Stumpy forms are the predominant transmissible forms of *Trypanosoma brucei*.

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Abstract

Recently, Schuster *et al.* demonstrated that bloodstream slender forms of African trypanosomes are readily transmissible to young tsetse flies where they can complete their complex life cycle (1). In their experimental conditions, a single slender parasite was sufficient for productive infection. Here, we compared the infectivity of slender and stumpy bloodstream forms in adult flies with a mature immune system, and without using any chemical compounds that would alter the insect immune response and/or promote the infection. After ingestion of slender forms, infected flies were observed only in one out of 24 batches of non-immunocompetent teneral flies and with a high number of parasites. In contrast, infected flies were detected in 75% (18/24) of the batches infected with stumpy parasites, and as few as 10 stumpy parasites produced mature infections in immune adult flies. We discuss that, although Schuster *et al.* have unequivocally demonstrated the intrinsic capacity of slender form trypanosomes to infect young and naive tsetse flies, highlighting the remarkable plasticity and adaptability of these protists, this phenomenon is unlikely to significantly contribute to the epidemiology of African trypanosomiases. According to both experimental and field observations, stumpy forms appear to be the most adapted forms for African trypanosome transmission from the mammalian host to the tsetse fly vector in natural conditions.

Introduction

Protist parasites of the *Trypanosoma brucei* group cause Human African Trypanosomiasis (HAT), or sleeping sickness in humans, and nagana in cattle (2). They are transmitted by the blood feeding tsetse fly following a long (at least 3 weeks) and complex (at least 9 distinct stages) cyclical development (review in (3)). In the mammalian host's blood circulation, proliferating slender trypanosomes differentiate into cell cycle-arrested stumpy cells upon quorum sensing when they reach high parasite densities (4-7). This differentiation is thought not only to regulate the parasite load in the reservoir host (8), but also to provide transmissible parasites adapted to pursue the life cycle in the vector host (9). Indeed, stumpy forms express several transcripts and proteins necessary to the next developmental stage in the insect, the procyclic form, including the Protein Associated to Differentiation 1 or PAD1 (5). For decades, arrest of the cell cycle and differentiation to the stumpy stage were presumed essential for the developmental progression of bloodstream trypanosomes to the insect stages.

Recently, Schuster *et al.* demonstrated that slender trypanosomes can also present some intrinsic characteristic of transmissible forms (PAD1 mRNAs and proteins) and are readily transmissible to both young male and female tsetse flies, where they can complete their complex life cycle (1), yet with a lower efficiency than stumpy forms (10). In their experimental conditions, a single slender parasite was sufficient for productive infection. However, these laboratory conditions are significantly different from what is encountered in the field. First, only young teneral flies (1-3 days post-eclosion) with an immature immune system were used. Second, in some experiments, chemical compounds altering the insect immune response (glutathione) and/or promoting the infection (N-acetyl-glucosamine) were added to the infective meal. To assess the importance of these parameters, we challenged the infectivity of slender bloodstream forms in adult tsetse flies, i.e. in conditions closer to the natural situation.

Material and methods

Strains, culture and *in vitro* differentiation

The AnTat 1.1E Paris pleomorphic strain of *Trypanosoma brucei brucei* was derived from a strain originally isolated from a bushbuck in Uganda in 1966 (11). Bloodstream form trypanosomes were cultivated in HMI-9 medium supplemented with 10% (v/v) FBS (12) at 37°C in 5% CO_2. Proliferative slender cells were maintained at densities

65 lower than 5.10^5 parasites/ml to prevent their natural quorum-sensing-dependent
66 differentiation into stumpy forms. For *in vitro* slender to stumpy BSF differentiation, we
67 used 8-pCPT-2′-O-Me-5′-AMP, a nucleotide analogue of 5'-AMP (BIOLOG Life
68 Science Institute, Germany). Briefly, $2x10^6$ pleomorphic AnTat 1.1E slender forms
69 were incubated with 8-pCPT-2′-O-Me-5′-AMP (5 µM) for 48 h (13). Freshly
70 differentiated stumpy forms and slender cells were then centrifuged at 1,400 × g for 10
71 minutes and resuspended at the appropriate densities in SDM-79 medium
72 supplemented with 10% FBS. Cells were resuspended at either 10^3, 10^4 or 10^5
73 parasites / ml. Assuming individual bloodmeal volumes ranging between 10-100 µl,
74 this would correspond to ingestions of 10-100, 100-1,000 or 1,000-10,000 parasites
75 per condition.

76 **Tsetse fly maintenance, infection and dissection**

77 *Glossina morsitans morsitans* tsetse flies were maintained in Roubaud cages at 27°C
78 and 70% hygrometry and fed through a silicone membrane with fresh mechanically
79 defibrinated sheep blood (BCL, France). Adult (between 2 and 3 weeks after
80 emergence) or teneral males (between 24h and 72h post-emergence) were allowed to
81 ingest parasites through a silicone membrane and without any chemical supplement.
82 A total of 3 to 5 independent biological replicates per condition were performed with
83 batches of 50 flies per condition.
84 Flies were starved for at least 24 hours before being dissected blindly 28 to 31 days
85 post-ingestion for isolation of all stages from the midgut and salivary glands. For
86 recovery of all tsetse organs, after rapid isolation of the salivary glands in a first drop
87 of phosphate buffer saline (PBS), whole tsetse alimentary tracts, from the distal part of
88 the foregut to the Malpighian tubules, were dissected and arranged lengthways in
89 another drop of PBS as previously described (14, 15). Isolated organs were then
90 scrutinized under a microscope at 40x magnification by two independent readers and
91 infection rates per organ were scored (16).

92 **Immuno-fluorescence analysis (IFA)**

93 Cultured parasites were washed in TDB and spread onto poly-L-lysine coated slides.
94 For flash methanol fixation, slides were air-dried for 10 min, fixed in methanol at -20°C
95 for 5 seconds and rehydrated for 20 min in PBS. For immunodetection of stumpy forms,
96 slides were incubated for 1 h at 37°C with a rabbit polyclonal anti-PAD1 antibody
97 (kindly provided by Keith Matthews, University of Edinburgh) (5) diluted at 1:300 in

98 PBS containing 0.1% Bovine Serum Albumin (BSA). After 3 consecutive 5 min washes
99 in PBS, a species and subclass-specific secondary antibody coupled to the Alexa 488
100 fluorochrome (Jackson ImmunoResearch) diluted at 1:1000 in PBS containing 0.1%
101 BSA was applied for 1 h at 37°C. After washing in PBS, slides were finally stained with
102 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI, 1 µg/ml) for visualization of kinetoplast and
103 nuclear DNA content and mounted under coverslips with ProLong antifade reagent
104 (Invitrogen), as previously described (14). Slides were observed under an
105 epifluorescence DMI4000 microscope (Leica) with a 100x oil objective (NA 1.4) to
106 assess the proportion of PAD1-positive cells in the infective meals (n > 100 cells /
107 condition).

108 **Results**

109 Pleomorphic *T. b. brucei* bloodstream forms were either maintained in culture at a
110 density lower than 5.10^5 parasites / ml to prevent quorum-sensing-induced
111 differentiation and obtain only slender forms or induced for differentiation with a 5'-
112 AMP nucleotide analogue to obtain mostly stumpy forms. The expression of PAD1 at
113 the cell surface was assessed by immunofluorescence analysis prior to each
114 experimental infection: no PAD1 expression was detected in the slender group,
115 whereas an average of 63% (52% to 71%, n = 12 replicates) of the induced cells were
116 expressing PAD1. Batches of 50 teneral (< 72h) or adult (2-3 weeks) male tsetse flies
117 were fed in parallel with either slender or stumpy forms at densities corresponding to
118 individual ingestion of about 10, 100 or 1,000 parasites per bloodmeal. In total, 1,384
119 flies from 12 distinct experimental infections were dissected about 4 weeks (28 to 31
120 days) after parasite ingestion. Infection rates in midguts and salivary glands were
121 quantified and plotted for each condition (Figure 1 and Table S1).
122 After ingestion of slender forms, infected flies were observed in only 1 batch out of 24.
123 This occurred in not yet fully immunocompetent teneral flies and with the highest
124 number of ingested parasites (1,000 to 10,000 parasites). In contrast, midgut and
125 salivary glands infected flies were observed in 75% (18/24) and 62.5% (15/24) of the
126 batches infected with stumpy parasites, respectively. As few as 10 stumpy parasites
127 produced mature infections in immunocompetent adult flies and the infection rates
128 were similar whatever the amounts of stumpy forms ingested. However, in more
129 susceptible non-immune teneral flies, the infection rates were increasing with the
130 number of stumpy forms ingested.

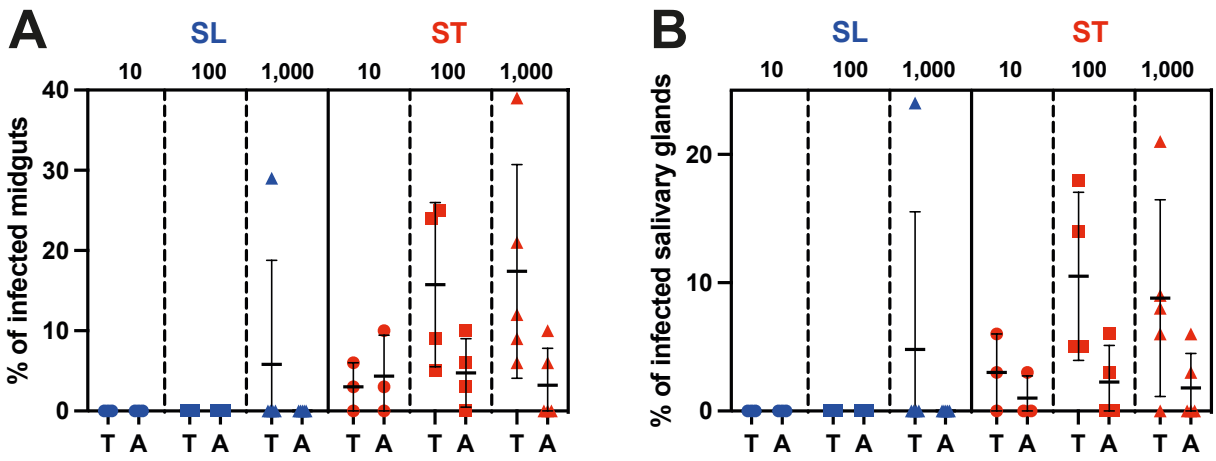

Figure 1. Stumpy forms are the predominant transmissible forms. Comparison of (**A**) midgut and (**B**) salivary gland infection rates in teneral (T) Vs. adult (A) tsetse flies (batches of 50 flies) infected with 10 to 100 (circles, 3 independent experiments), 100 to 1,000 (squares, 4 independent experiments) or 1,000 to 10,000 (triangles, 5 independent experiments) parasites in the slender (SL in blue) or stumpy (ST in red) forms.

Discussion

The recent findings of Schuster *et al.* (1) have opened a debate on the traditional view of the trypanosome life cycle where slender trypanosomes are considered as non-competent for cyclical development in the insect vector (17). The authors proposed that their observations could provide a solution to a long-lasting paradox, namely the successful transmission of parasites in chronic infections, despite low parasitemia.

However, Schuster *et al.* performed all their experimental infections in laboratory conditions that have been optimized for maximum transmission efficiency, with the use of teneral flies, and for some experiments, the addition of *N*-acetylglucosamine and glutathione. Teneral flies remain unfed up to 3-5 days after emergence from their puparium (1) and are known to be significantly more susceptible to trypanosome infection as they are immunologically immature (weak immune system and, leaky peritrophic matrix) (18-21). However, in the wild, tsetse flies remain teneral for 1 to 4 days maximum (before they take their first blood meal), although they subsequently live as adult flies for up to 9 months (22), which attenuates the possible epidemiological

156 impact of teneral flies on trypanosome transmission. In addition, all infective meals
157 were supplemented with 60 mM *N*-acetylglucosamine, an inhibitor of tsetse midgut
158 lectins enhancing trypanosome infection (23). For infections with monomorphic
159 parasites, the addition of 12.5 mM glutathione, an antioxidant that reduces the midgut
160 environment, protects trypanosomes from cell death induced by reactive oxygen
161 species (24). These chemical compounds inhibit the (already weak) immune response
162 in teneral flies, and substantially enhance the chances for trypanosomes to develop in
163 the insect vector.
164 Conditions are far less favourable in the field; hence we investigated and compared
165 the infection potential of slender and stumpy forms in adult and teneral flies without the
166 addition of chemicals. We observed that slender forms were not infective to adult tsetse
167 flies and only at densities higher than 10^5 parasites / ml. However, in endemic areas,
168 especially in Western Africa, parasitemia in confirmed cases are usually very low (<
169 10^4 parasites / ml in Guinea for instance) and it is necessary to concentrate parasites
170 in blood prior to microscopic examination to increase sensitivity of parasitological
171 diagnosis (2). Hence, the possible transmission of a few slender trypanosomes from
172 the blood of individuals with a chronic infection is unlikely to explain the maintenance
173 of the parasite circulation in tsetse populations.
174 By contrast, we observed that as few as 10 stumpy parasites are enough to produce
175 mature infections in both teneral and adult flies, already with a significant efficiency. In
176 patients with low parasitemia, the quorum-sensing-triggered differentiation of slender
177 to stumpy forms could be compatible with, or even more adapted to, extravascular
178 forms present in some tissues and organs, with a limited dilution of the parasites and
179 parasite factors remaining concentrated locally. Indeed, extravascular PAD1-positive
180 trypanosomes were detected in high numbers at least in adipose tissues (25) and in
181 the dermis (26) of experimentally infected mice. The presence of PAD1-positive
182 extravascular trypanosomes was also assessed in the skin of confirmed gambiense
183 HAT cases and unconfirmed seropositive individuals in endemic areas (27) (and
184 unpublished data). This suggests that stumpy trypanosomes accessible to tsetse flies
185 are likely more abundant than previously estimated in individuals with low parasitemia.
186 Schuster *et al.* have unequivocally demonstrated the intrinsic capacity of slender form
187 trypanosomes to infect young and naive tsetse flies, highlighting the remarkable
188 plasticity and adaptability of these protists. The fine understanding of the underlying
189 cellular mechanisms and / or transient adaptations involved in this process remains an

exciting challenge. However, this event is unlikely to contribute to the epidemiology of African trypanosomiases in natural settings. According to both experimental and field observations, stumpy forms appear to be the most adapted forms for African trypanosome transmission from the mammalian host to the tsetse fly vector in natural conditions.

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Author contributions

AC, JMTN and PS performed the experiments. BR designed the study, analysed the data, and wrote the manuscript. JMTN, PS and BR discussed the manuscript.

Competing interest

All authors declare no financial relationships with any organizations that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous three years, no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work, and no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work.

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