1 rPinecone: Define sub-lineages of a clonal expansion
2 via a phylogenetic tree.

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16 ABSTRACT

The ability to distinguish between pathogens is a fundamental requirement to understand the
epidemiology of infectious diseases. Phylogenetic analysis of genomic data can provide a powerful
platform to identify lineages within bacterial populations, and thus inform outbreak investigation and
transmission dynamics. However, resolving differences between pathogens associated with low
variant (LV) populations carrying low median pairwise single nucleotide variant (SNV) distances,
remains a major challenge. Here we present rPinecone, an R package designed to define sub-lineages
within closely related LV populations. rPinecone uses a root-to-tip directional approach to define sub-
lineages within a phylogenetic tree according to SNV distance from the ancestral node. The utility of
this program was demonstrated using genomic data of two LV populations: a hospital outbreak of
methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and endemic *Salmonella* Typhi from rural Cambodia.
rPinecone identified the transmission branches of the hospital outbreak and geographically-confined
lineages in Cambodia. Sub-lineages identified by rPinecone in both analyses were phylogenetically
robust. It is anticipated that rPinecone can be used to discriminate between lineages of bacteria from
LV populations where other methods fail, enabling a deeper understanding of infectious disease
epidemiology for public health purposes.

DATA SUMMARY

1. Source code for PlasmidTron is available on GitHub under the open source licence GNU GPL 3; (url: https:// github.com/alexwailan/rpinecone).
2. Newick format files for both phylogenetic trees have been deposited in Figshare; (url: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7022558)
3. Geographical analysis of the *S*. Typhi Dataset using Microreact is available at https://microreact.org/project/r1IqkrN1X.
4. Accession numbers, meta data and sample lineage results of both datasets used in this paper are listed in the supplementary tables.

I/We confirm all supporting data, code and protocols have been provided within the article or through supplementary data files. ⊠

IMPACT STATEMENT

Whole genome sequence data from bacterial pathogens is increasingly used in the epidemiological investigation of infectious disease, both in outbreak and endemic situations. However, distinguishing bacterial species which are both very similar and which are likely to come from a small geographical and temporal range presents a major technical challenge for epidemiologists. *rPinecone* was designed to address this challenge and utilises phylogenetic data to define lineages within bacterial populations that have limited variation. This approach is therefore of great interest to epidemiologists as it adds a further level of clarity above and beyond that which is offered by existing approaches which have not been designed to consider bacterial isolates containing variation that only transiently exist, but which is epidemiologically informative. *rPinecone* has the flexibility to be applied to multiple pathogens and has direct application for investigations of clinical outbreaks and endemic disease to understand transmission dynamics or geographical hotspots of disease.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) permit the study of bacteria at high resolution and this has created the opportunity to use WGS data to reliably discriminate between bacteria that were previously indistinguishable by alternative means, or to "type" them. Using WGS data to understand the epidemiology of infections presents distinct challenges to those faced by evolutionary biologists, more so when aiming to distinguish lineages of bacterial populations that are only transiently extant.

Single nucleotide variants (SNVs) which arise stochastically may offer no evolutionary benefit to a
given bacterial isolate, and therefore may only transiently be present in a population. Despite their
lack of evolutionary significance, however, they may be epidemiologically informative in the context
of localised outbreaks, especially amongst organisms that show low overall population diversity.
Traditional genetic clustering algorithms such as Structure(1) and BAPS(2, 3) are not suitable for sub-
typing of low-variant (LV) bacterial populations over small timescales such as less than three years.
They assume independence between loci and require 10-100's of SNV that are shared between
different lineages to confidently cluster populations. Novel bioinformatic approaches to identify sub-
lineages within LV bacterial populations are therefore needed for epidemiological investigations,
especially when technological advancements have made genomic studies of outbreaks increasingly
common.

For genomic data, typing tools are used to identify "clusters" or "partitions" to define a group of
isolates as a "lineage" or sub-lineage within a population. These three terms are used synonymously
in this context. However, to provide clarity we will use the term "sub-lineage" to refer to a defined
group of isolates within a population. These typing tools are non-tree based and fall under two broad
approaches, distance-based methods which calculate a pairwise distance matrix often using the SNV
distances between isolates, and model-based methods which rely on calculating a population genetic
model using either Bayesian or maximum likelihood based methods(1). For distance methods samples
are considered to be within the same cluster if their SNV distance is less or equal to a specified SNV
threshold. An alternative method is the widely used program hierBAPS(3), which when given a
multiple sequence alignment attempts to identify the lineages of the sequences that maximises the
posterior probability of the hierBAPS model. The model is based on a Multinomial-Dirichlet
distribution and assumes independence between SNV sites. The algorithm is applied first to identify
an initial set of lineages, which is then iteratively repeated to generate subsequent sub-lineages within
each of the initially defined lineages. While both are suitable for populations where long-term
historical evolution is present, neither are appropriate options for short-term clonal expansions such
as populations emerging from point source outbreaks or locally endemic disease. In the case of
Bayesian approaches, the resulting sub-lineages are not able to reflect the phylogenetic data, whereas
methods that use a pairwise SNV distance approach are unable to infer direction of evolution or
common ancestry between sub-lineages, which is necessary for source and transmission
investigations.

Here we present rPinecone, an R package which evaluates a phylogeny using a root-to-tip approach
to define sub-lineages according to SNV distances from ancestral nodes. rPinecone also determines if
two or more sub-lineages form part of a larger major lineage if they are related by enough ancestral
nodes. To demonstrate this approach, rPinecone was tested on a local endemic dataset of *Salmonella*
enterica subsp. *enterica* serovar Typhi (*S*. Typhi) from the H58 haplotype(4) as well as a hospital
outbreak of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) ST2371(5).

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METHODS

Phylogenetic tree construction of two case studies

Data from two studies were reanalysed to construct phylogenetic trees for input into rPinecone.
Mapping of reads was performed using SMALT v0.7.4 (sanger.ac.uk/science/tools/smalt-0/) and SNVs
were identified by using samtools mpileup(6). SNV alignments were generated using SNP-sites(7) then
used to generate phylogenetic maximum-likelihood (ML) trees with RAxML(8). In the MRSA case
study, the alignment and subsequent rooted ML tree was generated by using the *S. aureus* ST22 isolate
HO 5096 0412 (accession number HE681097) as a mapping reference and as an outgroup to root the
tree. In the case of the locally endemic *S.* Typhi in Cambodia, *S.* Typhi Genotyphi 4.3.1 isolate
2010_7898 (accession number GCA_001360555) was used as a mapping reference. *S.* Typhi Genotyphi
4.1.1. isolate Mal1017142 (accession number ERR279139)(9) was used as an outgroup to root the ML
tree. Methodological details for construction of phylogenetic trees can be found in the supplementary
material.

Ancestral reconstruction of phylogenetic trees

The SNV alignment and ML tree from the reanalysis of both datasets was used as an input for the
ancestral reconstruction tool "pyjar" (github.com/simonrharris/pyjar)(10) generating a ML joint
ancestral reconstruction (JAR) tree. Each JAR tree was used as an input for rPinecone to define the
sub-lineages within respective populations.

hierBAPS as a comparative benchmark

The R package for hierBAPS (rhierBAPS, available at github.com/gtonkinhill/rhierbaps) was used as a
comparative benchmark for rPinecone when analysing the *S*. Typhi dataset, due to its frequent use in
bacterial phylogenetics for lineage identification. Input data for this package was the SNV alignment
used to generate the phylogenetic ML tree. A maximum level depth of five and maximum cluster
number of 30 was used for the analysis.

RESULTS

rPinecone is a package developed in R and available under the open source licence GNU GPL3 at
github.com/alexwailan/rpinecone. Input for rPinecone requires two user-specified integer thresholds
for SNV distance and relatability (discussed below), and a rooted phylogenetic tree (Newick format)
where the branch lengths are integers corresponding to SNV distance. One type of tree that fits this
criterion is a maximum likelihood (ML) joint ancestral reconstruction (JAR) tree.

The rPinecone package has a primary wrapper function to perform the analysis which is performed in
two steps: sub-lineage definition and major-lineage definition (Fig. 1).

rPinecone will initially prepare for sub-lineage definition by collapsing zero SNV dichotomies of the
tree into polychotomies using the *ape* package(11) for R (v4.1) and performing a depth-first search
(DFS)(12) across the resulting tree, to list the tips and ancestral nodes from root-to-tip. Edges are then
drawn between nodes where the edge distance is the branch length i.e. the number of SNVs isolates
have from an ancestral node on a JAR tree. Using the DPS and SNV branch distance information,
rPinecone will then define sub-lineages by traversing the tree in a root-to-tip direction to assess each
ancestral node. At each ancestral node, a sub-tree is built with the remaining nodes where the
ancestral node becomes the root of the sub-tree. rPinecone uses two methods to define sub-lineages,
1) all root-to-tip paths of the sub-tree are assessed and if the maximum root-to-tip branch distance is
equal or below the specified SNV threshold, the remaining tips will be assigned a sub-lineage number
and 2) If the maximum distance is over the SNV threshold and there are at least two tips with zero
distance from the ancestral node, rPinecone assigns these tips in zero distance a sub-lineage number.
The process is repeated throughout the entire tree. Tips that are not assigned a sub-lineage number
will be assigned with a singleton number.

After sub-lineages have been declared, their relatability is analysed to determine if they form a larger
major lineage. The user specified relatability threshold is an integer used to compare the number of
ancestral nodes from the root of the entire tree to each sub-lineage and singleton. Lists of ancestral
nodes for each sub-lineage and singleton are compiled. These lists are compared in a pairwise fashion.
Sub-lineages and singletons that have the same intersecting ancestral nodes over the relatability
threshold are declared to have formed a major lineage within the population, where a major lineage
is composed of at least two sub-lineages.

Once sub-lineages and major lineages are defined, rPinecone outputs a list of six variables each able
to be used for downstream processes, including; the tree used for analysis, number of sub-lineages,
major lineages, singletons identified and number of isolates within the tree. The final variable is a
three-column table listing each "Taxa" label of the tree and their respective sub-lineage and major
lineage. Furthermore, phylogenetic trees can be displayed using the online display tool iTOL(13). The
rPinecone package includes three functions taking the output from the primary rPinecone function.
These functions parse the rPinecone output to a file in a format to display in iTOL. Three files can be
generated, a "LABELS" file to change the tip labels according to their sub-lineage or singleton number
as well as two "DATASET_COLORSTRIP" format files to display the sub-lineages and major lineages as
a colour strip/ block (Example displayed in the Fig. 2). To show the utility of rPinecone we perform two
case studies on a MRSA hospital outbreak and local endemic dataset of *S.* Typhi.

HOSPITAL OUTBREAK OF MRSA ST2371 – HEALTHCARE WORKERS WERE COLONISED BY A MAJOR LINEAGE

In 2011 over a 6-month period, the National Health Service Foundation Trust in Cambridge, UK,
investigated transmission of MRSA within the hospital neonatal unit and community and described a
complex transmission network(5). We reanalysed the data of this study and generated a phylogenetic

ML tree. From this analysis the population had a median pairwise distance of five SNVs. The
phylogenetic tree (Fig. 2) of the outbreak had a structure that begins with a root isolate (Patient 5),
then expands outwards in a "star-burst"-like fashion where each branch of the tree represents a
transmission pathway of MRSA between infants and their mothers, other mothers on the ward, and
to partners of affected mothers as described in the original study(5). rPinecone identified nine sub-
lineages and a major lineage composed of three sub-lineages (25 isolates) using SNV threshold of four
and a relatability threshold of three. These sub-lineages corresponded to the transmission pathways
determined in the original investigation using epidemiological data. The major lineage represents the
sub-lineages of MRSA (rPinecone sub-lineages 4, 5 and 6) carried by colonised healthcare workers
which were associated with subsequent episodes of MRSA 64 days after the last MRSA-positive patient
left the unit.

The major lineages identified by rPinecone highlight sub-lineages related by ancestral nodes and
potentially lineages that have separated from the remaining clonal population. This type of analysis
was not performed during the original analysis, however we successfully identified MRSA transmission
pathways using rPinecone and provided an additional layer of sub-lineage data to complement the
epidemiological data when associating sub-lineages with likely transmission events.

LOCALLY ENDEMIC *S.* TYPHI IN RURAL CAMBODIA – HIGHER RESOLUTION TO IDENTIFY CIRCULATING SUB-LINEAGES

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In the second example, rPinecone distinguished lineages of an *S*. Typhi population circulating in a
defined geographical area causing locally endemic disease, as opposed to a clonal outbreak. LV
bacterial pathogens responsible for localised, endemic disease present a different challenge; in this
context, it is highly likely that multiple, genetically similar sub-lineages will be in circulation, and in
order to be epidemiologically informative, phylogenetic analysis must be able to distinguish these
lineages despite the low variation between them. Whilst hierBAPS is unable to utilise the low variant
SNV information to define lineages, rPinecone can be used in such situations. We demonstrate this by
defining sub-lineages in a LV population of *S.* Typhi H58 responsible for endemic typhoid fever in a
rural part of Cambodia(4). Reanalysis of these data determined the population to have a median
pairwise SNV distance of two. The subsequent phylogenetic tree of the reanalysis can best be
described from root-to-tip (Fig. 3). At the root of the tree resides a "root group" of isolates, then a
main branch composing of identical isolates which can be referred to as the "primary group" of the
clonal expansion, followed by "diverging groups" of isolates and singletons which have diverged from
this main branch. Using the reanalysed data, rPinecone identified 14 sub-lineages and a major lineage
composed of two sub-lineages (seven isolates) of *S.* Typhi, using a SNV threshold of two and a
relatability threshold of three (Fig. 3). 27 isolates were also identified as singletons. In comparison,
rhierBAPS identified a maximum of nine sub-lineages at level three and offered no further resolution
after further analysis (2, 7, 9, 9 and 9 sub-lineages were identified at levels one through to five
[Supplementary Fig.1]).

rPinecone sub-lineages were nested within the sub-lineages defined by rhierBAPS. rPinecone also
acknowledges singleton isolates which have accumulated their own "private" SNVs. Therefore,
singletons that have individual SNVs may be excluded in the definition of sub-lineages. In contrast,
rhierBAPS cannot detect the private SNVs of singletons. This is because rhierBAPs seeks to maximise
the posterior probability of a sub-lineage assuming independence between SNV sites, and is less
suitable for the identification of singletons. In addition, rhierBAPS also identifies isolates situated
across the tree to be members of the same sub-lineage. hierBAPS and other similar programs like
Structure are not designed to separate population data that would be observed towards the tips of a
phylogenetic tree including those observed with a median pairwise SNV of two as observed here.
Rather they aim to cluster isolates into groups that are likely to come from similar source populations.
When there are few isolates and few SNVs there is little information to estimate the likely distribution
of allele frequencies in these source populations.

In this example, rPinecone provided greater resolution to distinguish sub-lineages than across five
different levels of rhierBAPS and distinguished additional sub-lineages. The original study noted their
sub-lineages to have significant geographical variation. The rPinecone sub-lineages provided a cross-
sectional view of the bacterial population, where some sub-lineages were geographically confined to
districts within one province and others span multiple provinces (Supplementary Fig. 2).

CONCLUSION

Investigators must be able to distinguish isolates to identify epidemiologically informative sub-
lineages, however this is difficult for bacterial populations associated with both outbreaks and
endemic disease over small temporal or geographical distances when the pathogen has a slow
mutation rate and appears largely "clonal". The ability to make this distinction is critical if WGS data
is to inform epidemiological investigation of such pathogens, whether in epidemic, or locally endemic
disease. When aiming to geographically locate hotspots of disease transmission, it is critical to be able
to incorporate associated geospatial data associated with samples.

rPinecone was designed to analyse LV populations and to be applied to any bacterial species with at
least a median SNV distance of two within the population. Using the genomic data of a MRSA hospital
outbreak and endemic *S.* Typhi, we demonstrate that rPinecone can be used to identify sub-lineages
within LV populations that are reflective of the phylogenetic data. Furthermore, when compared to
rhierBAPS, rPinecone identified additional sub-lineages. We highly recommend using heirBAPs for
initial analysis of phylogenetic data to understand the bacterial population. Once this has been done,
rPinecone will define sub-lineages of LV bacterial populations to set the platform for understanding
the transmission dynamics or geographical hotspots of disease.

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ABBREVIATIONS

278   LV: Low-Variant

279   SNV: Single Nucleotide Variant

280   WGS: whole genome sequencing

281   ML: Maximum-Likelihood

282   JAR: Joint Ancestral Reconstruction

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accession number GCA_001360555.

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1. The rPinecone package evaluates a phylogenetic tree in a root-to-tip approach and defines
sub-lineages according to single nucleotide variants (SNV) distances from ancestral nodes. (A) Define
Sub-lineages. The rPinecone algorithm traverses the tree from root-to-tip in the order of nodes listed
by the depth-first search. At each ancestral node, a sub-tree is constructed containing the ancestral
and remaining nodes. The ancestral node becomes the root of the sub-tree and all root-to-tip paths
are assessed to identify the maximum root-to-tip branch distance. If this distance is below or equal to

the user specified SNV distance threshold, the tips of the sub-tree are assigned to a sub-lineage
number. If the distance exceeds the threshold and two or more tips are in zero distance to the root of
the sub-tree, only the tips in zero distance will be assigned a sub-lineage number. The process is
repeated throughout the entire tree. (B) Define Singletons. Tips which have not been assigned a sub-
lineage number are assigned a singleton number. (C) Define Major lineages. Using the entire tree, the
list of ancestral nodes from the root to each sub-lineage and singleton is compiled. A pairwise
comparison of these lists is performed. Sub-lineages and singletons which have the same number of
ancestral nodes over the user specified relatability threshold will be defined as part of a major lineage.
The root, ancestral nodes, and tips of the tree are denoted by navy, cyan and white circles respectively.
Singletons, sub-lineages, major lineages are represented by a 'S' labelled circle, a blue pinecone, a gold
pinecone.

Figure 2. Rooted accelerated transformation tree based on whole genome sequencing of 45 MRSA
ST2371 isolates. Outgroup rooted using *S. aureus* ST22 isolate HO 5096. Tips are labelled by the
sample's ERR number followed by the origin of sample, patient (P) or Healthcare worker. Branch
lengths are single nucleotide variants scaled. The inner and outer coloured rings correspond to the
sub-lineages and, major lineage identified by rPinecone.

Figure 3. Rooted joint ancestral reconstruction tree based on whole genome sequencing of 203 *S*.
Typhi H58 isolates. Outgroup rooted using *S.* Typhi Genotyphi 4.1.1 isolate Mal1017142. Tips are
labelled by the sample's ERR number and rPinecone sub-lineage. Branch lengths are single
nucleotide variants scaled. Colour rings one and two correspond to the sub-lineages and major
lineage defined by rPinecone. The colour ring three corresponds to clusters defined by rhierBAPs
level three.

rPinecone

Overall workflow

Input:
Rooted SNV-scaled Tree

Deep First Search

List of nodes: Root-to-Tip

Define
- A. Sub-lineages
- B. Singletons
- C. Major Lineages

Output

Legend

- Root
- Ancestral node
- Tip
- (S) Singleton
- Sub-lineage
- Major Lineage

A. Define Sub-lineages — Traverse the Tree Root-to-Tip

1. Each Ancestral node ●

● + Remaining nodes → Construct sub-tree

2. Assess all Ancestral node-to-tip paths

Sub-tree Root

≤ SNV distance threshold? → Assign Sub-lineage

3. ≥2 ○ in 0 distance to ●

Continue to next Ancestral node

B. Define Singletons

○ without ⬢ → (S)

C. Define Major Lineages

1. Define List of Ancestral Nodes

Root — A — B — ⬢

A — B — (S)

Ancestral Nodes

2. Pairwise comparison

Number of Shared Nodes

3. Over Relatability threshold? → Assign Major Lineage

Tree scale: 1 SNV ⊢———⊣

1: rPinecone Sub-lineage
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14

2: rPinecone Major Lineage
- 1

3: rhierBAPS level 3
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9

Tree scale: 1 SNV

1: rPinecone Sub-lineage

2: rPinecone Major Lineage
1

3: rhierBAPS level 1
1
2

4: rhierBAPS level 2

5: rhierBAPS level 3

6: rhierBAPS level 4

7: rhierBAPS level 5