

# The role of trade-offs and feedbacks in shaping integrated plasticity and behavioral correlations

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## LAY SUMMARY

Correlations between behaviors are common but observed patterns of these correlations are, at least superficially, inconsistent with expectations of trade-offs. This mismatch is potentially resolved via feedbacks between behaviors and energy availability, suggesting important new research directions.

## ABSTRACT

How behaviors vary among individuals and covary with other behaviors has been a major topic of interest over the last two decades. Unfortunately, proposed theoretical and conceptual frameworks explaining the seemingly ubiquitous observation of behavioral (co)variation have rarely successfully generalized. Two observations perhaps explain this failure: First, phenotypic correlations between behaviors are more strongly influenced by correlated and reversible plastic changes in behavior than by “behavioral syndromes”. Second, while trait correlations are frequently assumed to arise via trade-offs, the observed pattern of correlations is not consistent with simple pair-wise trade-offs. A possible resolution to the apparent inconsistency between observed correlations and a role for trade-offs is provided by state-behavior feedbacks. This is critical because the inconsistency between data and theory represents a major failure in our understanding of behavioral evolution. These two primary observations emphasize the importance of an increased research focus on correlated reversible plasticity in behavior—frequently estimated and then disregarded as within-individual covariances.

## KEY WORDS

behavioral syndromes, integrated plasticity, state dependence, trade-off, feed-back

## DATA AND MODEL AVAILABILITY

Model code, as well as the data associated with Figures 2 & 3, are available at [github.com/DochtermannLab/FeedbacksModel](https://github.com/DochtermannLab/FeedbacksModel). Both code and data will be made available at Dryad if accepted.

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## INTRODUCTION

1 Despite almost two decades of intensive research effort, overarching explanations for why  
2 behavioral responses are frequently correlated remain elusive. Here, I argue that this stems  
3 from two key empirical findings that have not been fully appreciated. First, behavioral  
4 correlations are more strongly influenced by within-individual correlations than they are  
5 by behavioral syndromes (Table 1A, Box1). Second, bivariate trade-offs are an insufficient  
6 explanation for—and inconsistent with—observed behavioral correlations. Instead,  
7 observed correlations are consistent with a combination of feedbacks (positive and  
8 negative) between behaviors and states.

### *1. Understanding how among and within individual variation contribute to behavioral correlations*

9 Much of the research examining behavioral correlations over the last two decades has  
10 focused on among-individual correlations, i.e., “behavioral syndromes” (Figure 1A & 1B,  
11 Box 1; Sih et al. 2004a, Sih et al. 2004b, Dingemanse et al. 2010, Dingemanse et al. 2012).  
12 This interest has been reasonable because behavioral syndromes connect to both  
13 underlying genetic correlations and developmental processes. As such, behavior  
14 correlations can directly influence evolutionary outcomes (Dochtermann and Dingemanse  
15 2013, Royauté et al. 2020). This clearly embeds behavioral syndrome research into the  
16 broader realms of evolutionary biology. Unfortunately, this focus on syndromes ignores the  
17 fact that behavioral correlations are, instead, more strongly influenced by within-individual  
18 correlations (Box 1, Figure 1, Table 1A). This has led to a disconnect between research  
19 effort and biology.

20 Within-individual correlations represent the occurrence of correlated *changes* in  
21 behaviors at the level of an individual. For example, a negative within-individual  
22 correlation between aggression and exploratory propensity would mean that when an  
23 individual increases its aggression, it also decreases its activity (Figure 1). This correlated  
24 change can occur even if, on average, more aggressive individuals are also more active  
25 (Figure 1).

26 That behavioral correlations at the phenotypic level are more strongly influenced by  
27 within-individual correlations than by behavioral syndromes is a necessary conclusion  
28 given observed behavioral repeatabilities. Due to the mathematical relationship of a  
29 phenotypic correlation to its constituent parts (Box 1), whenever repeatability is less than  
30 0.5, the phenotypic correlation is more strongly influenced by within-individual  
31 correlations than among-individual correlations (Dingemanse et al. 2012, Dingemanse and  
32 Dochtermann 2013). Bell et al.’s (2009) meta-analysis of repeatabilities—a keystone

33 contribution to our understanding of behavioral variation—found that the average  
34 repeatability of behaviors was about 0.4. Consequently, behavioral correlations are, on  
35 average, most strongly influenced by within-individual correlations (Box 1).

36 Within-individual correlations include—but are not limited to (see Table 1B)—  
37 correlated plastic responses to temporary environmental variation; specifically, responses  
38 to unmeasured or unmodeled environmental variation. This correlated reversible plasticity  
39 is akin to “phenotypic flexibility” (Piersma and Van Gils 2011) but correlated across  
40 multiple behaviors. Despite more strongly influencing behavioral correlations than do  
41 behavioral syndromes (Box 1), within-individual correlations have received much less  
42 direct theoretical or empirical attention from behavioral researchers.

**Box 1. The relationship of behavioral syndromes and reversible plasticity to behavioral correlations: the primacy of correlated reversible plasticity**

Behavioral correlations at the population and phenotypic level ( $r_p$ ) emerge from the joint contributions of among-individual correlations, i.e. behavioral syndromes ( $r_A$ ), and within-individual correlations ( $r_w$ , Figure 1; (Dingemanse et al. 2012)). The relative influence of each of these on observed correlations is mediated by the repeatability of the behaviors of interest ( $\tau_1$  and  $\tau_2$ ):

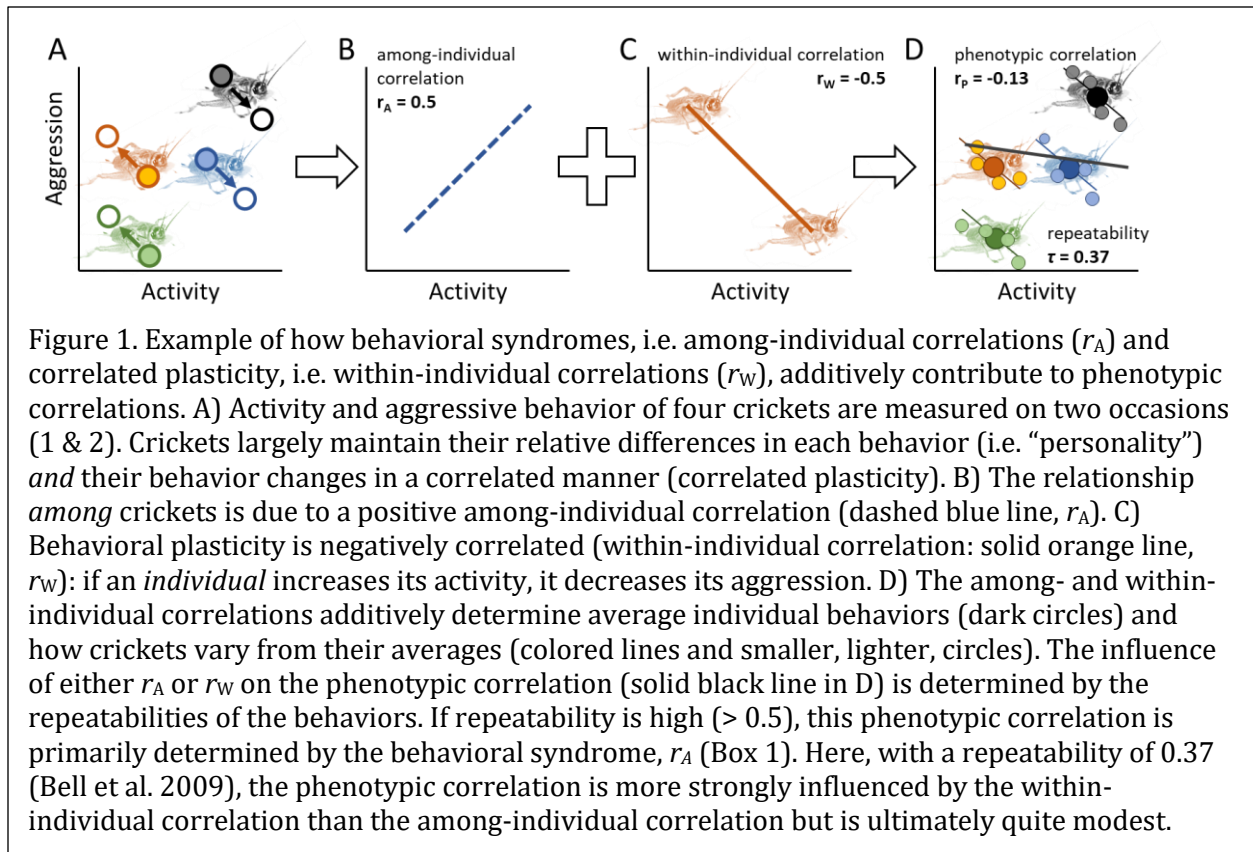
$$r_p = r_A \sqrt{\tau_1 \tau_2} + r_w \sqrt{(1 - \tau_1)(1 - \tau_2)}$$

$r_A$  is the statistical definition of a behavioral syndrome (Dingemanse et al. 2012) and, as repeatability decreases, the contribution of behavioral syndromes to phenotypic correlations necessarily decreases. At the extreme, if  $\tau$  for either behavior is 0, then  $r_p$  is entirely determined by the  $r_w$ . Moreover,  $r_w$  contributes more strongly to  $r_p$  than does  $r_A$  when geometric mean repeatability is less than 0.5 (Dingemanse and Dochtermann 2013). Based on meta-analysis (Bell et al. 2009) we know that average  $\tau$ s are around 0.4 and, consequently,  $r_w$ , on average influences  $r_p$  more strongly than does  $r_A$ . Put another way, within-individual correlations have an average 1.5 times greater influence on phenotypic correlations than do behavioral syndromes.

Importantly,  $r_w$  includes correlated reversible plasticity (Figure 1), though this plasticity will not necessarily be adaptive and errors both in the response to cues by organisms or in measurement also contribute to  $r_w$  (Table 1).

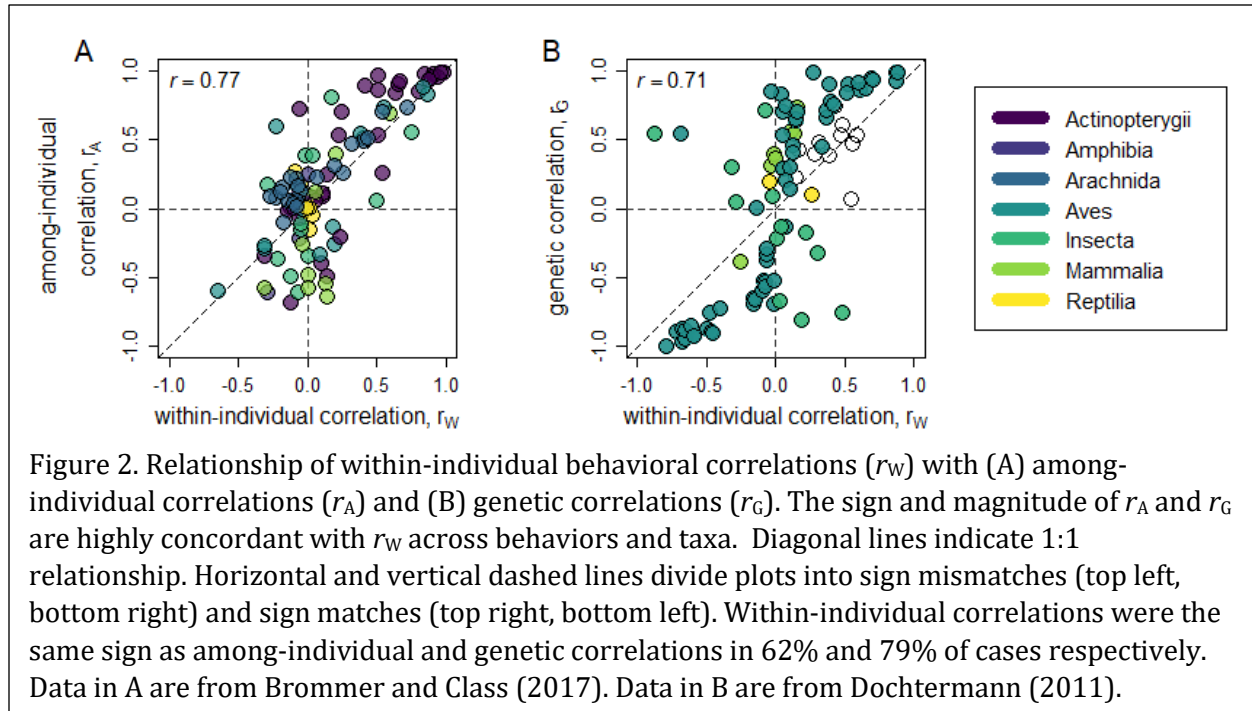
*2. Interpreting patterns of correlations and indications, or lack thereof, of a role for trade-offs*

43 A possible factor shaping correlated plastic responses are trade-offs in investment of  
44 energy (or other resources) into behaviors. For example, energy used during agonistic  
45 interactions is not available for exploring new areas. Accordingly, we would expect that as  
46 individuals increase investment in one behavior, they decrease investment in another  
47 (Figure 1A), generating negative within-individual correlations (Figure 1C). If individuals  
48 differ in their ability to acquire resources, this results in the familiar “big house, big car”  
49 scenario from life-history theory (Van Noordwijk and de Jong 1986, Reznick et al. 2000):  
50 high variation in acquisition (relative to variation in allocation) results in a positive among-  
51 individual correlation despite underlying trade-offs. However, because behavioral  
52 researchers frequently change the sign of behavioral measures to aid in the ecological



53 interpretation of behavioral assays, it is not the case that among-individual correlations are  
54 strictly expected to be positive and within-individual correlations be negative. Instead, if  
55 trade-offs underpin behavioral correlations, we would expect among-individual and  
56 within-individual correlations to be of *opposite signs* (Figure 1D; Downs and Doehtermann  
57 2014).

58 Meta-analyses have examined behavioral correlations at the genetic, among-  
59 individual, and within-individual levels (Doehtermann 2011, Brommer and Class 2017).  
60 These analyses have demonstrated that correlations across levels are generally concordant  
61 as to their signs and magnitudes (Figure 2). As suggested above, this concordance of signs  
62 suggests either a *potential* lack of trade-offs in the expression of behaviors or that variation  
63 in acquisition is low relative to variation in allocation. Of course, it is also possible that  
64 many of the analyzed behaviors should not be expected to trade-off due to naming fallacies  
65 obscuring that the same behavior is actually being measured in different ways (Carter et al.  
66 2013) or because limiting resources differ between behaviors. Moreover, because  
67 phenotypes consist of many, many behaviors and other traits, any trade-offs would not  
68 typically be expected to exist solely between two traits. Nonetheless, the results in Figure 2  
69 suggest that bivariate trade-offs alone are *insufficient* to explain patterns of among- and  
70 within-individual correlations alone.



### 3. Feedbacks as a potential component influencing behavioral correlations

71 An alternative mechanism for understanding behavioral correlations builds on a  
72 simple model of trade-offs by adding feedbacks between underlying state and behaviors.  
73 Sih et al. (2015) proposed that among-individual differences in behavior—i.e.,  
74 “personality”—can be generated by feedbacks between behavior and underlying state.  
75 Specifically, Sih et al. (2015) proposed that positive feedbacks can explain the emergence of  
76 personality variation. This was supported by a model where the intensity of initial  
77 behavioral expression resulted in feedbacks that then shaped an individual’s future  
78 behavioral expression.

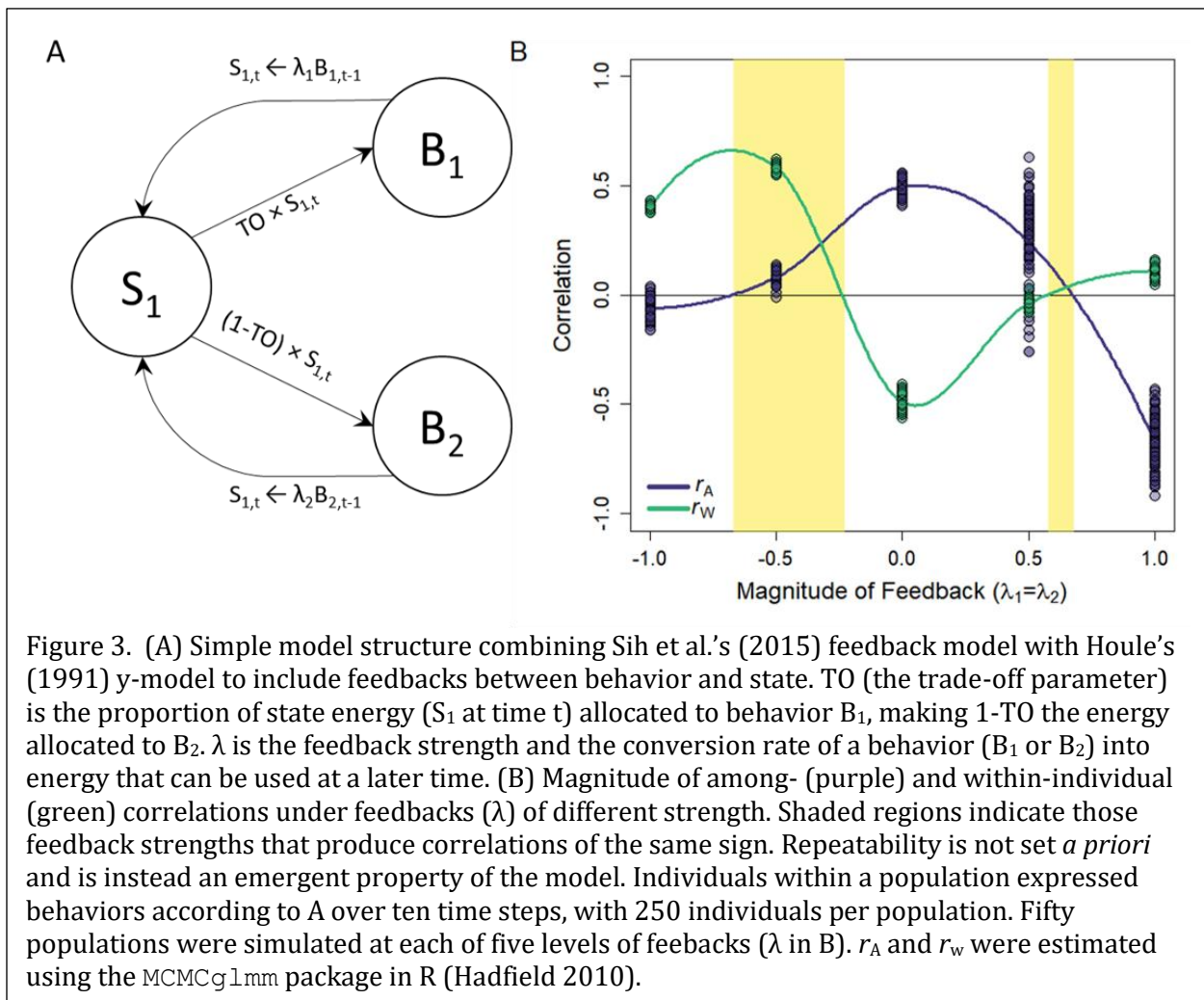
79 To determine whether feedbacks similarly produce both behavioral syndromes and  
80 within-individual correlations, I extended the Sih et al. (2015) model to two traits following  
81 Houle’s (1991) classic y-model (Figure 3A). The y-model is a simple representation of  
82 trade-offs where “state” or some other proxy for energy ( $S_1$ ) is allocated to expression of  
83 one of two traits ( $B_1$  or  $B_2$ , Figure 3A). Because energy allocated to one trait at a particular  
84 time ( $TO \times S_{1,t}$ ) is not available for allocation to the other trait ( $(1-TO) \times S_{2,t}$ ), a trade-off  
85 exists between them.

86 Following this framework, I modeled the expression of two behaviors ( $B_1$  and  $B_2$ ) as  
87 emerging from the investment of energy (based on “state”) into each, with the amount of  
88 energy invested trading off between behaviors. In this model the two behaviors  
89 subsequently affect the gain of state/resources for use in the future expression of behavior

90 via feedbacks ( $\lambda$ , the proportion of energy added back to  $S_1$ , Figure 3A). Biologically, such  
 91 feedbacks might arise if, for example, exploratory propensity is positively correlated with  
 92 energy gain. In such a case, individuals with an initially high state can explore more, gaining  
 93 more energy that can be invested in even greater exploration and energy gain in the  
 94 future—a positive feedback.

95 I modeled varied magnitudes of feedbacks, both positive and negative, and analyzed  
 96 modeled populations to determine resulting the among- and within-individual correlations  
 97 (Figure 3B). At the start of the model, state differed among individuals due to stochastic  
 98 variation. This seeded the population with variation in initial acquisition. In natural  
 99 populations, individuals may similarly initially differ due to developmental stochasticity,  
 100 parental investment, genetic differences, and other environmental factors.

101 In the absence of feedbacks ( $\lambda_1 = \lambda_2 = 0$ , Figure 3), this model reduces to the general  
 102 structure of models developed by Houle (1991) and Van Noordwijk and de Jong (1986).  
 103 Consequently, without feedbacks, the trade-off in allocation along with underlying



104 variation in initial acquisition results in positive among-individual ( $r_A$ ) and negative within-  
105 individual correlations ( $r_w$ , Figure 3B), i.e., negatively correlated plasticity plus different  
106 signs for the two correlations. In this case, within-individual variation is generated by  
107 stochasticity in how much is invested in one behavior and thus how much is available for  
108 the other. For example, individuals might differentially allocate energy to growth versus  
109 activity at different periods of their life.

110 In contrast, with both negative and positive feedbacks (negative and positive values  
111 of  $\lambda$  respectively), the within-individual correlation becomes increasingly positive (Figure  
112 3B). Simultaneously, negative and positive feedbacks lead to a reduction in among-  
113 individual correlations, with these correlations becoming negative and trade-offs becoming  
114 particularly apparent at the among-individual level with strong positive feedback.  
115 Importantly, this model identifies both positive and negative feedbacks in two disjunct  
116 ranges that result in among-individual correlations and integrated plasticity of the same  
117 sign (shaded regions of Figure 3B). This suggests that feedbacks might partially explain the  
118 patterns of correlations observed in Figure 2.

119 The potential for state-behavior feedbacks combined with trade-offs to explain  
120 observed patterns of correlations adds to several prior models that suggested state might  
121 generate consistent individual differences and phenotypic behavioral correlations (Dall  
122 2004, Wolf et al. 2007, Luttbegg and Sih 2010, Dall et al. 2012). However, these prior models  
123 did not separately examine among- and within-individual correlations nor the relationship  
124 between them. State-behavior feedbacks are also implied in existing conceptual  
125 frameworks, such as the pace-of-life syndrome hypothesis (Réale et al. 2010), though  
126 support for such overarching explanations remains elusive (e.g. Niemelä and Dingemanse  
127 2018, Royauté et al. 2018).

#### 4. Conclusions

128 Given that within-individual correlations more strongly influence observed  
129 correlations between behaviors than do behavioral syndromes, the mismatch in effort to  
130 understand these correlations over the last fifteen years has hindered our general  
131 understanding of behavioral correlations. While considerably more investigation is  
132 required, the simple model presented here suggests that feedbacks might play a role in  
133 shaping both behavioral syndromes and integrated plasticity. This potential for feedbacks  
134 to shape correlations can be empirically addressed via manipulation of food availability  
135 (e.g. MacGregor et al. 2021), manipulating population densities, and longitudinal  
136 measurements of both state and behavior (Sih et al. 2015). Importantly, within-individual  
137 correlations can only be estimated with specific study designs (Dingemanse and

138 Dochtermann 2013). Regardless, whether focused on feedbacks or other potential causes,  
139 our understanding of behavioral correlations can only advance if more—and careful—  
140 attention is paid to within-individual correlations.

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Table 1. A. Parameters characterizing behavioral associations. B. Some possible contributors to within-individual behavioral correlations. If either active or passive plasticity are elicited in response to known and measured environmental parameters, they can be explicitly modeled. Otherwise, they will contribute to within-individual variation and covariation. Similar processes contribute to the irreversible plasticity (aka developmental plasticity), which contributes to among-individual correlations (Dingemans and Dochtermann 2014). The contribution of each component of within-individual correlations can be determined by breaking  $r_w$  down into constituent parts, similar to how a phenotypic correlation was broken down in Box 1.

A.	Also known as	Definition	
Phenotypic correlations		The standardized covariance between two behaviors. Describes the strength and direction of association.	(Sih et al. 2004a, Sih et al. 2004b, Dingemans et al. 2010)
Among-individual correlations	Behavioral syndromes	Correlations in an individual's behavioral responses	(Dingemans et al. 2012, Dingemans and Dochtermann 2013)
Within-individual correlations	Residual correlations	Correlations in <i>changes</i> in an individual's responses	
B.	Definition		
Active reversible plasticity	changes in an individual's behavior expressed in response to environmental cues indicative of selective pressures		(Piersma and Drent 2003, Piersma and Van Gils 2011)
Passive reversible plasticity	changes in response to environmental conditions rather than specific cues of selective pressures; includes passive responses to abiotic conditions, such as hypoxia		(Whitman and Agrawal 2009)
Reversible organismal error	changes to an organism's phenotype in response to an incorrectly processed cue		(Westneat et al. 2015)
Measurement error	error in quantification of behaviors; can be correlated due to bias and		(Westneat et al. 2015)

for a discussion of additional contributors to within-individual (co)variation see: (Piersma and Drent 2003, Whitman and Agrawal 2009, Piersma and Van Gils 2011, Westneat et al. 2015, Berdal and Dochtermann 2019)