Spatial structure does not reduce population level interlocus sexual conflict but imposes additional sex-specific costs

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Key words: Dispersal, complex environment, cost of dispersal, mate harm, *Drosophila melanogaster*.

Word count: 5,267 excluding abstract, table and figure captions, acknowledgement and references.

Figure count: 3

Table count: 1

Supplementary information: A separate file that includes three figures and four tables.

Author contributions: SH and BN conceived the idea, designed the experiment, analysed and interpreted the data, wrote the manuscript. SH was the lead experimenter. In addition, SK, SS, ST and TV performed various assays and collected data.

Abstract:

Interlocus sexual conflict (ISC) arises due to antagonistic interactions between the sexes. Recent evidence suggests that the intensity of ISC could reduce due to habitat complexity and spatial structure, especially if it results in reduced encounter rate between sexes. Hence, spatial structuring, a common attribute of most natural populations, can potentially bring down the intensity of ISC. We tested this theory using laboratory populations of *Drosophila melanogaster*. We set up cohorts in three-patch habitat systems as either interconnected (structured) or unconnected (unstructured). Following a fully crossed design, we measured ISC by comparing reproductive output and starvation resistance of singly mated females and those continuously housed with surplus males. We show that continued exposure to males leads to significant fitness costs, indicating ISC. The experimental habitat type did not affect ISC. However, we found significant reproductive and survival costs arising from structured population. Our results are also robust to the alteration in female condition. Therefore, it appears that spatial structure *per se* cannot decrease ISC, but impose additional survival costs. We further showed such survival cost to be sex-specific, possibly reflecting female-biased spontaneous dispersal.

Introduction

In most sexually reproducing species, males can maximize their fitness by investing in competitive and manipulative traits that increase their mating and/or fertilization success. In contrast, female fitness is usually maximised by achieving longer lifespan, higher fecundity with better-quality eggs, and ensuring higher survival rate of juveniles (Holland and Rice 1999, Arnqvist and Rowe 2013, Adler and Bonduriansky 2014). Such asymmetry in evolutionary interests across the two sexes is commonly referred to as sexual conflict, which is now recognized as a widespread phenomenon affecting many animal and plant taxa (Parker 1979). Theories and empirical evidence suggest that male-benefiting traits that result in better mating and/or fertilisation success can emerge as male reproductive adaptations regardless of their impact on females (Rice 1996, Chapman et al. 2003, Nandy et al. 2013). Often, such male-benefiting traits are detrimental to female fitness as they involve coercing females to mating and/or reproducing at a time and rate which benefits males but is injurious for long-term survival of the females, thus reducing the lifetime progeny output of the females. This sets the stage for the emergence of female counter-adaptations that minimise female susceptibility to male manipulations (Chapman et al. 2003, Wigby and Chapman 2004, Nandy et al. 2014). This form of sexual conflict, commonly referred to as interlocus conflict, can result in intersexual antagonistic coevolutionary arms race (Chapman et al. 2003, Pizzari and Snook 2007). One crucial aspect of interlocus conflict is that it usually involves direct interaction for copulation between the sexes. For example, in water fowls, forced copulation or mounting by males injure or may even cause death of the females (Adler 2010). Among ungulates, interaction with males, especially during the rut, results in female biased mortality in the population (Réale et al. 1996). In the common lizard *Lacerta vivipara*, males harm females while attempting copulation by inflicting mating scars and damaging the skin on the backs of females (Le Galliard et al. 2005). Premating struggle to dislodge males' grasp increases wing injury in female dung flies, *Sepsis cynipsea* (Koene 2012) and increases susceptibility to predation in water striders (Arnqvist 1992). Riding behaviour of the male zeus bugs (*Phoreticovelia disparata*) to guard females and eventually mate reduces longevity of females (Jones et al. 2010). Often, bizarre adaptations of male

mating strategies, such as the “hypodermic genitalia” found in the true bug infraorder Cimicomorpha (Heteroptera), or “love dart” of the land snail (*Cornu aspersum*) result in female injury (Koene and Schulenburg 2005, Siva-Jothy 2006,). In, alfalfa leaf-cutting bee (*Megachile rotundata*) males chasing behaviour impedes females foraging and reproduction (Rossi et al. 2010). In fruit flies, *Drosophila melanogaster*, females suffer increased mortality and/or reduced life-time progeny production due to coercive male mating behaviour and toxic seminal fluid peptides received during copulation (Chapman et al. 1995, Rice et al. 2006, Wolfner 2009, Nandy et al. 2013). Most theoretical and empirical investigations of interlocus conflict that deal with the intensity of conflict in a population tend to assume, either implicitly or explicitly, unbridled interaction between the sexes (Rice et al. 2006). However, most natural populations are spatially structured in such a way that individuals are able to move around across patches seeking or avoiding favourable and unfavourable interactions. How such population structure changes the population level intensity of conflict is not well understood.

It is not unreasonable to expect females to avoid patches with a high male congregation to avoid mate harassment. An explicit experimental verification of this theory was first attempted by Rice et al. (2006), wherein *D. melanogaster* females were found to suffer less male harassment (measured as remating rate) when they were allowed to move between two compartments within a culture vial. More recent experiments on *D. melanogaster* showed that the intensity of interlocus conflict is significantly reduced in a large and heterogenous holding environment compared to a small and homogenous one (Yun et al. 2017, Malek and Long 2018). In addition, the scope of hitherto reported adaptive male mating bias, a source of mate harassment, in favour of high fecundity females appeared to have reduced in the large and complex environment (Yun et al. 2018). In water striders of the species *Aquarius remigis*, physical structuring of population modulates males’ aggressive behaviour towards females (Eldakar 2009). Clearly, spatial structuring of a population can affect (a) the level of interlocus conflict in a population, and (b) the evolutionary trajectory of sexually antagonistic traits.

Further, individuals in a patch structured population are expected to disperse across population patches, resulting in an added complication due to the ecology of dispersal. Indeed, in *Aquarius remigis*, maintained in a naturalistic laboratory environment that introduces dispersal alters male-female local interactions thereby altering the dynamics of interlocus sexual conflict. For instance, in isolated pools, without dispersal, males tend to gain more mating by being aggressive. Interestingly, in interconnected pools which allowed individuals to disperse, females were found to disperse away to avoid aggressive male, which in turn affected male dispersal (Eldakar 2009). Besides, if there is inherent difference in dispersal tendency across two sexes, which is prominent in many animals (Trochet 2016, Mishra et al. 2018a), it can heavily influence male-female interactions, thus shaping interlocus conflict and its evolutionary consequences. In addition, it is important to note that dispersal may also impose novel ecological costs. For example, dispersal and other movement related traits such as foraging or exploration, are energetically and/or ecologically costly (Bonte et al. 2012). However, it is not clear how such costs and benefits affect the outcome of interlocus conflict in a population. MacPherson et al. (2018) found low condition females, raised in high larval density, suffered from the cost of increased male exposure, regardless of their holding condition, whereas high condition females were found to be practically immune to mate harm in complex, but not in simple habitat. A patch structured habitat, apart from being relatively complex, may bring in an additional ecological component of dispersal. If both dispersal and resistance to mate harm are energetically expensive, structuring of habitat can impose additional cost on females thereby making them more susceptible to mate harm. However, this expectation will depend on cost of dispersal as well as female condition. With ever increasing anthropogenic fragmentation of natural populations with varying degrees of connectivity within patches (Rogan and Lacher Jr. 2018), it is becoming increasingly more important to investigate the impact of such changes in the habitat structure on key eco-evolutionary processes, such as, sexual conflict and selection.

Here, we addressed this issue using a *D. melanogaster* laboratory adapted populations. We investigated whether spatial structure could also have a similar complex habitat effect of relaxing intensity of sexual conflict. We mimicked spatial structure by setting up three-patch habitat systems by connecting three standard culture vials with narrow tubes that allow flies to move from one patch (vial) to another. As controls, three unconnected vials represented similar interacting population units, but not distributed following any spatial structure. While the control habitat is similar to the usual laboratory population structure wherein the sexes are free to interact with each other with no scope of escape or refuge, the experimental structured habitat type retained the possibility of identical interaction arena but also allowed scope for individuals to move around across patches (i.e., vials). Individuals within a patch in such a setup, have a higher chance of interacting with each other compared to those from two different patches. We then compared two components of female fitness - fecundity and starvation survival time, following two types of male exposures – limited exposure and continuous exposure, across these two habitat treatment types. We used the results to test the hypotheses on cost of male exposure (i.e., ISC) and cost of dispersal. We found clear evidence of both the costs in females but none suggesting a role of habitat type in modulating the former. The benign and nutritionally rich laboratory maintenance regime of populations such as, the ones used in our experiments, can often obscure fitness costs, especially those concerning resource allocation trade-offs (Van Noordwijk and De Jong 1986, McCracken et al. 2020, MacTavish and Anderson 2020). Therefore, we further investigated this issue using resource deprived females. To this effect, we first investigated the role of developmental dietary restriction on spontaneous dispersal tendency to determine a level of dietary manipulation that does not significantly alter dispersal but results in significantly resource deprived adults. We then repeated the above-mentioned experiment with an added treatment of the female diet regime wherein standard and nutritionally deprived females were used.

Material and methods:

We used flies from a set of large, outbred, wild-type, laboratory adapted populations of *Drosophila melanogaster* (BL_{1-5}), maintained under a 14-day discrete generation cycle, 24 h light, at 25 °C (±1) temperature on standard banana-jaggery-yeast food medium. Flies are grown in culture vials (25 mm diameter × 96 mm height) at a density of ~70 per 6-8 ml food in each vial, forty such vials make up one population. On day 12 post-egg collection, and after all the adults have emerged from pupae, flies are transferred into a population cage and thereafter maintained in the cage as a population of ~2,800 individuals. On day 14, eggs are collected on a fresh food plate within a time window of 18 h. These eggs are cultured in fresh food vials following the above-mentioned density to start the next generation. The details of the history and maintenance of the populations can be found in Nandy et al. 2016 and Dasgupta et al. 2022. Randomly chosen three out of the five BL populations, viz., BL_2, Bl_3 and BL 4 were used to conduct the experiments.

<u>Structured and unstructured habitats and the experimental setup:</u>

As mentioned above, the base populations are maintained as large unstructured island populations, either as a single large unit with ~2,800 individuals (i.e., the cage phase), or 40 small unconnected units each with ~70 individuals (i.e., the vial phase). For the purpose of the experiments, we used a simple three-patch setup. We created experimental patch-structured habitat systems (hereafter simply referred to as “structured” habitat type), by connecting three culture vials with narrow tubes (length 12.5cm, diameter 0.6 cm) that allowed flies to move from one vial to another in either direction (see Fig. S1). In such a setup, individuals within a patch are more likely to interact with each other compared to individuals from a different patch. Interaction between individuals from a neighbouring patch depends on the rate of dispersal. We used three standard culture vials, without connection between them, as controls (Fig. S1). Hereafter, we refer to this habitat type as “unstructured”. We opted for this design, since we aimed to compare structured vs. unstructured habitats controlling for the population size (i.e., large vs. small) effect. In the structured setup, because individuals were free to move around, the

density across the three patches are expected to change. However, the average density (number of individuals per vial) was expected to remain the same between the two habitats.

Experiment 1:

To investigate the effect of habitat fragmentation on the extent of interlocus conflict, we compared the reduction in female fitness (a measure of mate harm) upon extended exposure to males, across the structured and unstructured habitat types. We performed the assay in three independent statistical blocks using three randomly chosen BL populations (viz., BL_2, Bl_3 and BL_4). We measured female fecundity and starvation survival time under two types of male exposures – limited exposure (LE) and continuous exposure (CE). Such a measure of mate harm has been found to be a good approximation of interlocus conflict in similar *D. melanogaster* systems (Nandy et al. 2013, 2014).

To generate experimental flies, eggs were collected from the baseline populations in standard food vials (~8ml food) with a density of ~70 eggs/vial. After egg collection, vials were kept in controlled laboratory condition and monitored carefully for the onset of emergence of adults. Following the onset of eclosion, flies were collected every six hours. Experimental flies were collected as virgins from the peak of eclosion during which flies were separated by sex and housed in same sex vials at a density of 5 females/vial and 10 males/vial. The assays were performed on 2-3 days (post-eclosion) old flies. This adult age was chosen because it is the most relevant to adult fitness in this system (see description of maintenance regime above and Nandy et al. 2016).

On day 12, 10 virgin males and 5 virgin females were introduced in each vial for both S and US setups. An adult sex ratio of 2:1 was taken to ensure higher male inflicted harm on females, thereby helping in the resolution of even relatively smaller differences in female performance across treatments. For the unstructured habitat type, a set of three identical vials with 10 males and 5 females in each vial (i.e., 30 males and 15 females for a set) constituted a replicate set. For the structured habitat type, the same

numbers of sexes (i.e., 10 males and 5 females) were introduced in each of the three interconnected vials. Twenty-four replicate sets for each of the unstructured and structured habitat types were established. These twenty-four replicates were further subdivided into limited exposure (LE) and continuous exposure (CE), with twelve replicate sets in each. Thus, our assay design involved a 2×2 fully orthogonal combination of the two treatments (viz., habitat and exposure type). For the LE subset, one hour following the introduction of experimental flies, males were removed (using light CO_2 anaesthesia) whereas females were retained in the same setup. In the CE subset, males and females were allowed to remain in their respective setups for ~48 hours. To equalise the handling, flies in the CE setup were also exposed to mild dosage of CO_2 roughly after 1 hour after the initial introduction of the sexes in the setups. On day14, i.e., following ~48 hours of the initial combination of the sexes, flies were anaesthetized and ten randomly chosen females were transferred to oviposition tubes. For both unstructured and structured setups, females from the three component vials in a replicate setup were combined and 10 females (out of 15) were randomly chosen for oviposition. Males were discarded at this point. A fixed window of 18 hours was allowed to the females in the oviposition tubes for laying eggs. Following this, the females were removed from the tubes; the tubes were then incubated for offspring emergence. Per capita progeny output was calculated for a given replicate as the average number of offspring produced by these ten females. Following oviposition in tubes, 5 females were randomly chosen out of 10 and were regrouped and transferred into a non-nutritive agar vial to measure starvation survival time. Female survival in these vials were recorded every six hours. Mean survival time was calculated as the average survival time of five females for a given replicate vial.

<u>Experiment 2:</u>

Since dispersal tendency and susceptibility to mate harm in females are known to be condition dependent, and the relatively rich nutritional environment of our standard laboratory regime can obscure the fitness costs that depend on resource allocation trade-offs (Van Noordwijk and De Jong 1986, McCracken et al. 2020, MacTavish and Anderson 2020), we repeated the above experiment with

an added treatment - dietary condition. However, *a priori* information was needed on female response to nutritional manipulations. Hence, we first conducted an assay to measure the effect of manipulation of developmental diet on adult dispersal tendency (see supplementary material). The results suggested that nutritionally diluted developmental diet, even up to 40% reduction compared to the standard diet, does not affect female dispersal tendency (Fig. S3). Part of these results however, also suggested that such dietary treatment significantly reduces female quality as measured by lower body mass at eclosion (also see Poças et al. 2022). Such females are considered resource deprived or poor condition females. The following experiment thus involves poor and standard condition females. Additionally, in this experiment, we also assessed the cost of dispersal for males. The design of this experiment was similar to that followed in Experiment 1, except the additional treatment for female condition. We use nutritionally challenged females (poor condition: larval development in 40% diluted food) and those raised on standard food (control: larval development in standard banana-jaggery-barley-yeast food). The detailed composition of the food types is mentioned in SI (Table S1).

Flies were generated using a method similar to that followed in Experiment 1. However, as mentioned above, for this experiment, two types of females - poor and standard, were raised and collected as virgins (see Experiment 1). Followed by this, the experimental flies were subjected to the assay setups. However, unlike Experiment 1, this was done on 3-4 days old flies to account for the difference in development time of the poor and control females. We subjected the females to two habitat treatments - unstructured and structured, as mentioned in Experiment 1. These setups were further subdivided into two mate exposure treatments - limited exposure and continuous exposure, i.e., the LE and CE vials as mentioned in experiment 1. All males used in this stage were raised on a standard diet. Subsequently, we measured female progeny output and starvation survival time following the protocol similar to that followed in Experiment 1. We had 8 replicates for each female type × mate exposure × habitat treatment, and number flies in each vial/setup were identical across Experiment 1 and 2, with the latter being also performed in randomised block design with three blocks (three randomly chosen BL

populations - BL_3, Bl_4 and BL_5). Per capita progeny output and mean starvation survival time for the experimental females were computed following the same method adopted in Experiment 1.

Statistical analysis:

Progeny count (i.e., per capita progeny output) and mean starvation survival time results were analysed using a linear mixed-effect model using `lmer` function of the `lme4` package in R (R Version 4.2.0). In the models, progeny count or starvation survival time were taken as response variables, habitat, male exposure, and female type (only for Experiment 2) were treated as fixed factors, while block and all interactions concerning block were modelled as random factors. In order to test for the effect of random factors we ran separate models by dropping a random factor term of our interest and compared it with the global model using `anova` function. We did not find any significant effect of block and all interaction terms concerning block (see Table S4, for details of the results of this analysis). Following the analysis of variance using `anova` function, pairwise multiple comparisons were done with `pairwise` function in package `emmeans`.

Results

Experiment 1:

Analysis of the progeny count indicated that effects of both male exposure and habitat were significant (Table 1). On an average, progeny count from females belonging to the limited exposure (LE) treatment was 55% higher compared to that from the continuous exposure (CE) treatment (Fig. 1a), indicating a significant fitness cost due to continued exposure to the males. Similarly, the progeny output of females from structured setup was on an average 37% lower compared to those from the unstructured setup (Fig. 1a). However, male exposure × habitat type interaction had no significant effect on progeny count (Table 1), suggesting that the degree of interlocus sexual conflict (ISC) was not affected by the habitat type treatment.

Analysis of the starvation survival time revealed a marginally non-significant effect of male exposure (Table 1), indicating a tentative trend for cost of male exposure for females. Habitat was found to have a significant effect (Table 1), wherein starvation survival time of females from structured treatment was 11% less compared to that of the females from unstructured treatment (Fig. 1b). Male exposure × habitat interaction had no significant effect (Table 1) suggesting that strength of mate harm, measured as post-treatment reduction is starvation resistance in females, was not affected by habitat type also.

Experiment 2:

Results of analysis on progeny count indicated significant effects of all three main effects, viz., female type, male exposure and habitat (Table 1). As expected, poor condition females produced, on an average, 42% less progeny than standard females (Fig. 2b). On an average, progeny count of females from the structured setup was on average 29% less compared to those from the unstructured setup, indicating cost of dispersal that comes from living in a structured habitat (Fig. 2c). Progeny count from females belonging to the LE treatment was on an average 65% higher compared to that from the CE treatment, replicating the finding from Experiment 1, indicating significant reproductive cost of male exposure (Fig. 2d). Interestingly, female type × male exposure interaction was found to have significant effect on progeny count (Fig. 2a). This suggested that the reproductive cost of male exposure, the measure of ISC, is dependent on female type. Pairwise comparisons (Table S3) revealed a significant reduction of progeny count in CE treatment compared to the LE treatment only for standard females, but not for females raised in poor diet (i.e., poor female type). However, female type × habitat interaction was not significant (Table 1), suggesting that the relative reduction in progeny production in fragmented habitat is not affected by female condition. The non-significant male exposure × habitat interaction (Table 1) is in line with Experiment 1, confirming the lack of evidence supporting the potential role of habitat structure in reducing the population level ISC.

Analysis of the starvation survival time of the females revealed significant main effects of male exposure and habitat (Table 1). Effect of female type was marginally non-significant (Table 1, Fig. 3a). Starvation survival time of females from structured treatment was on an average 12% less compared to that of the females from unstructured treatment (Fig. 3b), replicating the results from Experiment 1. Females that received continuous male exposure (i.e., CE) died under starvation on an average 6% faster than females that received limited male exposure (Fig. 3c). None of the two-way and three-way interactions was found to have a significant effect on starvation survival time of the females (Table 1). For males, neither the main effects (viz., female type and habitat) nor the interaction between them had a significant effect on starvation survival time (Table 1), indicating that male starvation resistance depends neither on the type of females they are exposed to nor the presence of habitat structure. Assuming that the males disperse between the three patches in our structured setup, there was no evidence of a survival cost of such spontaneous dispersal in males.

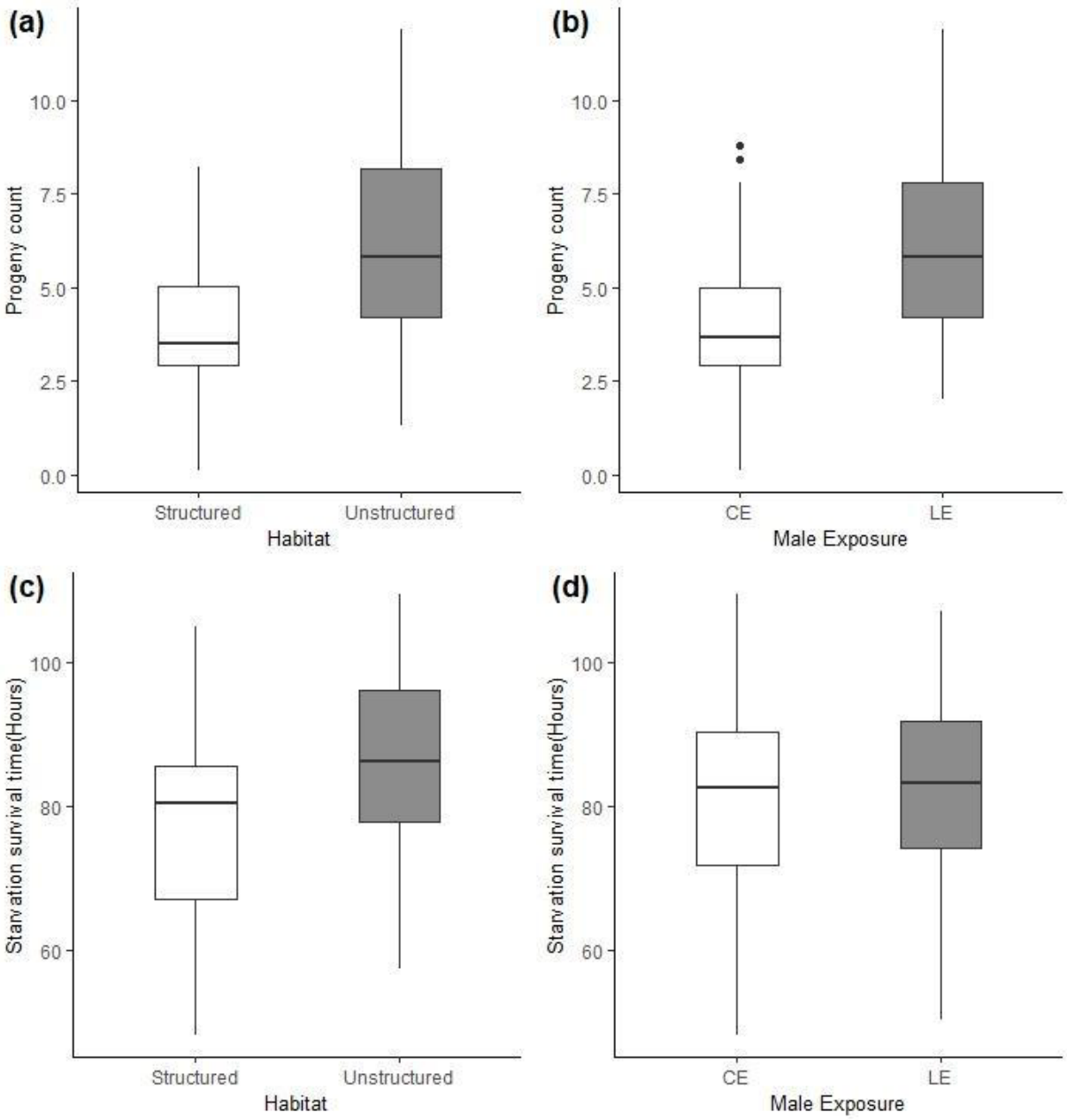

Figure 1: Results from Experiment 1. (a, b) Progeny count, i.e., number of offspring produced by the experimental females during the 18 h window following the experimental treatment. Per capita progeny output was computed as the average progeny output from ten of the fifteen females in a replicate setup. Per capita progeny count was used as the unit of analysis. (c, d) Starvation survival time of the experimental females following the treatment and progeny production. Starvation survival time was computed as the mean of the five randomly selected females within a replicate set. This mean was used as the unit of analysis. The treatment represents a full factorial combination of male exposure (limited exposure, LE and continuously exposed, CE) and

habitat (structured and unstructured). The box plots represent data from all three statistical blocks. The figure shows the main effects of the fixed factor habitat (a and c), and male exposure (b and d).

Table 1: Summary of the analyses of results from Experiment 1 and 2. The results were analysed using linear mixed-effect models where male exposure, habitat type, female type (for Experiment 2) were fitted as fixed factors. Block, and all interactions that included it were fitted as random factors. Statistically significant p-values are mentioned in bold font style.

Trait	**Effects**	**SS**	**DF**	**MS**	**F**	**P**
Experiment 1						
Progeny count	Male exposure	119.62	1	119.62	40.68	**0.02**
	Habitat	168.927	1	168.92	57.45	**<0.01**
	Male exposure × Habitat	1.336	1	1.336	0.45	0.50
Starvation survival time	Male exposure	271.49	1	271.49	3.65	0.057
	Habitat	2838.83	1	2838.83	38.26	**<0.01**
	Male exposure × Habitat	71.80	1	71.80	0.96	0.32
Experiment 2						
Progeny count	Female type	211.51	1	211.51	20.34	**0.04**
	Male exposure	219.29	1	219.29	21.09	**0.04**
	Habitat	234.66	1	234.66	22.57	**<0.01**
	Female type × Male exposure	90.74	1	90.74	8.73	**<0.01**
	Female type × Habitat	20.78	1	20.78	1.99	0.15

	Male exposure × Habitat	2.74	1	2.74	0.26	0.60
	Female type × Male exposure× Habitat	9.59	1	9.59	0.92	0.33
Starvation survival time (Female)	Female type	543.8	1	543.8	5.04	0.07
	Male exposure	1284.9	1	1284.9	11.91	**0.01**
	Habitat	3493.3	1	3493.3	32.40	**<0.01**
	Female type × Male exposure	51.5	1	51.5	0.47	0.51
	Female type × Habitat	59.7	1	59.7	0.55	0.47
	Male exposure × Habitat	28.2	1	28.2	0.26	0.60
	Female type × Male exposure× Habitat	110.3	1	110.3	1.02	0.31
Starvation survival time (Male)	Female type	529.12	1	529.12	0.85	0.45
	Habitat	2306.32	1	2306.32	3.719	0.20
	Female type × Habitat	30.99	1	30.99	0.05	0.82

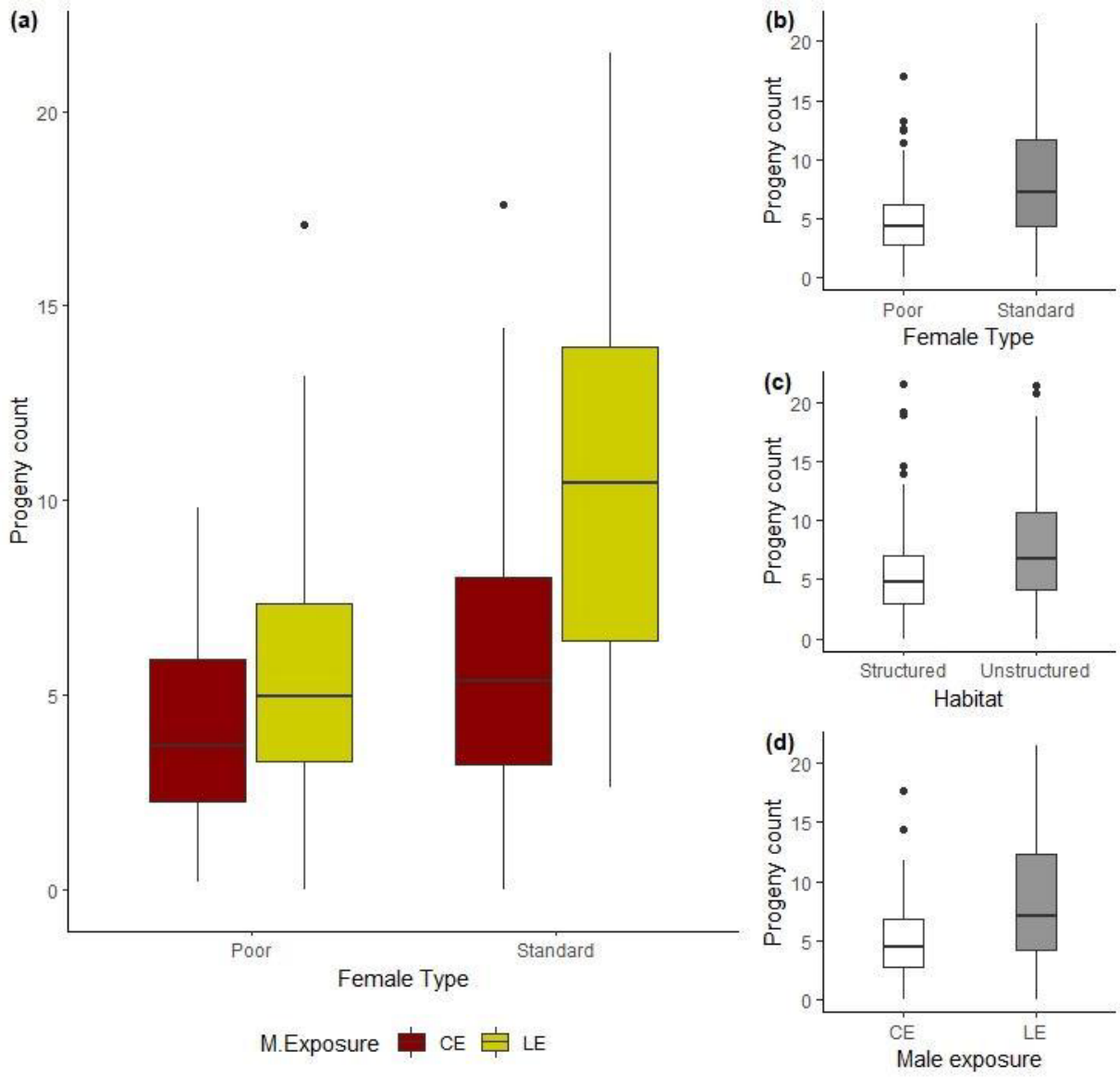

Figure 2: Progeny count results from Experiment 2. Progeny count, i.e., number of offspring produced by the experimental females during the 18 h window following the experimental treatment. Per capita progeny output was computed as the average progeny output from ten of the fifteen females in a replicate setup. Per capita progeny count was used as the unit of analysis. The treatment represents a full factorial combination of female type (poor and standard), mate exposure (limited exposure, LE and continuously exposed, CE) and habitat t (structured and unstructured). The box plots represent data from all three statistical blocks. The figure shows the

main effects of the fixed factors female type, (b), habitat (c), male exposure (d), and the effect of female type × male exposure interaction (a).

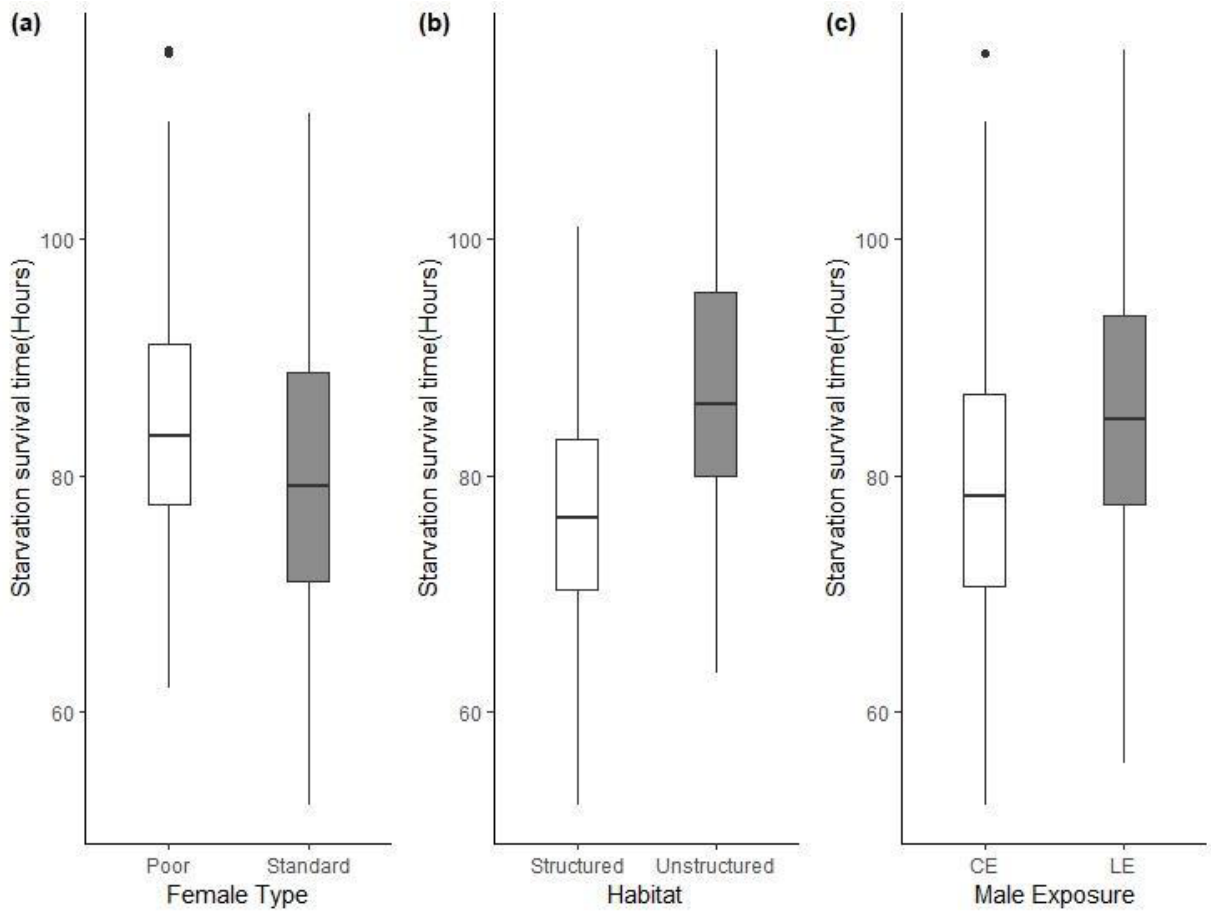

Figure 3: Female starvation survival time results from Experiment 2. Starvation survival time of the experimental females following the treatment and progeny production. Starvation survival time was computed as the mean of the five randomly selected females within a replicate set. This mean was used as the unit of analysis. The treatment represents a full factorial combination of female type (poor and standard), male exposure (limited exposure, LE and continuously exposed, CE) and habitat (structured and unstructured). The box plots represent data from all three statistical blocks. The figure shows the main effects of female type (a), habitat (b), and male exposure (c) on starvation survival time of the experimental females.

Discussion:

Contrary to the expectations from the hitherto reported complex environment effect on sexual conflict (Yun et al. 2017, Malek and Long 2018), in our study, we found no evidence in support of reduction of interlocus sexual conflict (ISC) in response to the introduction of spatial structure to a population. Regardless of the experimental habitat type we found females to bear a substantial fitness cost due to continuous exposure to males, clearly demonstrating the effect of mate harm. We found such a cost to express both as short term reproductive and survival costs. Importantly, given their laboratory ecology, these costs are good measures of the actual fitness cost. This finding appeared to be consistent even when female condition was varied. However, we found the reproductive cost of male exposure to disappear for poor condition females giving rise to a significant effect of the female type × male exposure interaction in our Experiment 2. Further, we found that spatial structuring has a significant negative impact on fitness components in females but not in males. This is possibly due to a females biased dispersal tendency, which we observed in a parallel experiment. Further, as the results of this parallel investigation suggested, neither female dispersal tendency nor the cost of dispersal seem to depend on female condition. We discuss the broader implications of our findings in light of existing understanding of sexual conflict, dispersal and life history theories.

Yun et al. (2017) reported that physical complexity of the habitat can modulate the intensity of ISC - bringing down male-female interaction rate, giving females opportunity to seek refuges, and even changing the outcome of male mate choice for high fecundity females. This and the subsequent follow-up study from the same group was an important step towards bridging the intellectual gap between sexual conflict research and the nuanced ecology of a natural population. We investigated another component of a natural population that is usually simplified in laboratory microcosm setups - fragmented, discontinuous nature of a habitat. In our experimental setups, we found clear evidence of ISC, but unlike Yun et al. (2017), no evidence indicating an effect of habitat on the population level ISC. This is unlikely to be due to the lack of movement of individuals between vials (i.e., experimental

habitat patches) as we found significant detrimental effects of habitat type on female progeny output as well as starvation survival time. Such negative impacts of change in habitat (viz., from unstructured to structured) was most likely due to the cost of dispersal across the three vials during the assay period (Mishra et al. 2022). Though we did not record the degree of dispersal of individuals across the vials in our structured setups during these assays, such dispersal was regularly seen. In addition, we have ample data on the movement tendencies of flies under similar setups; using a two-patch system we show that a substantial number of individuals of both sexes move from source to the sink patch (see SI for experimental details of dispersal tendency). Further, the sex specific effect of habitat type (see results of Experiment 2) wherein only females, but not males, were found to show fitness costs of being in the fragmented habitat, is perfectly compatible with our findings from a two-patch setup experiment that suggested a female biased spontaneous dispersal tendency.

Theoretically, in a fragmented habitat, females can escape male congregation by moving to a patch with less male abundance. Interestingly, when Mishra et al. (2018b) found density dependent dispersal in female *D. melanogaster*, such density dependence was present only when the sexes were held together, and not when they were kept apart. These results seem to suggest a role of the presence of males on female dispersal, potentially invoking the mate harm avoidance hypothesis. Thus, in a habitat that allows such movement opportunities, females can be expected to escape mate harm, at least to some extent, by moving to a neighbouring patch potentially resulting in reduction in population level intensity of ISC. However, such male-avoidance related female dispersal can result in temporary shortage of females in a patch or temporary increase in the intensity of male-male competition resulting in increased ‘mate-finding dispersal’ in males (Mishra et al. 2020). This can in turn result in the equalisation of sex ratio across habitat patches, ameliorating the advantage of female biased dispersal, if any. It is quite possible that reduction in ISC under a complex environment, as reported by Yun et al. (2017) and Malek and Long (2018), critically depends on the availability of refuge to the females (Byrne et al. 2008). Unless spatial structuring also allows access to refuge, it seems unlikely that it

would lead to reduced ISC. Importantly, in natural populations habitat structure is usually accompanied by a number of other ecological variables, such as, heterogeneity in resource availability, abundance of natural enemies. It is possible that the presence of such heterogeneity in cost and reward of different habitat patches have direct or indirect implications in determining the strength of ISC. For example, the detrimental effect of larger males of *Aquarius remigis* seems to be stronger in habitats with high risk of predation (Sih and Krupa 1992). In the Trinidadian guppies, *Poecilia reticulata*, males in habitat patches with high risk of predation tend to be more persuasive towards females, resulting in increased mate harassment (Magurran and Seghers 1994). Hence, in such a species both predation and habitat structure seem to inflate the effect of ISC, which can in turn have important consequences on dispersal across habitat patches (for example, see Rowe et al. 1994).

Though it did not seem to result in an escape from harmful effects of male exposure, females in our experiments possibly showed greater degree of dispersal compared to the males. At least, data from a parallel assay that used a two-patch setup, seem to suggest such a female-biased dispersal (see SI for details). This is not surprising and has been previously reported in several animals (Iliadi et al. 2002, Mishra et al. 2018a, b). As it turns out, female-biased dispersal is fairly common in birds (Clarke et al. 1997), and also seen in mammals (Favre et al. 1997), fishes (Yue et al. 2012) and invertebrates (Caudill 2003, Sundström et al. 2003, Beirinckx et al. 2006). Female biased dispersal is more commonly associated with competition for resources instead of mates, which is a common driver of male biassed dispersal (Li and Kokko 2019). An interesting exercise is to consider the consequences of female philopatry. There are two main costs of philopatry for *D. melanogaster* females, which live on ephemeral food patches - (a) competition for food (Bath et al. 2018), which is a primary determinant of female reproductive output, and (b) increasingly unfavourable environment for offspring development (Botella et al. 1985). Incidentally, these are two main components of female fitness. Male fitness, on the other hand, depends primarily on mating success (Bateman 1948), and all else being equal, it is much harder for males to increase their chances of mating by simply dispersing to a different patch, unless the

resident patch turns out to be mate deprived (Joshi et al. 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that a female biased dispersal rate is perhaps an adaptive demographic outcome given the behaviour and ecology of *D. melanogaster*. However, as our results suggest, females suffer a significant negative impact of living in a fragmented habitat - possibly due to costs of dispersal. In the long run, this should strengthen natural selection acting on females. Though our results rule out condition-dependence of sex-biased dispersal tendency (see SI), it will be interesting to find out if such sex biased dispersal persists under a variety of other conditions. There is already some evidence that population density can break down this pattern (Mishra et al. 2018b).

Interestingly, and somewhat counterintuitively, we found no evidence of reproductive cost of male exposure for poor quality females (i.e., females raised on a nutritionally impoverished diet), whereas the same was present for standard females. This observation was independent of the habitat treatment. It is possible that this is a result of male mating preference against poor condition females. Male mate choice in *D. melanogaster* is well documented, and indicates adaptive choice towards female qualities which indicate higher fecundity (Byrne and Rice 2006, Nandy et al. 2012, Edward and Chapman 2013, Arbuthnott et al. 2017). Long et al. (2009) showed non-virgin females of higher quality (viz., larger females) to receive greater male courtship compared to that received by low quality females. Such differential courtship resulted in high quality females suffering higher cost of male exposure (Long et al. 2009). Though our results fit this theory, we currently lack data required for a more direct test.

In conclusion, our results are, to the best of our knowledge, the first clear empirical test of the effect of spatial structure on the population level of interlocus sexual conflict. Our results clearly demonstrate that spatial structuring by itself is ineffective in reducing the ISC. It can, however, impose additional fitness costs. Such a fitness cost can be sex specific, especially if there is sex specific dispersal tendency. Future investigations should assess the generality of these findings under variability of

different components of environment, including patch quality, predation risk, intensity of competition risk.

Acknowledgements:

We thank Vinesh Shenoi, Rabi Sankar Pal, and Purbasha Dasgupta for the critical comments on a previous version of the manuscript. Incorporation of his suggestions have greatly improved the quality of the manuscript. We are thankful to Purbasha Dasgupta, Anirban Bhowmick for her help during the experiments and population maintenance. We also thank Suresh Maharana for the help in fashioning the experimental setups. The experiments reported here was supported by Seed Grant from Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Berhampur, Govt. of India. SH thanks University Grant Comission, Government of India for financial support in the form of Junior and Senior Research Fellowship.

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