN-β (PBL Assay Science) for 6 hours

according to the published protocol[26]. The second aliquot was left untreated. After 6 hours, the

8 samples for each condition were pooled together in two final pools (stimulated cells and

control cells) as described above.

Droplet-based capture and sequencing.

Cellular suspensions were loaded onto the 10x Chromium instrument (10x Genomics) and

sequenced as described in Zheng et al[17]. The cDNA libraries were sequenced using a custom

program on 10 lanes of Illumina HiSeq 2500 Rapid Mode, yielding 1.8B total reads and 25K

reads per cell. At these depths, we recovered > 90% of captured transcripts in each sequencing

experiment.

Bulk isolation and sequencing.

PBMCs from lupus patients were isolated and prepared as described above. Once resuspended

in EasySep buffer, the EasyEights Magnet was used to sequentially isolate CD14$^+$ (using the

EasySep Human CD14 positive selection kit II, cat #17858), CD19$^+$ (using the EasySep Human

CD19 positive selection kit II, cat #17854), CD8$^+$ (EasySep Human CD8 positive selection kitII,

cat#17853), and CD4$^+$ cells (EasySep Human CD4 T cell negative isolation kit (cat #17952)

according to the kit protocol. RNA was extracted using the RNeasy Mini kit (#74104), and

reverse transcription and tagmentation were conducted according to Picelli et al. using the

SmartSeq2 protocol[39, 40]. After cDNA synthesis and tagmentation, the library was amplified with

the Nextera XT DNA Sample Preparation Kit (#FC-131-1096) according to protocol, starting with

0.2ng of cDNA. Samples were then sequenced on one lane of the Illumina HiSeq 4000 with

paired end 100bp read length, yielding 350M total reads.

Alignment and initial processing of single cell sequencing data.

We used the CellRanger v1.1 and v1.2 software with the default settings to process the raw

FASTQ files, align the sequencing reads to the hg19 transcriptome, and generate a filtered UMI

expression profile for each cell[17]. The raw UMI counts from all cells and genes with nonzero

counts across the population of cells were used to generate t-SNE profiles.

Cell type classification and clustering.

To identify known immune cell populations in PBMCs, we used the Seurat package to perform

unbiased clustering on the 2.7k PBMCs from Zheng et al., following the publicly available

Guided Clustering Tutorial[17, 41]. The FindAllMarkers function was then used to find the top 20

markers for each of the 8 identified cell types. Cluster averages were calculated by taking the

average raw count across all cells of each cell type. For each cell, we calculated the Spearman

correlation of the raw counts of the marker genes and the cluster averages, and assigned each

cell to the cell type to which it had maximum correlation.

Differential expression analysis.

Demultiplexed individuals were used as replicates for differential expression analysis. For each

gene, raw counts were summed for each individual. We used the DESeq2 package to detect

differentially expressed genes between control and stimulated conditions[42]. Genes with

baseMean > 1 were filtered out from the DESeq2 output, and the qvalue package was used to

calculate FDR < 0.05 [43].

Estimation of interindividual variability in PBMCs.

For each individual, we found the mean expression of each gene with nonzero counts. The

mean was calculated from the log2 single cell UMI counts normalized to the median count for

each cell. To measure interindividual variability, we then calculated the variance of the mean

expression across all individuals. Lin's concordance correlation coefficient was used to compare

the agreement of observed data and synthetic replicates. Synthetic replicates were generated

by sampling without replacement either from all cells or cells matched for cell type proportion.

Estimation of interindividual variability within cell types.

For each cell type, we generated two bulk equivalent replicates for each individual by summing

raw counts of cells sampled without replacement. We used DESeq2 to generate variance-

stabilized counts across all replicates. To filter for expressed genes, we performed all

subsequent analyses on genes with 5% of samples with > 0 counts. The correlation of replicates

and QTL detection was performed on the log2 normalized counts. Pearson correlation of the

two replicates from each of the 8 individuals was used to find genes with significant

interindividual variability.

Single cell and bulk RNA-sequencing data has been deposited in the Gene Expression Omnibus

under the accession number GSE96583. Demuxlet software is freely available at

https://github.com/hyunminkang/apigenome.

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