Direct inference of the distribution of fitness effects of spontaneous mutations from recombinant

inbred *C. elegans* mutation accumulation lines

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16

Abstract

The distribution of fitness effects (DFE) of new mutations plays a central role in evolutionary

biology. Estimates of the DFE from experimental Mutation Accumulation (MA) lines are

compromised by the complete linkage disequilibrium (LD) between mutations in different lines.

To reduce LD, we constructed two sets of recombinant inbred lines from a cross of two *C.*

elegans MA lines. One set of lines ("RIAILs") was intercrossed for ten generations prior to ten

generations of selfing; the second set of lines ("RILs") omitted the intercrossing. Residual LD in

the RIAILs is much less than in the RILs, which affects the inferred DFE when the sets of lines

are analyzed separately. The best-fit model estimated from all lines (RIAILs + RILs) infers a

large fraction of mutations with positive effects (~40%); models that constrain mutations to have

negative effects fit much worse. The conclusion is the same using only the RILs. For the

RIAILs, however, models that constrain mutations to have negative effects fit nearly as well as

models that allow positive effects. When mutations in high LD are pooled into haplotypes, the

inferred DFE becomes increasingly negative-skewed and leptokurtic. We conclude that the

conventional wisdom - most mutations have effects near zero, a handful of mutations have

effects that are substantially negative and mutations with positive effects are very rare – is likely

correct, and that unless it can be shown otherwise, estimates of the DFE that infer a substantial

fraction of mutations with positive effects are likely confounded by LD.

INTRODUCTION

The distribution of fitness effects (DFE) of new mutations is of fundamental importance in numerous areas of evolutionary biology (FISHER 1930; ORR 2000; PECK *et al.* 1997; SCHULTZ and LYNCH 1997; ZHANG *et al.* 2004), as well as having practical applications, including human genetic disease (AGARWAL *et al.* 2023; BOYLE *et al.* 2017; EYRE-WALKER 2010; MORROW and CONNALLON 2013) and cancer (CANNATARO *et al.* 2016; CANNATARO and TOWNSEND 2018; DURRETT *et al.* 2010). The DFE can be estimated from data in two ways: indirectly from patterns of sequence variation within and between species (BOYKO *et al.* 2008; GILBERT *et al.* 2021; JAMES *et al.* 2023; JOHRI *et al.* 2020; KEIGHTLEY and EYRE-WALKER 2010; KIM *et al.* 2017; KOUSATHANAS and KEIGHTLEY 2013; LOEWE and CHARLESWORTH 2006; TATARU *et al.* 2017), or directly from comparisons between genotypes differing by a known (or estimated) set of mutations (BÖNDEL *et al.* 2019; DAVIES *et al.* 1999; KEIGHTLEY 1994; RAMANI *et al.* 2012; SHEN *et al.* 2022; THATCHER *et al.* 1998). Each method has strengths and limitations. Estimation from the standing variation incorporates a vastly larger number of mutations than could ever be assessed experimentally, the effects of very weak selection are detectable (at least in aggregate), and effects are integrated over the entire spectrum of environmental and genomic contexts experienced by the organism in question. However, the method has several important limitations. First, the effects of selection must be jointly estimated with the effects of demography, which are necessarily greatly simplified for analytical tractability (JOHRI *et al.* 2020; KEIGHTLEY and EYRE-WALKER 2007; LI *et al.* 2012). Second, there is little information about the tail of the distribution for which selection is strong on an evolutionary timescale but weak over the course of a few generations ($s \approx 1\%$) (KOUSATHANAS and KEIGHTLEY 2013). Third, the method assumes there is a class of mutations that are selectively neutral to serve as a

reference; the extent to which that assumption is met is an empirical issue requiring independent

validation (KRUGLYAK *et al.* 2023; SHEN *et al.* 2022). Finally, there is no way to connect the

DFE back to phenotypic traits.

Direct estimation from fitness differences between known genotypes has the advantage of

being conceptually unambiguous - if two groups differ by a single mutation and differ in fitness

by some amount y, the effect of the mutation is y. Constructing two populations that differ by

one or a few mutations is straightforward: known mutations can be introgressed or otherwise

engineered (e.g., by CRISPR) into a common genetic background to provide "nearly isogenic

lines" (NILs). Recent advances in CRISPR technology have made it possible to engineer large

panels of NILs in yeast and other microbes (SHARON *et al.* 2018; SHEN *et al.* 2022). However,

constructing enough NILs to provide a meaningful estimate of the DFE remains a daunting

proposition in multicellular organisms. Single-gene "knockout panels", in which genes are

systematically inactivated and the fitness effects documented, have been tremendously important

in informing our understanding of the functional aspects of the genome (e.g., KIM *et al.* 2010;

RAMANI *et al.* 2012; THATCHER *et al.* 1998), but knockout mutations constitute only a small part

of the mutational spectrum and do not provide an unbiased estimate of the DFE.

Mutation accumulation (MA) experiments, in which spontaneous mutations are allowed

to accumulate in the (near) absence of natural selection, provide the opportunity to estimate the

DFE of a (nearly) unbiased set of mutations (HALLIGAN and KEIGHTLEY 2009; KATJU and

BERGTHORSSON 2019). However, within an MA line, all mutations are in complete linkage

disequilibrium, which renders individual mutational effects inestimable.

Here we employ a classical line-cross strategy with MA lines, to break down the linkage

disequilibrium among the accumulated mutations. We then combine whole-genome sequencing

with high-throughput competitive fitness assays to estimate the DFE of a set of 169 spontaneous

mutations. This strategy was first employed by BÖNDEL *et al.* (2019) with the unicellular green

alga *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*. We crossed two parental *C. elegans* mutation accumulation

(MA) lines derived from the same genetically homogeneous ancestor to get F1 hybrids that are

segregating at all mutant loci. The F1s were reciprocally crossed, and from the F2s we

constructed two sets of recombinant inbred lines (**Supplemental Figure 1**). For the first set, F2s

were further crossed prior to inbreeding to construct a set of Recombinant Inbred Advanced

Intercross Lines (RIAILs). For the second set, we omitted the intercrossing step and proceeded

directly to the inbreeding step; these lines are classical RILs. We refer to the full set of lines as

RI(AI)Ls for brevity. RI(AI)Ls were assayed for competitive fitness against a marked

competitor strain nearly isogenic for the ancestral genome, and multilocus genotypes inferred by

whole-genome sequencing at low (2-3X) coverage. The strategy is conceptually analogous to

QTL analysis, except the variant loci are not simply markers, but rather are the QTL themselves.

METHODS

1. Experimental Methods

1.1 Mutation Accumulation (MA) lines.

The details of the MA experiment have been reported elsewhere (BAER *et al.* 2005). Briefly, 100

replicate lines were initiated from a single, highly inbred N2 strain hermaphrodite, and

propagated under standard laboratory conditions for a maximum of 250 generations by transfer

of a single immature hermaphrodite at four-day intervals. Under this protocol the effective

population size, $N_e \approx 1$, and all but the most highly deleterious mutations are effectively neutral.

The progenitor (G0) was cryopreserved at the outset of the experiment, and surviving MA lines

were cryopreserved upon culmination of the MA phase.

1.2 Recombinant Inbred (Advanced Intercross) Lines.

Two MA lines (MA530 and MA563) were chosen as parents for a set of recombinant inbred

advance intercross lines (RIAILs) or simple recombinant inbred lines (RILs). The parental lines

were chosen on the basis of their near-average decline in lifetime reproductive success (~20%)

over four assays after 200 and 220 generations of MA at two different assay temperatures (20°

and 25° (BAER *et al.* 2006). The original plan was to construct a set of 600 RIAILs, with ten

generations of intercrossing followed by ten generations of selfing, using the "random pair

mating with equal contributions of each parent" design of ROCKMAN and KRUGLYAK (2008; see

their Figure 1). However, many crosses failed during the intercrossing phase, so we abandoned

the intercrossing and completed the set of lines with RILs. The final set of 517 genotyped lines

includes 192 RIAILs and 325 RILs. Details of the crossing schemes are given in **Section I of**

the Supplemental Material.

1.3 Competitive fitness assays.

To assay competitive fitness, an L1-stage focal strain worm and an L1 GFP-marked competitor

(strain VP604) were placed together on a plate seeded with bacterial food and allowed to

reproduce. Upon exhaustion of the bacterial food, worms were washed from the plate and

counted using a Union Biometrica BioSorter™. The natural logarithm of the ratio of the

frequencies of the two types, $W=\log[(p/1-p)]$, is proportional to the difference in fitness between

the focal strain (frequency $= p$) and the competitor strain (frequency $= 1-p$) (LATTER and SVED

1994). The assay is described in detail in Appendix 1 of YEH *et al.* (2018) and summarized in

Section II of the Supplemental Material.

1.4 Genome sequencing, variant calling, and genotyping.

RI(AI)L genomes were sequenced at low (~2-3X) coverage with 150-bp paired-end Illumina

sequencing, using standard methods. Details of sequencing and variant calling are given in

Section III of the Supplemental Material. Raw sequence data (fastq) of the RI(AI)Ls have

been deposited in the NCBI SRA under project number PRJNA1083210. Genome sequences for

the G0 progenitor and the parent MA lines have been previously reported (RAJAEI *et al.* 2021;

SAXENA *et al.* 2019).

1.5. Imputation. Given the low (2-3X) sequencing coverage, approximately 1/3 of the data

(35.2%) are missing, i.e., the genotype at a given locus was not called as either homozygote.

The mean number of loci successfully genotyped per RI(AI)L is 109, and the mean number of

RI(AI)Ls for which a locus was scored is 335. To account for the missing genotype information,

we constructed a computational procedure to impute the missing data by leveraging linkage

disequilibrium (LD; see next section) between segregating sites.   Specifically, we used the

masked language modeling approach from natural language processing to build a predictive

model for the missing alleles. The imputation model is built on the transformer architecture,

which has been widely used for modeling natural languages as well as biological sequences such

as DNAs and proteins (JI *et al.* 2021; RIVES *et al.* 2021). The model output consists of the

predicted log-probability for all possible states per site, i.e., the MA530 or MA563 allele. The

details of the model are given in **Section IV of the Supplemental Material**.

To assess the model's performance, we performed 100 rounds of validation. For each

round, all RI(AI)L genotypes were used for training, but with one percent of the called alleles

randomly masked. Across the 100 rounds, we observed a high imputation accuracy on the

masked positions: mean $\pm$ 1 SD prediction accuracy = 90.3 $\pm$ 1.5%. Cases in which the imputed

allele differs from the called allele include errors in the initial call, so 90% is a conservative

estimate of the true prediction accuracy. The final imputed genotypes (**Supplemental Table 1**)

were generated by retraining the model on all RI(AI)L genotypes using all available allele

information.

1.6. Linkage Disequilibrium (LD)

Alleles from the two parents, MA530 and MA563, are initially in complete coupling (positive)

linkage disequilibrium in the F1. However, mutant alleles occur in both parental genomes, so

although the initial LD between pairs of mutant alleles is complete, the sign of the association

(positive or negative) depends on which parental genomes the mutations occurred. Measures of

LD that do not account for the sign of the association are agnostic with respect to whether alleles

are coded by the parent of origin or as ancestral (0) vs. mutant (1); the value is the same either

way. Measures of LD that do account for the sign of the association may differ by sign

depending on if the alleles are coded by parent of origin vs. ancestral vs. mutant. For our

purposes, it is more meaningful to code alleles as ancestral or mutant.

The pairwise coefficient of linkage disequilibrium, $D = p_{A1B1} - p_{A1}p_{B1}$ where p_{A1B1} is the

frequency of the double-mutant (*A1B1*) haplotype at the A and B loci, p_{A1} is the frequency of the

mutant allele at the A locus and p_{B1} is the frequency of the mutant allele at the B locus. The

expected allele frequency in the RI(AI)Ls is 0.5 at all segregating loci, but the observed

frequencies will vary due to sampling. We report two measures of LD, the squared coefficient of

correlation, r^2, and $D^* = D/|Dmax|$, where $|Dmax| = \min[p_{A1}(1-p_{B1})], (1-p_{A1})p_{B1}]$; r^2 is constrained

non-negative and D^* can take on values [-1,1]. Note that our D^* is the familiar D' but with the

sign retained. We calculated r^2 and D^* among all pairs of the 169 loci using the PLINK v1.9

commands '--r2' and '--r dprime-signed' respectively (PURCELL *et al.* 2007). We also report the

mean pairwise intra-chromosomal and inter-chromosomal LD for (1) all lines (n = 517), (2) RILs

only (n = 325), and (3) RIAILs only (n = 192). To visualize intra-chromosomal pairwise LD we

used the ggplot2 package v3.4.4 for R Statistical Software v4.2.3 (WICKHAM 2009).

1.7. Heritability. We estimated the broad-sense heritability (H^2) of *W* from the among-line (i.e.,

among-RI(AI)L) component of variance estimated from the general linear model (GLM) $y_{ijk} = \mu$

$+ \alpha_i + \beta_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ijk}$, where y_{ijk} is the value of *W*, μ is the overall mean, α_i is the random effect of

Block *i*, β_{ij} is the random effect of Line *j* in Block *i*, and ε_{ijk} is the residual effect of Replicate *k* of

Line *j* in Block *i*. Because the RI(AI)Ls are homozygous lines derived from a cross of

homozygous parents, $V_G = V_L$, where V_L is the among-line component of variance (FALCONER

1989, Ch. 15) and the broad-sense heritability $H^2 = V_G/V_P$, where V_P is the total phenotypic

variance. Variance components were estimated by restricted maximum likelihood (REML), as

implemented in the MIXED procedure of SAS v. 9.4. Variance components were first estimated

hierarchically (i.e., the within-line and among-line components of variance were estimated

separately for each block), and tested against models with the variance pooled over blocks. The

best model was ascertained by the Bayesian Information Criterion. Statistical significance of the

among-line variance was assessed by likelihood-ratio test (LRT), wherein the model with the line

term included was tested against the simpler model with Line excluded. The models are nested,

so twice the difference in log(likelihood) is asymptotically Chi-square distributed with degrees of

freedom equal to the difference in the number of parameters estimated.

To account for the possibility that some of the among-line variance was due to factors

other than genotype, we included a set of six "pseudolines" of the G0 ancestor and of each

parental MA line in each assay block, which are the experimental equivalent of RILs except they

are genetically homogeneous, and any among-(pseudo)line variance must be due to causes other

than variation among genes. Pseudolines were analyzed identically to the RI(AI)Ls.

We next estimated the proportion of the total broad-sense heritability <u>not</u> explained by

the cumulative additive effects of the mutations, H^2*, from the full (imputed) dataset, as follows.

First, we calculated the multiple regression $y_{ijk} = \mu + \boldsymbol{\beta}\mathbf{x} + \varepsilon$, where y_{ijk} is the value of W as

before, μ is the overall mean, $\mathbf{x}$ is the vector of genotypes at mutant loci 1-169, $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is the vector of

regression coefficients, and ε is the residual effect. We then re-estimated the linear model from

above, $y^*_{ijk} = \mu + \alpha_i + \beta_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ijk}$, where the terms are as before, where the y^*_{ijk} are the residuals of

the multiple regression of W on the multilocus genotype, $\mathbf{x}$. The difference $H^2 - H^2*$ is the

narrow-sense heritability h^2, i.e., the fraction of the total phenotypic variance explained by the

additive effects of the mutations. Statistical significance of h^2 was assessed by randomly

permuting estimates of W among replicates and re-calculating h^2.

2. Estimation of the DFE

2.1. Marginal effects. The simplest way to measure the phenotypic effect of a mutation at locus *i*

is from the average difference in the trait between lines that have the mutant allele and lines that

have the ancestral allele at locus *i*. We refer to the mutational effects calculated in this way as

the marginal effects. Confidence intervals and approximate standard errors of marginal effects

were calculated from 1000 bootstrap replicates, holding the number of lines in each category

(mutant, wild-type) constant in each (re)sample.

2.2. Bayesian MCMC. We take a fully Bayesian approach to estimate the posterior distribution

of all genetic and non-genetic parameters. The basic model is the same as in section 1.7 above,

such that the observed fitness of replicate *k* of line *j* in block *i* is: $y_{ijk} = \mu + \alpha_i + \boldsymbol{\beta}^T\mathbf{x_j} + \varepsilon_{ijk.}$ The

vector $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ contains the effects for the 169 mutations. We fit a series of models with increasing

complexity in the prior distribution of $\boldsymbol{\beta}$, to test different hypotheses regarding the DFE of the

mutations. In all models, the grand mean, μ, follows an uninformative normal distribution with

mean zero and SD = 10. The individual block effects follow normal distributions with mean 0

and SD = 1, given the small variation in block effects when averaged over lines (SD = 0.13). The

models tested are summarized in **Table 1**.

To begin, in model 1 ("neutral model") mutational effects are constrained to 0, i.e., $\boldsymbol{\beta} = 0$.

In model 2 ("uniform effect model"), all mutations in the vector $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ have a constant effect (u),

such that $y_{ijk} = \mu + \alpha_i + m_j \times u + \varepsilon_{ijk}$., where m_j is the number of mutant alleles in line j.

Model 3 ("neutral + uniform effect model") assumes that mutations in vector $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ follow identical

independent distributions such that the m-th mutation, β_m, has a probability $1 - q$ of being

neutral, and q of having a nonzero constant effect u, such that $\beta_m = w \times u$, where w is sampled

from a Bernoulli distribution with parameter q, which in turn is drawn from an uninformative

Beta prior with shape parameters = 2. In both the uniform effect model and the neutral +

uniform effect model, the constant mutational effect u follows a normal prior with mean 0 and

SD = 10. Model 4 (neutral + uniform positive effect + uniform negative effect, "3-effect

model") in addition assumes that mutations can take both constant positive or negative effects,

such that $\beta_m = w \times (z \times u^+ - (1 - z) \times u^-)$. Similarly, w is a Bernoulli random variable with the

probability q, equal to the probability that a mutation is non-neutral, which follows the same

distribution as model 3. The parameter z controls the conditional probability of a nonneutral

mutation having the positive effect, and is a Bernoulli random variable with probability p^+,

which follows an uninformative Beta distribution with shape parameters = 2. The constant

positive/negative effects u_{pos}/u_{neg} follow an uninformative normal distribution with mean 0 and

SD = 10.

In addition to these constant-effects models, we tested three models in which mutational

effects are sampled from a continuous Gamma distribution. In model 5 ("negative gamma"), all

mutations are assumed to have negative (i.e., deleterious) effects, with effect sizes sampled

identically and independently from a Gamma distribution, whose shape and rate parameters

follow uninformative half normal distributions (SD = 10). In model 6 ("symmetric gamma") and

model 7 ("asymmetric gamma"), mutations can have either positive or negative effects, such that

we can express individual mutation effects as $\beta_m = z \times \beta_m^+ - (1 - z) \times \beta_m^-$. Similar to model 4, z

is a Bernoulli random variable with probability p^+, which follows a symmetric Beta distribution.

The positive (negative) effect sizes, β_m^+ (β_m^-) are in turn sampled from their respective Gamma

distributions, as in Model 5. The only difference between model 6 and 7 is that in model 6, β_m^+

and β_m^- follow the same Gamma distribution, whereas in model 7, the Gamma distributions for

the positive and negative effect sizes are allowed to be different.

Bayesian inference for all models was implemented in the statistical software PyMC3

v5.10 (SALVATIER *et al.* 2016). The No-U-Turn-Sampler was employed to acquire posterior

samples. Continuous random variables were sampled using the Hamiltonian Monte Carlo

method which relies on gradients calculated using automatic differentiation, whereas discrete

random variable were sampled using the Metropolis algorithm. To account for the uncertainty in

the genotypes due to missing alleles, for each model we performed 50 independent Monte Carlo

runs, each with missing alleles sampled from independent Bernoulli distributions with

probability predicted by the trained imputation model. For each model and genotype replicate,

we ran 4 parallel Monte Carlo chains, each with 1000 warm up steps and 4000 sampling steps.

We used the R-hat statistic (VEHTARI *et al.* 2021) as a diagnostic of model divergence, which

compares the parameter estimates between and within chains. R-hat is greater than 1 if the chains

are not well mixed, such that the between and within-chain sample distributions disagree.

We used a Bayesian model selection procedure to identify the best model. Specifically,

for each model we estimated the leave-one-out expected log pointwise predictive density (ELPD

LOO) model fit, equal to the mean expected log likelihood of the observed fitness of a random

individual given its genotype, calculated based on a model fitted using the full data set minus the

focal individual. The procedure is implemented in PyMC3 based on the approximate method

introduced by VEHTARI *et al.* (2017) The ELPD LOO scores for all 50 genotype replicates were

averaged to provide an overall goodness-of-fit score for each model.

RESULTS:

Linkage Disequilibrium

The purpose of constructing RI(AI)Ls is to break up the linkage disequilibrium between

mutations, to permit estimation of the effects of individual mutations. That effort was only

partially, and variably, successful. Averaged over all lines (RILs + RIAILs), intrachromosomal

LD as measured by median r^2 is 0.12 (**Figure 1; Supplemental Figure 2**). However, LD is

much higher in the RILs (median $r^2 = 0.28$) than in the RIAILs (median $r^2 = 0.045$). Ten

generations of advanced intercrossing was effective in breaking up LD, on average, but regions

of near-complete LD remain even in the RIAILs. Inspection of **Figure 1** reveals that regions of

high LD are concentrated in the chromosome centers, as expected given the reduced rate of

crossing over in centers relative to arms, although there are also regions of high LD in

chromosome arms where mutations are tightly clustered. Interchromosomal LD is near 0 in both

RILs and RIAILs (**Supplemental Figure 3**), indicating a trivial role for sampling variance in

maintaining LD.

Figure 1 - Intrachromosomal pairwise linkage disequilibrium (LD). (**a**) Pairwise LD (r^2)
calculated with all lines (RIAILs + RILs), (**b**) RILs only, and (**c**) RIAILs only. Each heat map
represents a chromosome with pairwise LD (r^2) between mutant loci colored as shown in the

legend. The colored lines above each chromosome represent the parental origin of the mutant
allele (MA530-solid blue, MA563-dashed orange). These lines also show the relative physical
position of mutant loci across each chromosome; the far-left vertical line represents the first
mutant locus on the chromosome and the far-right vertical line represents the last mutant locus.
295

Heritability

Our goal is to estimate the effects of spontaneous mutations on fitness. To begin, we ask: is

there heritable variation in competitive fitness among the RI(AI)Ls? The broad-sense heritability

of W including all RI(AI)Ls, H^2=0.30 (bootstrap SEM=0.023; LRT p<0.0001). Estimates of H^2

were similar for RIAILs (H^2=0.325 $\pm$ 0.036, LRT p<0.0001) and RILs (H^2=0.278$\pm$ 0.029, LRT

p<0.0001). Including all RI(AI)Ls, narrow-sense heritability, estimated from the residuals of the

multiple regression of W on multilocus genotype, h^2 = 0.16 (permutation test, P<0.001; averaged

over 1000 permutations of the data, random h^2 = 0.023, max=0.048). The cumulative additive

effects of the 169 segregating spontaneous mutations explain approximately half of the total

heritable variance in W. By way of comparison, H^2 for competitive fitness from a set of 28 *C.*

elegans wild isolates was 0.49, although the assays in the two studies are not directly comparable

(TEOTÓNIO *et al.* 2006).

Considering RIAILs and RILs separately, h^2 of the RILs is similar to the estimate from

the full dataset (h^2 = 0.20, n=325). The same analysis for RIAILs gives a REML point estimate

of V_L=0 (i.e., there is no among-line variance of the residuals), which taken at face value implies

that additive effects of the multilocus genotype completely explain H^2. A more conservative

interpretation is that the smaller number of RIAILs (n=192) provides insufficient power to

estimate a relatively small among-line component of variance once the additive effects are

accounted for.

Variation among lines may have non-genetic causes. To account for that possibility, we

estimated variance components among sets of "pseudolines" of the G0 ancestor of the parental

lines, and of the MA530 and MA563 parental lines. These controls are not powerful (n=30

pseudolines, 6 per block), but in all three cases the REML estimate of the among-pseudoline

component of variance, V_L= 0. Thus, we infer the remaining unexplained broad-sense

heritability is due to some combination of epistasis, transgenerational epigenetic inheritance

(TEI), and/or residual (but small) genotype-environment correlations.

Relationship between number of mutations and mean fitness

If all mutational effects are equal and in the same direction (i.e., the Bateman-Mukai criteria

(MUKAI 1964)), the slope of the regression of W on the number of mutant alleles carried by a line

will equal the average effect of a mutation. Averaged over all RI(AI)Ls, accounting for variation

among assay blocks and removing two outlying lines, the regression of W on number of

mutations is not significantly different from 0 (slope = -0.0051, $F_{1,509}$=1.83, P>0.17), although

the trend suggests that mutations are deleterious, on average.

Relationship between mutational effect and mutant allele frequency

The expected frequency of segregating neutral alleles in the RI(AI)Ls is 0.5. Selection was

minimally effective in the crossing and inbreeding phases ($N_e \approx 2$), but it was not absent. If most

mutations are deleterious and if deleterious alleles were preferentially removed by selection, then

(*i*) the average frequency of mutant alleles will be < 0.5, and (*ii*), there should be a negative

relationship between allele frequency and mutational effect size. The mean observed mutant

allele frequency is 0.500 (range = 0.287-0.675). The correlation between mutant allele

frequency p_i at the *i*th locus and the marginal effect u_i, r_{pu}= 0.15 (**Supplemental Figure 4**).

Thus, we infer that selection did not systematically skew mutant allele frequencies away from

the expected neutral frequency.

The Bayesian posterior DFE.

To infer the DFE, we tested a series of seven increasingly complex models, using the Bayesian

MCMC analysis outlined in the Methods. Because of the discrepancy in average LD between

the RIAILs and the RILs, all analyses were first done on the full set of RI(AI)Ls, and repeated on

RIAILs and RILs separately.

As a first step, we tested for model convergence, using the R-hat statistic. We observed

no divergence between the four parallel Markov chains, indicated by R-hat < 1 in all cases

(VEHTARI *et al.* 2021). Model performance, as measured by the Bayesian leave-one-out

expected log pointwise predictive density (LOO-ELPD, VEHTARI *et al.* 2021) averaged across 50

genotype replicates, is summarized in **Table 1**. Posterior means and 95% credible intervals of

model parameters are given in **Supplemental Table 2**.

Table 1. Comparison of seven competing Bayesian models fitted to the genotype and phenotype
data of all RILs and RIAILs, and separately to RILs and RIAILs. Each model was run with 50
random genotype replicates. Each replicate consisted of four Markov Chains with 4000
Metropolis steps. Sampling was performed using the software PyMC3 (SALVATIER *et al.* 2016).
Model performance is measured using the Bayesian leave-one-out expected log pointwise
predictive density (LOO-ELPD), quantifying the generalizability of the fitted model to validation
data points. Higher LOO-ELPD indicate better model performance.
357

Index	Model name	RILs + RIAILs		RILs		RIAILs	
		LOO-ELPD	Δ Best	LOO-ELPD	Δ Best	LOO-ELPD	Δ Best
1	**Neutral**	-3501.2	-99.2	-2200.6	-33.4	-1493.1	-133.6
2	**Uniform**	-3478.2	-76.2	-2190.1	-22.9	-1472.6	-113.1

5	Neutral + uniform	-3422.2	-20.2	-2179.7	-12.6	-1365.1	-5.5
4	Negative gamma	-3422.2	-20.2	-2181.0	-13.8	-1360.3	-0.8
5	3 effects	-3403.1	-1.1	-2170.8	-3.7	-1360.4	-0.8
6	Symmetric gamma	-3402.0	**0**	-2168.2	-1.1	-1359.6	**0**
7	Asymm. gamma	-3402.3	-0.3	-2167.2	**0**	-1359.9	-0.3

(i) All lines (RILs + RIAILs = RI(AI)Ls). Reassuringly, the **neutral** model, in which mutational

effects are constrained to equal 0, performs worst, with LOO-ELPD = -3501.2. The **uniform**

effect model, in which mutational effects are constrained to be equal, is moderately better with

LOO-ELPD = -3478.2. The posterior mean for the shared mutational effect (u) is negative and

has a 95% credible interval not intersecting zero (u = -0.006; CI = -0.009, -0.005).

The next most complex model is the **neutral + uniform effect model**, in which

mutations can either have a uniform non-zero effect with probability q or be neutral with

probability $1- q$. This performed significantly better, with LOO-ELPD = -3422.2. Again, the

mean mutational effect is inferred to be negative (u = -0.16, 95% CI = -0.24, -0.10), but with low

probability (q = 0.064, 95% CI = 0.026, 0.114). The **negative Gamma** model, in which effects

are constrained to be negative and sampled from a Gamma distribution, performs nearly

identically to the neutral + fixed effect model, with LOO-ELPD = -3422.2.

All models summarized so far assume mutations must have a uniform sign. The first

model relaxing this assumption is the **3-effect model**, in which a mutation can be neutral with

probability $1 - q$, or have a fixed positive/negative effect with probabilities q^+ and q^- (in our

Bayesian model parametrization, $q^+ = q \times p^+$, $q^- = q \times (1 - p^+)$, where p^+ is the probability that a

mutation has a positive effect, given that it is non-neutral). This model showed a significant

improvement in performance with a LOO-ELPD = -3403.

Finally, the two-sided Gamma models (**symmetric** and **asymmetric Gamma**) provide a

moderate improvement over the 3-effect model. The two models have LOO-ELPD scores that

are nearly indistinguishable (symmetric gamma model = -3402, asymmetric gamma model = -

3402.3), indicating that the additional flexibility conferred by the asymmetric gamma model does

not confer higher generalizability to new data. For the asymmetric gamma model, the alpha

(scale) and beta (rate, inverse of the scale parameter) parameters for the positive and negative

halves of the distribution have nearly identical posterior distributions (**Supplemental Table 2**).

Additionally, the two-sided gamma models show very similar posterior distributions for all

parameters. We therefore focus our discussion on the more parsimonious symmetric gamma

model.

On average, mutations are slightly less likely to have a positive effect ($p^+ = 0.426$; 95%

CI = 0.294, 0.547). The posterior distribution of the effects of all 169 mutations shows that

39.6% of all mutations have a positive posterior mean effect (**Figure 2A**), consistent with the

posterior probabilities $p^{+/-}$. However, individual mutations exhibit large credible intervals that

intersect zero (**Figure 3A**). The distribution of negative mean effects shows a longer tail than

the positive effects, but this asymmetry in shape was not reflected in the model selection results,

where the symmetric and asymmetric Gamma models have virtually identical performance. This

is likely a power issue, whereby the increased flexibility of the asymmetric Gamma model was

not supported by enough data to result in likelihood improvements that can offset the penalty

resulting from the higher model complexity.

Figure 2 - Distribution of Bayesian posterior mutational effects on fitness. The distribution
of mean mutational effects (u) calculated using the Bayesian MCMC method is shown. The
distribution is calculated separately with (**a**) all lines (**b**), RILs only, or (**c**) RIAILs only. The
vertical red line in each panel represents the mean of means for that population. The mean value
for each panel is also annotated on the plots in red text.

(ii) RILs. The model selection results for the RILs are largely consistent with results based on the

full set of RI(AI)Ls. The neutral and the fixed effect models have the lowest LOO-ELPD (**Table**

1). The two negative effects models have similar LOO-ELPD values and show significant

improvement over the first two models. Finally, we see that the three two-sided models provide

further substantial improvement over the one-sided model. The two-sided Gamma models

produced very similar LOO-ELPD scores, while the 3-effect model has a moderately lower

value. The distribution of mean mutational effects under the symmetric Gamma model are

similar to results generated from the full set of RI(AI)Ls (Pearson's $r = 0.56$; **Figure 2B**).

(iii) RIAILs. Model selection results for the RIAILs reveal a different pattern. Although the

neutral and fixed effect models still perform worst, performance of the models in which effects

are constrained to be non-positive (in particular the negative Gamma model) is now close to that

of the two-sided models (**Table 1**). The similarity between the two-sided models and the

negative-only model is supported by the change in the shape of the two-sided gamma models, in

which the frequency of mutations with positive effects is lower ($q+ = 0.355$; 95% CI 0.119,

0.595). Inference from RIAILs resulted in an overall reduction in the mean posterior effects of

mutations, such that the effects of most mutations are shrunk towards zero (**Figure 2C**).

Additionally, the posterior variance of the mutational effects is lower in the RIAILs (mean

posterior SD of mutational effects is 0.040, compared with 0.056 in the full set of RI(AI)Ls)

(**Figure 3C**), even with the lower sample size. The mutational effects for the RIAILs are more

weakly correlated to those inferred from the full set of RI(AI)Ls (Pearson's $r = 0.36$) than are the

effects inferred from the RILs.

425
426
Figure 3 - Bayesian posterior mutational effects by genome position. The mutant loci are
plotted by their physical position in the genome (x-axis) and their mean mutational effect (u) (y-
axis), which was calculated using the Bayesian Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method.
The colors indicate the parent of origin for the mutant locus (MA530-blue, MA563-orange) and
the shapes show the mutant class (indel-circle, snp-triangle). The vertical lines plotted behind

each point represent the 95% confidence intervals of the mutant effect estimates. The mutational
effects are calculated separately with all lines (**a**), RILs only (**b**), and RIAILs only (**c**).
434

(iv)The marginal DFE. The simplest way to infer the mutational effect at a locus is to calculate

the mean value of all lines with a mutant allele and all lines with an ancestral allele at that locus;

the difference is the marginal effect of the mutation at that locus. As a sanity check, we plotted

the inferred Bayesian posterior effect against the marginal effect; ideally, the correlation should

be +1. The correlations were positive, but well below 1 in all three cases (**Figure 4**). The

magnitude of the marginal effects is typically much larger than that of the posterior effects. The

difference is likely caused by LD, in that the marginal effect for a single mutation contains

contributions from other linked mutations, which may inflate the estimates.

Figure 4 - The relationship between Bayesian posterior mutational effects and marginal
effects. The effects are calculated separately using (**a**) all lines, (**b**) RILs only, or (**c**) RIAILs
only. Each point represents a locus and is colored by the parent of origin (MA530-blue, MA563-
orange). The shape of the point shows the mutant class (indel=circle, snp=triangle). 95%
confidence intervals for the estimates are plotted as vertical and horizontal lines behind the
points. Pearson's correlation coefficient (*r*) is displayed in the upper left of each panel.
450

Effects of mutant haplotypes

A major challenge is that many mutations are in high LD, making the effects of individual

mutations nearly unidentifiable (for example, if two mutations with effects, u_1 and u_2 are in

complete LD, we only have observations for the sum of their effect $u_1 + u_2$, making it impossible

to estimate u_1 and u_2 separately). To proceed, we first identified haplotype blocks consisting of

groups of loci in which LD among all pairs of consecutive loci $r^2 > 0.8$. We then designated two

haplotypes for each haplotype block. Among loci in a haplotype block, two types of haplotype

assignment can occur. Consider a haplotype block with two loci, each with an ancestral and a

mutant allele (coded 0 and 1). If the two loci are in positive LD, we have an ancestral haplotype

(00) and a double-mutant haplotype (11). If the two loci are in negative LD, we have two single-

mutant haplotypes, 01 and 10. Treating the data as haplotypes rather than individual loci reduces

the sample size from 169 (the number of loci) to 114 (the number of haplotypes). We restricted

this analysis to the symmetric Gamma model.

We acquired the posterior sample of a mutant haplotype by summing the posterior

samples of the individual mutations at each locus in the haplotype. We repeated this procedure

for the RILs, RIAILs and the full set of RI(AI)Ls. In all three cases, the distribution of the mean

mutant haplotype effects is skewed to the left (**Figure 5**). The percentage of mutant haplotypes

Figure 5 - Distribution of Bayesian posterior mutant haplotype effects on fitness. The
distribution of mean mutant haplotype effects (u) calculated using the Bayesian MCMC method

is shown. The distribution is calculated separately for (**a**) all lines, (**b**) RILs only, or (**c**) RIAILs.
The vertical red line in each panel represents the mean of means for that population. The mean
value for each panel is also annotated on the plots in red text.

with negative posterior means is 61.4% in the full set of RI(AI)Ls, 64.0% in the RILs, and 67.5%

in the RIAILs. Again, inference from the RIAILs results in an overall reduction in the mean and

variance of posterior effects of mutant haplotypes, relative to inferences from RILs and the full

set of RI(AI)Ls.   The mean absolute posterior mean effect for the negative mutant haplotypes

based on RIAILs only ($u^- = -0.022$) is twice that of the positive mutant haplotypes ($u^+ = 0.011$).

Finally, the lower LD in the RIAILs allowed us to identify a mutant haplotype with a

strong negative effect located in a 6.05 Mb region between positions 3771123 and 9819058 on

chromosome III (**Figure 6**). This haplotype contains 13 mutations, including 11 SNPs and 2

indels. The two mutant haplotypes are 1000111001100 for MA530, and 0111000110011 for

Figure 6 - Bayesian posterior mutant haplotype effects by genome position. The 114 mutant
haplotypes are plotted by their physical position in the genome (x-axis) and their mean haplotype
effect (*u*) (y-axis), which was calculated using the Bayesian Markov chain Monte Carlo
(MCMC) method. The center of haplotypes are plotted as points and the genomic range of multi-
locus haplotypes are represented by horizontal boxes plotted behind the points. The colors

indicate the parent of origin for the mutant haplotype (MA530-blue, MA563-orange). Multi-
locus mutant haplotypes are plotted with square points (multi), and the other single-locus
haplotypes are plotted with shapes based on mutation type (indel-circle, snp-triangle). The
vertical lines plotted behind each point represent the 95% confidence intervals of the haplotype
effect estimates. The haplotype effects are calculated separately with all lines (**a**), RILs only (**b**),
and RIAILs only (**c**).
496

MA563. The MA563 mutant haplotype has a large negative effect (u = -0.760; 95% CI -1.09, -

0.149), whereas the MA530 mutant haplotype shows a moderately strong positive mean effect (u

= 0.118; 95% CI -0.134, 0.647). However, their effects are strongly negatively correlated in the

posterior samples, i.e., if an estimated effect at the MA530 haplotype is large and negative, the

corresponding estimate at the MA563 haplotype is large and positive. The most we can say with

confidence is that the cumulative effect of mutations in this region is to reduce W by about 0.64

relative to the ancestor, which is sufficient to explain the decrease in fitness of MA563 relative to

the ancestor (**Supplemental Figure 5**).

The full list of mutations, along with parent of origin and their inferred effects, are

presented in **Supplemental Table 3**; fitness data are presented in **Supplemental Table 4**.

DISCUSSION

Unsurprisingly, mutations are deleterious, on average. Coincidentally or not, the point estimate

of the mean marginal effect on competitive fitness in the RI(AI)Ls, -0.0039, is extremely similar

to the same estimate from the full set of 80 MA lines of which the two parental lines were drawn.

Assuming that a random pair of MA lines differs by 160 mutations, the average mutational effect

estimated from the data of YEH *et al.* (2018, Table 1) is -0.0040. Given the substantial sources of

variation in these experiments, the concordance is remarkable. In a similar vein, YEH et al.

estimated the mutational heritability from the same data, $h_M^2 = V_L/2t = 0.00084$/generation of

MA. Summed over the approximately 250 generations of MA, we predict a broad-sense

heritability $H^2 \approx 0.2$, about 2/3 of the observed value in this study. Or differently put, our

estimate of H^2 implies a mutational heritability $h^2_M \approx 0.0012$. Given that both measures of

heritability are ratios of variances, the observed values are quite consistent.

Perhaps more surprising is the relatively high narrow-sense heritability of the mutational

effects ($h^2=0.16$), which explain roughly half of the heritable variance in fitness. There are no

comparable competitive fitness data from wild isolates, but ZHANG *et al.* (2021) estimated H^2

and h^2 for lifetime fecundity on solid media for a set of 121 *C. elegans* wild isolates. In their

assay h^2 (0.20) was about 1/3 of H^2 (0.63). In contrast to our RI(AI)Ls, which differ by about 85

mutations on average, the wild isolates differ by thousands of segregating variants. Comparison

of heritabilities is problematic because the upper bound is 1, which means that h^2 necessarily

reaches an asymptotic value. However, if we assume that the contribution of non-heritable

effects (V_E) is similar in the two studies – and we would naively expect that V_E is greater in a

competitive fitness assay than in a non-competitive assay because the competitor contributes to

V_E – the implication is that the asymptote is reached after at most a few hundred generations of

mutations have accumulated in the population.

The inclusion of both RILs and RIAILs in the experiment is fortuitous. If we only had

RILs to work with, we would have been much more confident in concluding that a large

proportion of mutations have positive effects. Ten generations of intercrossing in the RIAILs

broke up most of the initial LD, but not all of it, and it is clear that at least some of the apparently

greater fraction of positive-effect mutations in the RILs can be attributed to the confounding

effect of negative-effect mutations in LD. Inspection of the DFE along the chromosome (**Figure**

3) reveals a negative spatial autocorrelation: mutations inferred to have large positive effects are

usually in close proximity to one or more mutations with large negative effects.

This study was motivated by three antecedents: the studies of BÖNDEL *et al.* (2019), who

used a related crossing design to estimate the DFE from spontaneous MA lines in the unicellular

green alga *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*; of GILBERT *et al.* (2021), who estimated the *C. elegans*

DFE from the standing site frequency spectrum among wild isolates; and those of VASSILIEVA *et*

al. (2000) and KEIGHTLEY *et al.* (2000), who estimated the DFE from the distribution of (non-

competitive) fitnesses among *C. elegans* MA lines. We consider each in turn.

BÖNDEL *et al*.'s crossing design differed from ours in a key way: they backcrossed MA

lines to the common ancestor rather than crossing two MA lines. Their design results in all

mutations being initially in complete coupling (positive) LD, rather than a random mix of

coupling and repulsion LD, as in our design. Nevertheless, their design is still constrained to

infer the cumulative effects of mutations in LD. They did not report LD, nor did they report the

distribution of mutational effects along the chromosomes (except as raw data). They too

observed a high proportion of mutations with positive effects on fitness; in their best-fit model

(two-sided Gamma with different means for positive and negative DFEs), the DFE was highly

leptokurtic, with posterior mean frequency of positive effects, q^+, of 84%. However, the

estimated mean (absolute) effect of deleterious mutations, u^-, was 4-5 times greater than the

mean positive effect, which reconciles the high frequency of mutations with positive effects with

the consistent and well-supported overall decline in fitness of the MA lines. They too observed a

strong positive correlation between the inferred posterior mean mutational effect at a locus and

the marginal effect, and that the Bayesian posterior DFE was shrunk toward zero compared to

the marginal effects.

GILBERT *et al*. used maximum likelihood, as implemented in the DFE-alpha software

(KEIGHTLEY and EYRE-WALKER 2007), to infer the DFE from segregating SNP variation in a set

of ~300 *C. elegans* wild isolates. They also analyzed data simulated under realistic parameters

of mutation and recombination to investigate the effect of self-fertilization on the inferred DFE.

They found that, while DFE-alpha reprises the input DFE quite faithfully when mating is

random, self-fertilization biases the results toward mutations of small negative effect, evidently

due to the slower decay of LD under selfing. Inclusion of a small fraction (0.1%) of beneficial

mutations similarly biases the inferred DFE of deleterious mutations toward small effects.

C. elegans MA lines invariably decline in fitness, and early studies concluded that the

mean deleterious mutational effect is quite large (~10-25 %) (ESTES *et al.* 2004; KEIGHTLEY and

CABALLERO 1997; VASSILIEVA *et al.* 2000), although none of those studies investigated

competitive fitness. The point estimate of the mean deleterious mutational effect from our

neutral + uniform effect model (Model 3) in the full set of RI(AI)Ls is -0.16 and the inferred

fraction of deleterious mutations (0.064) translates to a per-genome, per-generation deleterious

mutation rate of U ≈ 0.02, very consistent with the aforementioned studies. Coincidentally or

not, our inference from RIAIL haplotypes that the *C. elegans* DFE consists of a very large

proportion of mutations with near-zero effects interspersed with a small number of mutations

with large negative effects is very similar to the conclusion of KEIGHTLEY *et al.* (2000), who

reached that conclusion from the distribution of fitnesses among *C. elegans* MA lines that had

been subjected to EMS mutagenesis.

<u>Conclusions</u> – Two primary conclusions emerge from this work. First, mathematics is no

substitute for recombination where inference of the DFE is concerned. When mutations are in

strong LD – repulsion or coupling – different combinations of positive and negative effects can

result in the same cumulative effect, possibly leading to the mistaken inference that the DFE

includes a large fraction of mutations with positive effects. However, posterior estimates at

linked loci will be strongly negatively correlated, which will not be true of unlinked loci. That

conclusion is obvious in hindsight, and should serve as a cautionary note. But second, the

unplanned inclusion in this study of RILs along with the RIAILs, and the large difference in

average LD between the two sets of lines, turns out to be informative. As LD is reduced in the

RIAILs vs. the RILs, the DFE becomes more leptokurtic, the inferred proportion of mutations

with negative effects increases, and the relative difference in magnitude between negative and

positive effects increases (negative effects become increasingly greater). When mutations are

binned into haplotypes, the most intuitive interpretation of the results is that almost all mutations

have effects that are very close to 0, and that the decline in fitness with MA is the result of a

small number of mutations with large negative effects – perhaps only one, on chromosome III in

the MA563 genome.

Looking ahead, we envision understanding of the DFE being advanced in three ways.

First, technical advances in high-throughput gene editing will allow efficient construction of

nearly-isogenic lines (NILs), removing the confounding effects of LD. The mutation spectrum

can be inferred, and a large random sample of spontaneous mutations can be engineered into a

common genomic background(s) and the DFE estimated as we have done here. Second, the DFE

of a common set of mutations should be estimated in a variety of contexts. We only assayed

fitness in one context in this experiment; it would be very interesting to see if, and how, the DFE

changes in different contexts. Finally, experimental estimates of the DFE can be employed as

strong priors in estimates of the DFE from standing polymorphism, which may have the added

benefit of facilitating estimates of demographic parameters by de-confounding selection from

demography.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Raw sequence data have been submitted to the NCBI BioProject database

(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/bioproject/) under accession numbers PRJNA1083210

(RI(AI)Ls) and PRJNA429972 (parental MA lines). Cryopreserved stocks (G0 ancestor,

parental MA lines and RI(AI)Ls) are available upon request to CFB. All code for analyses is

available at https://github.com/Crombie-Lab/manuscript_DFE/tree/main

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

We thank Joanna Dembek and Mike Snyder for expert work in the lab during the line

construction and assay phases of the experiment, and David McCandlish for comments on the

manuscript. Support was provided by NIH awards GM107227 to CFB, ECA, and JMP, and

GM127433 to CFB, ECA, and V. Katju.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1 - Intrachromosomal pairwise linkage disequilibrium (LD). (a) Pairwise LD (r^2)

calculated with all lines (RIAILs + RILs), **(b)** RILs only, and **(c)** RIAILs only. Each heat map

represents a chromosome with pairwise LD (r^2) between mutant loci colored as shown in the

legend. The colored lines above each chromosome represent the parental origin of the mutant

allele (MA530-solid blue, MA563-dashed orange). These lines also show the relative physical

position of mutant loci across each chromosome; the far-left vertical line represents the first

mutant locus on the chromosome and the far-right vertical line represents the last mutant locus.

Figure 2 - Distribution of Bayesian posterior mutational effects on fitness. The distribution

of mean mutational effects (u) calculated using the Bayesian MCMC method is shown. The

distribution is calculated separately with **(a)** all lines **(b)**, RILs only, or **(c)** RIAILs only. The

vertical red line in each panel represents the mean of means for that population. The mean value

for each panel is also annotated on the plots in red text.

Figure 3 - Bayesian posterior mutational effects by genome position. The mutant loci are

plotted by their physical position in the genome (x-axis) and their mean mutational effect (u) (y-

axis), which was calculated using the Bayesian Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method.

The colors indicate the parent of origin for the mutant locus (MA530-blue, MA563-orange) and

the shapes show the mutant class (indel-circle, snp-triangle). The vertical lines plotted behind

each point represent the 95% confidence intervals of the mutant effect estimates. The mutational

effects are calculated separately with **(a)** all lines, **(b)** RILs only, and **(c)** RIAILs only.

Figure 4 - The relationship between Bayesian posterior mutational effects and marginal

effects. The effects are calculated separately using (**a**) all lines, (**b**) RILs only, or (**c**) RIAILs

only. Each point represents a locus and is colored by the parent of origin (MA530-blue, MA563-

orange). The shape of the point shows the mutant class (indel=circle, snp=triangle). 95%

confidence intervals for the estimates are plotted as vertical and horizontal lines behind the

points. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is displayed in the upper left of each panel.

Figure 5 - Distribution of Bayesian posterior mutant haplotype effects on fitness. The

distribution of mean mutant haplotype effects (u) calculated using the Bayesian MCMC method

is shown. The distribution is calculated separately for (**a**) all lines, (**b**) RILs only, or (**c**) RIAILs.

The vertical red line in each panel represents the mean of means for that population. The mean

value for each panel is also annotated on the plots in red text.

a

I   II   III

IV   V   X

b

I   II   III

IV   V   X

c

I   II   III

IV   V   X

Parent —— MA530   ···· MA563

r^2

0.00   0.25   0.50   0.75   1.00