Parental care maintains genetic variation by relaxing selection

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Abstract

Benevolent social behaviours, such as parental care, are predicted to relax selection against

deleterious mutations, enabling them to persist. We tested this prediction experimentally

using burying beetles *Nicrophorus vespilloides*, which make an edible nest for their larvae,

whom they nourish and defend. For 20 generations, we allowed replicate experimental

burying beetle populations to evolve either with post-hatching care ('Full Care' populations)

or without it ('No Care' populations). Lineages were seeded from these experimental

populations and then inbred to expose differences in their mutation load. Outbred lineages

served as controls. Half the lineages received post-hatching care, half did not. We found that

inbred lineages derived from the Full Care populations had lower breeding success and went

extinct more quickly than lineages derived from the No Care populations – but only when

offspring received no post-hatching care. We infer that Full Care lineages carried more

recessive deleterious mutations. When parents provided care, the developmental environment

was sufficiently benign that broods had higher survival, whether the population had a high

mutation load or not. We suggest that the increased mutation load caused by parental care

increases a population's dependence upon care. This could explain why care is seldom lost

once it has evolved.

Introduction

Classical population genetics models imagine that populations attain an equilibrium level of genetic variation (known as mutation-selection balance [1-5]). New genetic mutations arise spontaneously, through diverse mechanisms, and increase genetic variation in the population [e.g. 5, 6]. However, since the majority of new mutations are mildly deleterious [e.g. 5, 6], they are quickly purged by natural selection. Mutation-selection balance is theoretically achieved when the rate of input of new genetic variants through spontaneous mutation is perfectly balanced by the rate of their elimination by selection [1-5].

The concept of mutation-selection balance has long been used as a theoretical reference point for understanding the effects of mutation rate on the health of human populations, partly because it is recognised that humans can modify their own environment and so change the forces of natural selection to which they are exposed [1-5]. Better quality housing, improved diets, and benevolent social activities, such as a welfare state or the universal provision of medical care, are suggested to have been particularly influential in preventing natural selection from purging deleterious mutations in human populations [1, 2, 4, 5]. Consistent with this suggestion, recent comparative genomic analyses have revealed a greater incidence of genetic pathologies in western industrialised populations than in traditional, pre-industrial human societies which are more exposed to natural selection [4, 5, 7-9]. Nevertheless, it is impossible to demonstrate that a more benign physical and social environment, in which selection is relaxed, has *caused* this difference.

Elaborate architecture, enhanced access to resources and benevolent social behaviours are relatively commonplace in other animals too, especially among the many bird, mammal and

insect species that cooperate with each other and live socially [10]. For these species, any

causal effects of this social and physical environment on genetic variation can more easily be

investigated. A complication in other animal societies, however, is that additional factors

might perturb the mutation-selection balance. For example, animals that breed cooperatively

also tend to produce fewer, larger offspring. This life history strategy is known to reduce

genetic diversity [11] and could potentially oppose, or even conceal, any increases in genetic

variation that are due to cooperation buffering the effects of natural selection. Cooperative

animal societies are also commonly associated with a high incidence of reproductive skew.

Since only a few dominant individuals are typically able to reproduce, the effective

population size is greatly reduced [12]. This can lead to a reduction in the efficiency of natural

selection and a greater influence of genetic drift [6], potentially confounding any increases in

genetic variation that are due solely to relaxed selection. Similarly, animal societies typically

comprise related individuals that derive kin-selected benefits from their cooperative social

interactions. Theoretical analyses have shown that kin selection acts more weakly than direct

selection [13]. Consequently, loci under kin selection are predicted to harbour more sequence

variation than loci under direct selection [3, 13].

We tested the effect of kin-selected cooperative actions on the maintenance of genetic

variation by focusing on parental care, a widespread form of cooperation [14]. Since care is

commonly exhibited by pair-breeding individuals, this form of cooperation is unlikely to

change effective population size – eliminating this potentially confounding effect. By building

protective nests, defending their brood from attack and nourishing them, animal parents shield

their young from environmental stressors [15] and weaken the correlation between the

phenotypic variation seen by selection and the underlying genetic variation [3, 16]. In these

ways, parents relax selection on the offspring phenotype [3, 15-18] theoretically allowing

mildly deleterious alleles to accumulate [3, 6, 15]. Previous experimental work with insects

has shown that parental care relaxes selection sufficiently that new mutants [15] and inbred

offspring [19] can survive - at least for one generation. However, it is not yet known whether

parental care also enables mildly deleterious mutations to persist over multiple generations.

We tested this prediction by evolving replicate laboratory populations of burying beetles

Nicrophorus vespilloides under sharply contrasting levels of parental care, for 20 generations.

Comparing populations within species also allowed us to eliminate the confounding effect of

propagule number on genetic diversity [11]. Burying beetles breed on the body of a small

dead vertebrate [20], which the parents jointly convert into a carrion nest by removing the fur

or feathers, rolling the flesh into a ball, covering it with anti-microbial anal exudates, and

burying it. This is pre-hatching parental care [21]. Parents also guard and feed larvae after

hatching, though larvae can survive in the lab with no post-hatching care at all [22]. In two of

our evolving populations, larvae were able to receive both pre-hatching and post-hatching

parental care (these were called the 'Full Care' lines) while in two other populations we

prevented parents from supplying any post-hatching care by removing them before the larvae

hatched, after the carrion nest was complete (these were called the 'No Care' lines). During

the first 20 or so generations of experimental evolution, No Care lines rapidly adapted to a life

without parental care [23], through divergent phenotypic change in both larval [e.g. 24]) and

parental [21] traits.

To determine whether parental care causes deleterious genetic variation to accumulate over

the generations, we inbred sub-populations, each derived from the replicate experimental

evolving populations, for 8 successive generations (we called this The Evolutionary History

Experiment). For these 8 generations, we measured the extent to which inbreeding reduced

measures of reproductive success in comparison with control outbred populations. To

determine whether parental care could temper the rate of extinction (as implied by [19]), in

half of all our treatments parents were allowed to provide care after their offspring hatched,

while in the remainder they were prevented from supplying post-hatching care. This

generated 8 different treatments in total (see Supplementary Figure 1, for the design of the

Evolutionary History Experiment).

We used the data from the Evolutionary History Experiment, to test three predictions: (1) that

the No Care environment is harsher than the Full Care environment. (2) That the more benign

conditions of the Full Care environment relax selection and promote the survival of more

genetic variants. (3) That inbred populations from the Full Care lines should exhibit greater

inbreeding depression than inbred populations from the No Care lines (having accumulated a

greater number of deleterious recessive mutations under relaxed selection). The outbred

populations acted as a control treatment for tests of all three predictions.

Methods

Nicrophorus vespilloides **natural history.**

The common burying beetle *N. vespilloides* breeds on a small dead vertebrate (like a songbird

or mouse). The larvae hatch from eggs laid nearby in the soil and crawl to their carrion nest,

which they can feed upon themselves [20]. Once at the carcass, larvae receive post-hatching

biparental care. Parents supply fluids to their offspring through oral trophallaxis, and defend

their brood and the carrion nest from attack by predators, microbes and rival beetles [20]. The

duration and extent of post-hatching care are highly variable, however. For example, when

wild beetles are brought into the lab to breed, roughly 5% of larvae receive no post-hatching

care at all, yet larvae can still survive to become reproductively competent adults (e.g. [22,

25]. Within roughly a week of hatching, the larvae complete development and at this point

(which we refer to as 'dispersal), they start to crawl away from the scant remains of the

carcass to pupate in the soil. The parents, meanwhile, fly off in search of a new carcass.

Experimental evolution

The experimental lines used in this work have been described in detail elsewhere [e.g. 21, 24].

In brief, we established a large founding population of *N. vespilloides* by interbreeding wild-

caught individuals from four different woodlands. This was then divided into four

experimental lines. In two lines, larvae experienced 'Full Care' at each generation, with both

parents staying in the breeding box throughout the breeding bout and able to provide post-

hatching care as well as pre-hatching care. In the other two 'No Care' lines, parents engaged

in pre-hatching care but at each generation they were removed from the breeding box around

53 h after they were paired, so that they never interacted with their larvae. The work reported

here began when these lines had been exposed to 20 generations of experimental evolution

under these contrasting regimes of care.

Evolutionary History Experiment

Preparatory common garden generation

The experiment began by exposing individuals drawn from the four lines (Full Care replicated

twice and No Care replicated twice) to a common garden Full Care environment for one

generation (N = 60 pairs for each No Care line (to counter-balance the slightly lower breeding

success caused by the No Care environment) and N = 50 pairs for each Full Care line). In this

way, we minimised any potentially confounding transgenerational effects prior to starting the

Evolutionary History Experiment.

Overview (see Supplementary Figure 1)

Broods from the common garden generation were used to seed lineages in the experimental

treatments: broods derived from the Full Care populations (FC_{POP}) founded lineages that were

Inbred or Outbred, in either a Full Care (FC_{ENV}) or No Care (NC_{ENV}) environment, and the

same was true for broods derived from the No Care populations (NC_{POP}). Thus, for each

experimental line of origin, individuals in the different treatments came from a similar genetic

pool. From Generation 1 onwards, half of the beetles drawn from each line were exposed to

continuous inbreeding (full-sibling crosses) for up to 8 generations (by which point all the

inbred lineages had gone extinct) (N = c. 45 crosses per treatment at Generation 1). The

remaining beetles were outbred in identical conditions to provide a control baseline for

comparison with the inbred lineages (N = c. 35-40 crosses per treatment, per generation). Half

of all inbred lineages, and half of the outbreeding populations, were allowed to provide post-

hatching care for their young (Full Care environment), while the remaining beetles were only

allowed to provide pre-hatching care (No Care environment). The experiment therefore had a

2 x 2 x 2 design, with 8 treatments in all (Full Care versus No Care line of origin; Inbred

versus Outbred; Full Care environment versus No Care environment), with each treatment

replicated twice due to replicate Full Care and No Care populations (Supplementary Figure

1).

Detailed methods

Beetle maintenance was carried out following standard protocols [23]. Briefly, adult beetles

were kept individually in plastic boxes (12 x 8 x 6cm) filled with moist soil and fed twice a

week with raw beef mince. Adults were bred at 2-3 weeks post-eclosion in a breeding box (17

x 12 x 6cm) with soil and a mouse carcass (11-13 g for all treatments except for the

individuals derived from the Full Care lines, that were outbred under Full Care conditions (8-

14 g)). To ease the considerable burden of work, data for broods in this treatment were

collected from the ongoing experimental evolution lines in the laboratory. Carcass size was

included, where appropriate, as a factor in the statistical analyses (see below).

For the inbreeding treatments, we paired full siblings (one pair per family) whereas for the

outbreeding treatments we paired males and females at random and did not pair siblings or

cousins. Each pair was given a breeding box with a dead mouse sitting on soil, and the

breeding boxes were placed in a dark cupboard to simulate natural underground conditions.

For broods assigned to a No Care environment, parents were removed around 53 h after

pairing. Eight days after pairing (which is when the larvae have completed their development

and start to disperse away from the carcass) we scored two standard measures of reproductive

success in burying beetles [21]: brood success (fail = no larvae produced; success = some

larvae produced) and brood size at dispersal. Larvae were then placed into cells (2 x 2 x 2cm)

in an eclosion box (10 x 10 x 2cm), with one eclosion box per brood, which was filled with

soil until larvae had developed into sexually immature adults (about 18 days after dispersal).

At this point, adults were transferred to individual boxes until they reached sexual maturity

roughly 2 weeks later. Both the eclosion boxes and the individual boxes were kept on shelves

in the laboratory at 21°C on a 16L:8D hour light cycle.

Statistical Analyses

All statistical tests were conducted in R version 3.5.1 [26]. Data handling and visualisation

were carried out using the 'tidyverse' [27] and 'survminer' [28] R packages. All data and

code presented in the manuscript is available through: https://github.com/r-

mashoodh/nves_MutationLoad.

Testing predictions (1) and (2)

To test predictions (1) and (2) we focused on the data collected from Generation 1. Using a

binomial generalised linear model (GLM) in the base 'statistics' package in R, we tested the

effect of evolutionary history (*i.e.* derived from a No Care evolving population or from a Full

Care evolving population), current care environment (*i.e.* experienced No Care or Full Care

during Generation 1), and inbreeding (*i.e.* inbred or outbred) on brood success. We defined

brood success at dispersal in the following way: broods that produced at least one larva that

survived to breed were defined as successful (following [21, 23]) whereas those that did not

produce any surviving young were classified as failures.

We subsequently ran analyses separately for the inbreeding and outbreeding conditions to

examine any interactions between evolutionary history (*i.e.* derived from a No Care evolving

population (NC_{POP}) or from a Full Care evolving population (FC_{POP})) and the current

environment (*i.e.* experienced No Care (NC_{ENV}) or Full Care (FC_{ENV}) during Generation 1)

dropping non-significant interaction terms where appropriate. We included block and carcass

weight as covariates to ensure any effects we detected occurred over and above any variation

in these variables.

Testing prediction (3)

Calculation of inbreeding depression.

For direct comparison with previous work [19], we calculated the inbreeding depression rate:

$\delta = (w_o - w_i)/w_o$, where w_o and w_i are respectively the number of surviving outbred and

inbred offspring at dispersal. We combined data from both blocks.

Survival analysis across generations

To determine the effect of evolutionary history (*i.e.* derived from a No Care evolving

population or from a Full Care evolving population), and current care environment (*i.e.*

experienced No Care or Full Care during Generation 1) on the survival of the different

lineages in the Evolutionary History Experiment (Supplementary Figure 1), we fit accelerated

time hazard models with a log-logistic distribution using the 'survival' R package [27]. Again

carcass weight and block were included as covariates. A lineage was considered to be extinct

if it did not survive to reproduce in the subsequent generation. We additionally used the non-

parametric Kruskal Wallis test to determine if median survival times of each inbred lineage

differed, by comparing the effect of evolutionary history (*i.e.* derived from a No Care

evolving population or from a Full Care evolving population) in separate analyses, one for

each current care environment (No Care versus Full Care). Model diagnostics were checked

visually.

Results

To test predictions (1) and (2) we initially focused on the data collected from the first

generation of breeding in the Evolutionary History Experiment. In support of prediction (1),

we found that exposure to a No Care environment reduced reproductive success, regardless of

the evolutionary history of the lineage (Figure 1, Table 1). However, in support of prediction

(2), we found that a supply of post-hatching care enabled more broods to survive, even if they

were inbred - and regardless of the evolutionary history of their lineage (Figure 1, Table 1),

replicating previous work [19].

To test prediction (3), we continued to examine inbred families in the first generation of

breeding in the Evolutionary History Experiment. In this generation, we found an interaction

between evolved history and the current environment in inbred but not outbred lineages

(Table 2). We split the dataset by the current level of care supplied, to be able to examine the

effect of evolutionary history in more detail. In support of prediction (3), we found inbred

families derived from the Full Care populations had lower brood survival than inbred families

drawn from the No Care populations (log(OR) =1.12 [0.49-1.80], z=3.42, p<0.001) – though

only when broods were raised in a No Care current environment. No equivalent differences

were observed in the Full Care current environment (log(OR)=0.20 [-1.4,1.9], z=0.25,

p=0.80). For the outbred families, the evolutionary history of the lineage had no effect on

breeding success, though broods were in general less successful when they received no post-

hatching care (Table 2).

To further test prediction (3), we expanded our analyses to consider all generations, beginning

by calculating the extent of inbreeding depression at each generation. Inbreeding depression

was greater in Generation 1 for families descended from the Full Care evolving populations

than the No Care evolving populations, in the No Care current environment (Figure 2A). We

found the same pattern in the Full Care current environment – though here the differences

between lineages were first seen at Generation 3 (Figure 2A).

Finally, we compared the survival of all lines across generations in the Evolutionary History

Experiment, by fitting accelerated failure time hazard models (Figure 2B). A lineage was

considered extinct if none of its members survived to reproduce in the subsequent generation.

Whilst all inbred lineages in our experiments eventually went extinct, outbred lineages were

still reproducing successfully at the point at which the experiment was terminated

(Supplementary Figure 2, Supplementary Table 2).

For the inbred lineages, there was once again an interaction between the evolutionary

history of a population and current care received (Supplementary Table 1). This resulted, in

part, from a No Care current environment causing particularly rapid extinction (Figure 2B;

Supplementary Table 2). When there was No Care, inbred lineages seeded from the Full Care

evolving populations had significant lower median survival than inbred lineages seeded from

the No Care evolving populations (Estimate=0.20 [0.05-0.36], p<0.01; Figure 2B). Lineages

seeded from the Full Care evolving populations reached 50% extinction one generation

sooner under a No Care environment than inbred lineages seeded from the No Care evolving

populations (non-parametric Kruskal Wallis test: H(1)=4.59, p=0.03; Supplementary Table 2).

In a Full Care environment, by contrast, we could detect no equivalent difference in lineage

survival between the No Care and Full Care populations (Estimate=-0.01 [-0.13-0.10],

p=0.85; Figure 2B; Supplementary Table 2).

Discussion

Burying beetles care for their offspring by making a nest for them to inhabit during

development, providing them with plentiful carrion to feed upon and defending them from

attack by rival microbes and animals [20]. Our experiments show that the supply of post-

hatching care is sufficient to perturb the mutation-selection balance by relaxing selection - as

predicted generally by evolutionary theory [1-5]. We cannot tell from our experiments

whether selection is relaxed because the primary beneficiaries of care are kin [3] or because

parental care more generally buffers against harsh environments and so weakens the effects of

natural selection [14], or both.

By supplying care, parents shield their young from relatively harsh environmental conditions:

larvae receiving parental care had higher survival than those that had no care. Indeed, we

found that when parents provided care, the developmental environment was sufficiently

benign, and the strength of selection then sufficiently weak, that diverse genetic variants were

able to survive - even those that were inbred, just as previous work has shown [19].

Consequently, after 20 generations of experimental evolution in these contrasting

environments, we found that the Full Care populations carried a greater mutation load than

the No Care populations (confirmed in a companion paper [29] which uses SNPs to quantify

the extent of genetic variation in the two types of experimental population). The difference

between the populations was especially pronounced during the first generation of inbreeding,

and most readily detectable when inbred individuals were prevented from supplying care.

This suggests that some of the additional mutations present in the Full Care populations were

recessive and / or only mildly deleterious [5]. Given the relatively short timeframe of this

experiment, we presume that these mutations were present in the founding populations of

wild-caught beetles but were removed from the No Care populations by selection acting more

strongly against them. In this sense, our findings are similar to previous work on *Tribolium*

which found that deleterious genetic variation was purged when populations were exposed

experimentally to more intense sexual selection [30].

Although it is now well-understood why individuals evolve cooperative behaviour, the

mechanisms that cause cooperation to persist and diversify remain relatively unclear [31].

Recent theoretical work suggests that positive feedback cycles could play a key role in

entrenching cooperation, following its initial evolution [32]. Cooperative social interactions

facilitate the transfer of beneficial microbes, for example, upon which social partners might

then become dependent over evolutionary time, ensuring that cooperation must persist [e.g.

33-36]. Likewise, cooperative interactions can promote the division of labour between social

partners, causing a degree of interdependence that ensures cooperation must continue [37].

Our results, together with those obtained by Pilakouta et al. [19], suggest a third mechanism

through which cooperation can become entrenched, hinted at originally by Crow [2]. We have

shown that parental care creates a problem (increased mutation load: our results) for which it

is also the solution (enhanced survival of all genetic variants: [19], our results). By relaxing

selection, parental care causes an increase mutation load which increases the population's

dependence upon care. Care ensures that the diverse genetic variants, whose existence it has

facilitated, are able survive until the end of development. This could explain why parental

care has evolved more frequently than it has been evolutionarily lost [14]. As Crow [2] put it:

'there is no turning back…A return to the original conditions leads to the immediate full

impact of all the mutants that have accumulated during the period of improved environment".

In principle, this reasoning can be extended to any form of cooperation that relaxes selection.

Indeed, Crow [2] made the argument originally in the context of environmental improvements

in human societies and their effect on genetic variation.

Finally, we have focused on the immediate effects of parental care on genetic variation, but

the longer-term consequences are still unclear and need not match the effects seen in the

short-term. For example, although greater intensity of intrasexual selection is beneficial in the

short term, because it purges deleterious mutations from the population [30], in the longer run

more intense intrasexual selection can make lineages more prone to extinction [38]. This

might be due to a lack of beneficial genetic diversity. Likewise, although parental care

enables mildly deleterious mutations to persist in the short-term, perhaps in the longer-term it

builds up genetic diversity that could be beneficial and underpin rapid evolution, especially if

environmental conditions change suddenly, or if mutations promote novelty through

compensatory evolution [26]. In future work, it would be interesting to isolate the longer-term

effects of parental care on genetic diversity and the effects it might have on the evolutionary

resilience of wild populations in a changing world [39].

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 TABLES

Table 1. Summary of binomial generalised linear model estimates for brood success in all

treatments in Generation 1 of the Evolutionary History Experiment, predicted by the type of

population in which they Evolved (*i.e.* whether families were derived from the No Care or

Full Care evolving populations), Current Environment (*i.e.* whether families experienced No

Care or Full Care in the current generation) and Breeding Condition (*i.e.* whether families

were inbred or outbred). Carcass weight and Block were included as a covariate for inbred

lineages (see Supplementary Figure 1 for experimental design).

Characteristic	log(HR)[1]	95% CI[1]	p-value
Evolved			
Full Care	—	—	
No Care	-0.05	-0.40, 0.30	0.8
CurrentEnv			
Full Care	—	—	
No Care	**-1.4**	**-1.7, -1.0**	**<0.001**
Breeding			
inbred	—	—	
outbred	**0.33**	**0.10, 0.56**	**0.006**
as.numeric(Block)	-0.02	-0.24, 0.20	0.9
Carcass.weight	0.12	-0.01, 0.25	0.10
Evolved * CurrentEnv			
No Care * No Care	**0.48**	**0.02, 0.93**	**0.042**

[1]HR = Hazard Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval

Table 2 Summary of binomial generalised linear model estimates for brood success in

Generation 1 of the Evolutionary History Experiment, with Inbred and Outbred populations

analysed separately. For each analysis we tested whether brood success was predicted by the

type of population in which they Evolved (*i.e.* whether families were derived from the No

Care (NC_{POP}) or Full Care (FC_{POP}) evolving populations) and Current Environment (*i.e.*

whether families experienced No Care (NC_{ENV}) or Full Care (FC_{ENV}) in the current generation).

Carcass weight and Block were included as covariates (see Supplementary Figure 1 for

experimental design). Separate models were run for Inbred and Outbred families.

Characteristic	Inbred			Outbred		
	log(HR)[1]	95% CI[1]	p-value	log(HR)[1]	95% CI[1]	p-value
Evolved						
Full Care	—	—		—	—	
No Care	0.08	-0.38, 0.54	0.7	-0.13	-0.71, 0.45	0.7
CurrentEnv						
Full Care	—	—		—	—	
No Care	**-1.7**	**-2.2, -1.3**	**<0.001**	**-0.92**	**-1.4, -0.43**	**<0.001**
as.numeric(Block)	-0.09	-0.40, 0.22	0.6	0.11	-0.21, 0.45	0.5
Carcass.weight	0.20	-0.05, 0.45	0.13	0.05	-0.13, 0.22	0.7
Evolved * CurrentEnv						
No Care * No Care	**0.64**	**0.02, 1.3**	**0.043**	0.25	-0.46, 0.97	0.5

[1]HR = Hazard Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval

FIGURES

Figure 1

Figure 1. Breeding success of evolved populations in Generation 1 of the Evolutionary

History Experiment. Predicted means ± S.E brood survival probabilities in populations that

have evolved under Full Care (red lines and datapoints, FC_{POP}) or No Care (blue lines and

datapoints NC_{POP}) are shown, based on the current care environment (Full Care *vs* No Care)

under inbred (left) and outbred (right) conditions.

Figure 2

Figure 2. Survival of inbred populations across generations.

A. Inbreeding depression values for population lineages from the Evolutionary History

Experiment, shown in their native ($FC_{POP}FC_{ENV}$ and $NC_{POP}NC_{ENV}$) and reciprocal current

environments ($FC_{POP}NC_{ENV}$ and $NC_{POP}FC_{ENV}$). **B.** Survival curves for inbred population

lineages from the Evolutionary History Experiment and associated 95% confidence intervals

for the inbred lines, also shown in their native ($FC_{POP}FC_{ENV}$ and $NC_{POP}NC_{ENV}$) and reciprocal

current environments ($FC_{POP}NC_{ENV}$ and $NC_{POP}FC_{ENV}$). (FC = Full Care, NC = No Care).