Zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) behavioral laterality predicts increased short-term avoidance memory but not stress-reactivity responses

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Abstract

Once considered a uniquely human attribute, behavioral laterality has proven to be ubiquitous among non□human animals, being frequently associated with different neurophenotypes in rodents and fish species. Zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) are a **versatile vertebrate model system** that has been widely used in translational neuropsychiatric research due their highly conserved genetic homology, well characterized physiological and extensive behavioral repertoire. Although the spontaneous left- and right-bias responses and associated behavioral domains (e.g. stress reactivity, aggression and learning) have previously been observed in other teleost species, no information regarding **how spontaneous motor left-right bias responses of zebrafish predicts other behavioral domains** has been described. Thus, we aimed to investigate the existence and incidence of natural left-right bias of adult zebrafish in the Y-maze test and explore any relationship of biasedness on the performance of different behavioral domains. This included learning about threat-cues in the fear conditioning test and locomotion and anxiety-related behavior in the novel tank diving test. In conclusion, we showed for the first time that zebrafish exhibit a natural manifestation of **motor** behavioral lateralization which can influence aversive learning responses. **Although laterality did not change locomotion or anxiety-related behaviors, we found that biased animals had an altered exploration pattern in the Y-maze, making them easily discernable from their unbiased counterparts, and increased learning associated to fear cues.**

Keywords: Anxiety; Behavioral asymmetries; Left-bias; Pavlovian fear conditioning; Right-bias.

1. Introduction

Lateralization of brain and behavior is the apparent predisposition towards side bias, often manifested in terms of motor output, such as handedness. Laterality has been extensively studied in humans, **with functional laterality of different brain regions known to be an important aspect in language and cognition (Hull and Vaid 2007; Vikingstad et al. 2000). Research has revealed that motor functions may also be under the control of lateralized mechanisms which, in humans, may manifest as preference for one side over the other for handedness, footedness and eyedness** (Brown and Taylor 1988)**. Laterality** has been shown to be an evolutionarily conserved characteristic which is observed at the populational level and, when disrupted, has been associated with **cognitive and neuropsychiatric disorders, such as anxiety and major depressive disorder (Koster et al. 2010; Lichtenstein-Vidne et al. 2017).**

Lateralization is not a purely human characteristic, many studies now suggest that most vertebrate species, including monkeys (Fagot and Vauclair 1991; Hopkins 1994; McGrew and Marchant 1997), rodents (Robison 1981; Rodriguez and Afonso 1993; Rodriguez et al. 1992), birds (Bhagavatula et al. 2014; Franklin and Adams 2010; Gunturkun et al. 1998), fish (Bibost and Brown 2014; Bisazza and de Santi 2003; Dadda et al. 2010a; Dadda et al. 2010b) **and some invertebrate species (Anfora et al. 2010, 2011; Frasnelli, Vallortigara, and Rogers 2012) express brain functional asymmetries (MacNeilage, Rogers, and Vallortigara 2009). In rodents for example,** several behavioral tasks have been used to assess behavioral asymmetries such **as** turning rotometers, handedness, choice behavior, T-maze and Y-maze (Corballis 1986; Pisa and Szechtman 1986; Zimmerberg and Glick 1974). Variability in lateralization exerts a number of fitness benefits **at the individual level**. For example, lateralization has been associated with maximization of brain processes, enabling individuals to process two tasks simultaneously (Rogers 2000; Rogers 2002). **Studies have suggested that laterality evolved at the population level to maintain coordination among social groups once that lateralization in a same**

direction is considered as a potential benefit to group cohesion and a mechanism where

individuals interact in predictable ways in social group (Rogers 2000).

Behavioral laterality is an evolutionarily conserved characteristic which is observed at

populational level in humans and has been associated to different neurophenotypes (Corballis

2017; Frasnelli 2013). **Taxonomic and evolutionary aspects of brain laterality have been**

previously described in fish species, primarily focusing on CNS asymmetries, sensory organs

and somatic lateralization, as well as the adaptive role of laterality in nature (de Perera and

Braithwaite 2005; Lychakov 2013; Nepomnyashchikh and Izvekov 2006; Vallortigara and

Rogers 2005). Behavioral asymmetries have been related to high escape performance (Dadda et

al. 2010b), social responses (Reddon and Balshine 2010) and even accelerated learning responses

(Andrade et al. 2001) in **both fish and mammals. However, despite the clear** relevance of

lateralization to several mammals and vertebrate species, we still have a limited understanding of

the general origins of morphological and functional asymmetries in the brain and of their

importance for behavior.

Zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) is a versatile vertebrate model system that has been widely used in

translational neuropsychiatric research (Fontana et al. 2018; Stewart et al. 2015) and **to**

understand evolutionary aspects of animal cognition (Oliveira 2013; Reale et al. 2007). The

last decade has seen an increase in the use of zebrafish to study the mechanisms underlying

lateralization (Andersson et al. 2015; Ariyomo and Watt 2013; Barth et al. 2005; Dadda et

al. 2010a; Sovrano and Andrew 2006). Larval zebrafish have an increased use of left-eye

when interacting with their own reflection (Sovrano and Andrew 2006). Studies also showed

that zebrafish initially use the right hemifield predominantly when interacting with novel

object, but as the object becomes familiar, they switch to the left hemifield (Miklósi,

Andrew, and Savage 1997). In a mutant zebrafish strain that shows strong laterality bias

(*fsi*), asymmetry of diencephalic structures correlates with different behavior patterns such

as boldness responses, with left-bias fish showing increased latency to interact with a novel

object than right-bias fish (Barth et al. 2005). Despite a growing understanding of

lateralization in zebrafish, very little is known about how spontaneously occurring motor

asymmetry impacts on other behavioral domains. Therefore, in this study we aimed: (1) to

investigate the existence and incidence of spontaneously occurring motor left-right bias of

adult zebrafish in a continuous Y-maze test; and (2) to explore how spontaneously occurring

motor left-right bias relates to performance on different behavioral domains, including

learning about threat-cues in the fear conditioning test, and locomotion and anxiety-related

behavior in the novel tank test.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Animals

Adult zebrafish (AB wild-type; ~ 50:50 male:female ratio at 3-month of age) were

bred in-house and reared in standard laboratory conditions on a re-circulating system

(Aquaneering, USA). Animals were maintained on a 14/10-hour light/dark cycle (lights on at 9:00

a.m.), pH 8.4, at ~28.5 °C (±1 °C) in groups of 20 animals per 2.8 L. Fish were fed three

times/day with a mixture of live brine shrimp and flake food, **except on the weekends when they**

were fed once a day. **Animals were tested in the Y-maze apparatus and then pair-housed for**

24 hours prior to analysis of shock-avoidance or tank diving, to reduce stress from multiple

handling in a single day (see **Fig. 1**). **During the pair-housing period, animals had shared**

water system and visual contact through transparent partition, the pair-housing system is

used to separate animals for further identification and reduce the stress induced by social

isolation (Parker et al. 2012). After behavioral tests, all animals were euthanized using 2-

phenoxyethanol from Aqua-Sed (Aqua-Sed™, Vetark,Winchester, UK). All experiments were

carried out following approval from the University of Portsmouth Animal Welfare and Ethical

Review Board, and under license from the UK Home Office (Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act,

1986) [PPL: P9D87106F].

2.2. Y-maze test

The Y-maze spontaneous alternation task is widely used for measuring the disposition of

different animal models to explore new environments and to assess left- and right-biased

responses (Barnard et al. 2016; Castellano et al. 1987; Frasnelli 2013; Rodriguez et al. 1992).

One-hundred and three adult zebrafish were used for assessing Y-maze performance and right-

left bias. Required sample size was calculated *a priori* following pilot tests (effect size (d) = 0.3,

power = 0.8, alpha = 0.05). The apparatus consisted of a white Y-maze tank with three identical

arms (5 cm length x 2 cm width; three identical arms at a 120º angle from each other) and a

transparent base, filled with 3L of aquarium water (**Fig. 1**). Ambient light allowed some visibility

in the maze, but no explicit intra-maze cues were added to the environment. **Behavioral tests**

were performed between 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. using the automated Zantiks (Zantiks Ltd.,

Cambridge, UK) AD system (Brock et al. 2017) to track animal behavior, and we carried out

three independent replicates. **The Zantiks AD system was fully controlled via a web-enabled**

device during behavioral training. Fish behavior patterns were recorded for 1 hour and was

assessed according to overlapping series of four choices (tetragrams) and analyzed as a proportion

of the total number of turns (Gross et al. 2011). **For assessing fish behavioral lateralization, the**

number of turns for the right or left arm according to the previous location in 10 minute

time bins was used and the following formula was applied: $bias\,percentage =$

$\frac{number\ of\ turns\ L\ or\ R*100}{total\ number\ of\ turns}$. **Following this, the mean and coefficient of variation for right and**

left bias was calculated based on the bias percentage in 10-minute time bins to assess the

consistency of data across the entire trial (1-hour test period). Behavioral lateralization was

considered when the animal presented >60% of average preference for right or left turns in

the Y-maze during the 1-hour test. To assess zebrafish search strategies we used the number

of alternations (rlrl + lrlr) and repetitions (rrrr + llll) as proportion of total number of turns

which are highly expressed through 1-hour and are commonly linked to animals'

exploratory activity (Cleal and Parker 2018; Gross et al. 2011). Both alternations and

repetitions were also previously linked to short-term spatial memory by reduction the

number of alternations after developmental alcohol exposure (Cleal and Parker, 2018);

however, more studies are need to clarify how these patterns are linked to learning and

memory processes.

2.3. Pavlovian fear conditioning

The inhibitory avoidance paradigm is a valid method widely used to explore mechanisms

underlying fear avoidance learning responses in zebrafish (Amorim et al. 2017; Manuel et al.

2014; Manuel et al. 2015; Ng et al. 2012). 24h after the completion of the Y-maze test, animals

(*n*= 55) were tested on a Pavlovian fear conditioning procedure for 1 hour. The fear conditioning

response was based on previous work (Cleal and Parker 2018; Valente et al. 2012) **where**

increased memory responses were linked to the decreased time spent in the fear conditioned

area. Fish were individually placed in one of four lanes of a tank (25 cm length x 15 cm, 1 L of

water in each tank) **of the Zantiks (Zantiks Ltd., Cambridge, UK) AD system (Brock et al.**

2017) (Fig. 1). Briefly, fish were habituated for 30 minutes in the test environment**, half of the**

arena had a check pattern on the base and the other half had a grey color on the base.

Images were projected into the tank from a screen which was embedded in the base of the

AD unit, on which the test tank sits. Every 5 minutes of the habituation the base patterns,

check or grey, were switched to the opposite side of the tank. The baseline preference was

ascertained over 30-mins, but only the last 10-mins baseline preference was used for

assessing the area preference. Following the baseline was the conditioning phase, which

consisted of a conditioned stimulus (**CS+; full screen of "check" or "grey", half CS+ in**

"check" and CS+ in "grey") presented for 1.5-s and followed by a brief mild shock (9 V DC,

80ms; unconditioned stimulus (US). After this, an 8.5-s inter-trial interval (ITI) of the non-CS

(CS−) exemplar was presented at the bottom of the tank. The CS+/US was **shown** nine times.

Finally, avoidance of CS+ was assessed by presenting the baseline screen (CS+ and CS−

simultaneously) for 1-min, and switching positions after 30-s.

2.4. Novel tank diving and thigmotaxis responses

The novel tank test is commonly used for analyzing locomotor and anxiety-like

phenotypes in zebrafish presenting a high sensitivity to anxiolytic and anxiogenic drugs (Egan et

al. 2009; Kalueff et al. 2013; Levin et al. 2007; Maximino et al. 2010; Mezzomo et al. 2016;

Wong et al. 2010). 24 hours after the Y-maze test, animals (*n = 46*) were placed individually in a

novel tank (30 cm length x 15 cm height x 12 cm width) containing 4 L of aquarium water.

Behavioral activity was recorded using 2 webcams (front and top view, see **Fig. 1B**) for 5 min to

analyze thigmotaxis and diving response (Egan et al. 2009; Parker et al. 2012; Rosemberg et al.

2012). Behaviors were **measured using an automated** video-tracking software (EthoVision,

Noldus Information Technology Inc., Leesburg, VA - USA) at a rate of 60 frames/s. **Thigmotaxis**

(time spent in proximity to the edge/sides) was analyzed through the behavior tracking

obtained by the top view camera. Meanwhile, for the detailed evaluation of vertical activity,

the tank was separated in three virtual areas (bottom, middle and top) and the following

endpoints were measured: total distance traveled, time spent in each third of the tank, immobility

and thigmotaxis.

2.5. Randomization and blinding

All behavioral testing was carried out in a fully randomized order, choosing fish at random

from one of ten housing tanks for testing. Fish were screened for left-right bias in the Y-maze

first, but analysis was not carried out prior to subsequent behavioral testing to avoid bias.

Subsequent to **the** Y-maze screening, fish were pair housed and issued a subject ID, allowing all

testing to be carried out in a fully blinded manner. **Once all data were collected and screened**

for extreme outliers (e.g., fish freezing and returning values of '0' for behavioral parameters

indicating non-engagement), the bias was revealed, and data analyzed in full. Two animals

were excluded in the Y-maze task and two in the novel tank due to poor engagement with

the task (freezing and displaying no measurable behavioral patterns).

*2.6. Data **processing** and statistical analysis*

Data from the Y-maze protocol was obtained as number of entries into each arm (1, 2, 3 and middle section 4) across a 1-hour trial. To analyze the data according to left and right turns in 10-minute time bins, raw data was processed using the Zantiks Y-maze Analysis Script created specifically for this purpose (available from: https:/ /github.com/thejamesclay/ZANTIKS_YMaze_Analysis_Script). Subsequently, data were analyzed in IBM SPSS® Statistics and the results were expressed as means ± standard error of the mean (S.E.M), to assess whether there were any effects of bias on total turns, alternations (lrlr + rlrl) **or** repetitions (rrrr + llll). **Alternations and repetitions were analyzed using generalized linear models (Poisson distribution, log link), with laterality (three levels – left bias, right bias, non-bias) and time (six levels - 10-min time bins across 1 hour) as the fixed factor, and ID as a random effect (to account for non-independence of replicates). To analyze novel tank responses, we used either one- or two-way ANOVAs, with bias and time spent in different tank zones fixed factors (tank diving) or bias only as a fixed factor for thigmotaxis, immobility and distance traveled.** Additionally, left-right bias effects on **the** shock avoidance test was assessed using two-way repeated measures ANOVA with 'bias' (left vs right vs neutral) and conditioning (pre-vs-post) as factors, and preference for conditioned stimulus as the dependent variable. Newman-Keuls test was used as post-hoc analysis, and results were considered significant when $p \leq 0.05$.

3. Results

2.1. Left-right bias profile in the Y-maze test

Zebrafish showed behavioral lateralization in the Y-maze (right-biased 27.18 %, left-biased 27.18% and non-biased 45.63%). To confirm if the behavioral laterality was **consistent across 1-hour (analyzed in 10-minute time bins)**, the coefficient of variation for the left and right-turn preferences were calculated for the non-biased (19.28 ± 2.52 and 21.05 ± 2.95), left-biased (30.40 ± 3.85 and 21.7 ± 3.61) and right-biased (27.23 ± 5.52 and 25.95 ± 2.31) groups. **Figure 2** displays the Y-maze data. A significant bias effect was observed for number of turns (F

$(2, 601) = 13.115$; $p<0.0001$), repetitions (F $_{(2, 601)} = 39.696$; $p<0.0001$) and alternations (F $_{(2, 601)} =$

45.437; $p<0.0001$). A time effect (data not shown) was also observed for number of turns (F $_{(5, 601)}$

$= 9.769$; $p<0.0001$), repetitions (F $_{(5, 601)} = 3.242$; $p=0.007$) and alternations (F $_{(5, 601)} = 3.801$;

$p=0.002$). Additionally, a significant interaction effect (bias * time) was observed for repetitions

(F $_{(10, 601)} = 2.504$; $p=0.006$) and alternations (F $_{(10, 601)} = 2.390$; $p= 0.009$). **Bias, to the left or the**

right, significantly increased the number of repetitions ($p<0.0001$ for right-bias and $p<0.001$

for left-bias) and decreased the percentage of alternations ($p<0.0001$ for right-bias and

$p<0.005$ for left-bias) compared to non-biased animals. In addition, right-biased animals also

decreased the number of turns ($p<0.05$) compared to non-biased animals. Biased differences

were not just seen between biased vs. non-biased groups, but also between bias groups, right-

biased animals had a significant increase of repetitions ($p<0.05$) and decrease of alternations

($p<0.05$) compared to left-biased animals (**Fig. 2A**). The behavioral profile of biased and non-

biased animals is displayed in **Fig. 2B** tetragrams where a high number of llll and rrrr

configuration can be observed for left- and right-biased animals, respectively.

2.2. Short-term avoidance memory and novelty response of biased animals

Although no interaction effect bias *vs.* shock (F$_{(2, 98)}$ =1.259; $p= 0.312$) was observed for

the Pavlovian responses, a significant effect for bias (F$_{(2, 98)}$ =3.128; $p= 0.035$) and **conditioning**

(probe *vs* baseline) (F $_{(1, 98)} = 79.47$; $p<0001$) effect was revealed. **ANOVA analysis are often**

underpowered and therefore unable to detect the significance of interaction terms (Wahlsten

1990)**. Therefore post-hoc analysis was performed to specifically analyze the effects between**

groups. In general, all biased ($p<0.0001$ for right- and left-bias) and non-biased ($p<0.0001$)

animals had a decreased time spent in the preference for conditioned stimulus (probe *vs*

baseline). However, both left- and right- biased animals ($p<0.05$) spent significantly less time

in the conditioned area during the probe trial compared to non-biased group (Fig. 3),

despite no significant differences in their baseline preferences. No significant effect was

observed for bias in all novel tank diving test-related parameters, including distance travelled (F $_{(2,}$

$_{43)} = 0.683$; $p = 0.510$), immobility ($F_{(2, 43)} = 2.348$; $p = 0.107$), time in tank zones time ($F_{(2, 129)} =$

0.084; $p = 0.918$) (**Fig. 4**) and thigmotaxis ($F_{(2, 43)} = 1.289$; $p = 0.286$) (**Fig. 5**).

4. Discussion

In this study we evaluated **spontaneously occurring motor left-right bias** in adult zebrafish

using **an** unconditioned Y-maze **protocol and** evaluated the predictive validity of **spontaneous**

behavioral laterality on both unconditioned and conditioned measures of fear **and anxiety**. We

showed, for the first time, that the zebrafish presents natural behavioral laterality in the Y-maze

test **when analyzed using 16 overlapping tetragrams to evaluate exploration strategy**,

suggesting that the protocol may be useful for screening this species for behavioral asymmetry.

Second, we found that behaviorally lateralized animals show **a decrease in the relative number**

of alternation responses and increase **in relative number of repetitions, in the Y-maze**. **This**

suggests that search strategies used by spontaneously biased individuals differs from that

used by non-biased fish and is quite likely directly due to the lateralization. Third, we

observed that behavioral asymmetry predicts increased learning in a Pavlovian fear conditioning

protocol but did not predict measures of unconditioned anxiety (novel tank test, thigmotaxis).

Collectively, these data suggest, contrary to theories that laterality is related to increased stress-

reactivity, that increased behavioral laterality may be related to increased cue-reactivity,

particularly in relation to aversive cues. This has connotations for translational models of human

disorders of affective state, in which heightened attention to threat-related cues is observed

(Lichtenstein-Vidne et al. 2017) and in which brain and behavioral laterality are thought to be risk

factors (Bruder et al. 2016).

Left-right asymmetries in behavioral protocols including the T-maze and Y-maze have been

widely utilized in rodents (Andrade et al. 2001; Nakagawa et al. 2004; Rodriguez et al. 1992).

Here, for the first time, we observed that approximately a quarter of zebrafish present substantial

natural left- (27.18 %) or right- (27.18%) locomotor lateralization, with the remaining 45.63% **of**

animals showing stochastic patterns of left/right. These data are somewhat at odds from observed

bias in other models, in which there is a high number of right-biased animals (52.8%) and low

numbers of left- (22.2%) and non-biased responses (25%) for rodents (Andrade et al. 2001). **A**

previous study (Chivers et al. 2016) showed that wild-caught fish, yellow-and-blueback

fusiliers (*Caesio teres*), also present a natural increased bias for the right turn (65%) and

decreased left bias (24%) and no biased (11%). However, they also observed that the

strength of the behavioral lateralization was increased depending on predation pressure.

Although the authors also did not find significant differences between the left- and right-

biased groups, in general, the biased groups presented distinct patterns of behavior

compared to non-biased animals. As mentioned earlier, larvae and adult zebrafish exhibit

different patterns of left- and right eye use that correlate with boldness and response to

novelty (Barth et al. 2005), aggression (Ariyomo and Watt 2013) and learning/memory

(Andersson et al. 2015) behavior.

Studies focusing on the evolutionary aspects of lateralization suggest that behavioral

asymmetries exist at population level because individually asymmetrical organisms

coordinate their behavior with other asymmetrical organisms (Frasnelli 2013). The

differences between left- and right-bias in other fish species. For example, right-biased

animals showed increased escape responses (Chivers et al. 2016) and increased right-eye use

when attacking the mirror image aggression (Bisazza and de Santi 2003). In invertebrates,

laterality has been also consistent with the vertebrate findings, where eusocial ants show

motor left-bias when exploring unfamiliar nest sites (Hunt et al. 2014) and eusocial

honeybees have olfactory asymmetries that predict learning and recall of memory (Frasnelli

et al. 2010; Rigosi et al. 2011; Rogers and Vallortigara 2008).

In general, brain and behavior lateralization are more common in social rather than in

solitary species (Bisazza et al. 2000; Frasnelli 2013). Although zebrafish is a social species

(Saverino and Gerlai 2008), research on zebrafish almost only uses domesticated strains,

that were removed from wild populations many generations ago (Spence et al. 2008), as we

used here. Zebrafish lab strains present genetic divergence from wild populations (Whiteley

et al. 2011), and it is therefore important to consider that wild populations may have
different lateralization patterns. Thus, behavioral patterns may change depending on stress-
levels (Parker et al. 2012), predator pressure (Chivers et al. 2016), fish strain (Vignet et al.
2013) and animal origin (Spence et al. 2008), doing that more studies are needed to
understand how behavioral laterality is influence by these variables in adult zebrafish.

We observed that behavioral laterality has an important role in Y-maze performance,
where left-right biased animals presented an increase of repetition behavior and decrease of
alternation, in particular in the left-biased animals. **Previous studies by** (Cleal and Parker 2018;
Gross et al. 2011) **and continuing work in our laboratory (data not shown here) in**
conjunction with rodent T- and Y-maze data suggest that the normal search strategy
employed in mazes is to use a high level of alternations. Alternations have been directly
associated with functionally distinct search patterns, where the seeking for change and novelty
may have a role in their exploratory profiles (Kool et al. 2010). **Rodriguez et al. (1992)**
described decreases in pure alternations and increases in pure repetition behavior in
lateralized animals, and demonstrated that both stress and over-training decrease the
alternation/repetition ratio through the promotion of an increase of biased responses.
Although the dominant strategy, alternations are broken up with other exploratory
patterns, as indicated in Fig 2B showing the relative frequency of each of the 16 tetragrams
over the duration of a 1-hour trial. This discontinuous, but dominant search strategy, leads
us to believe that the exploration patterns in the Y-maze are possibly associated with short
term memory rather than motor memory (McBride and Parker 2015). However, further
work would have to be carried out to determine to what extent, if any, alternations and
repetitions are implicated in short term memory in the Y-maze. Here, we confirmed that
both alternations and repetitions remain as a highly reliable behavioral pattern that is
conserved across species (Ghafouri et al. 2016; Lewis et al. 2017; Pickering et al. 2015).

In agreement with previous studies (Andrade et al. 2001), we showed that locomotor
lateralization is associated **with** increased learning in a **Pavlovian** fear conditioning protocol.

Studies using other fish species showed that lateralized animals have a better response in

cognitive tasks such as spatial reorientation (Sovrano et al. 2005), and left-eye bias is related

to faster learning in conditioning tasks (Bibost and Brown 2014). In general, the most

predominant theory of how left-right bias affects learning and cognitive processing relates to a

hypothesized increased stress-reactivity in lateralized animals (Carlson and Glick 1989; Neveu

1996; Westergaard et al. 2001). Interindividual differences in laterality have been shown to covary

with, or predict, individual differences in stress-reactivity and susceptibility to stress-related

pathology (Byrnes et al. 2016; Carlson and Glick 1989; Fride and Weinstock 1989; Ocklenburg et

al. 2016). Here, we tested the hypothesis that left- and right-biased animals would differ in

measures of stress-reactivity and anxiety-like phenotypes (Blaser and Rosemberg 2012; Egan et

al. 2009; Parker et al. 2012). We found no significant differences in lateralized animals in our

measures of anxiety, suggesting that the observed differences in behavioral phenotypes observed

in the Y-maze and shock avoidance learning seems to not be related to stress-reactivity responses

per se. Instead, our data may suggest that the lateralized fish are more reactive to stress-related

cues. This would explain the increased performance **in** the Pavlovian fear conditioning, the fact

that there were no differences in measures of anxiety, and the **altered search strategy in** the Y-

maze test.

There are several theories regarding the mechanisms underlining behavior laterality in

simple maze tasks. Diaz Palarea et al. (1987) were the first to report that left-right biased animals,

as assessed via spatial asymmetry in a T-maze, had alterations in dopaminergic (DA) signaling.

In addition, apomorphine (DA receptor agonist) and 6-hydroxydopamine lesions alters behavioral

laterality of animals in the T-maze test (Castellano et al. 1987) and Y-maze (Nakagawa et al.

2004), confirming the involvement of DA system in behavioral asymmetry. DA receptors are

strongly implicated in emotional learning and recall of emotionally relevant events in rats. For

example, activation of D4-receptors in the medial pre-frontal cortex potentiates fear-associated

memory formation but has no impact on recall (Lauzon et al. 2009; Laviolette et al. 2005),

whereas activation of D1-like receptors blocks recalls of previously learned fear-associated

memories but has no impact on learning (Lauzon et al. 2009), suggesting a double dissociation of

function. Interestingly, the serotonergic (5-HT) system has also been shown to have an important

role in mediating individual differences in anxiety-like responses and locomotor activity in

zebrafish and exerts a minor modulatory role of the DA system (Tran et al. 2016). Both behavioral

laterality and aversive memory is mostly associated with **modulatory action of the DA system**,

but the 5-HT system has a major role modulating zebrafish responses to novelty. The precise

mechanisms of how behavioral laterality modulates neuropsychiatric conditions are yet to be

firmly established, and further studies are required to better understand the mechanisms in which

behavioral laterality modulates aversive memory in zebrafish.

5. Conclusion

Overall, we showed for the first time that zebrafish exhibit **spontaneously occurring**

motor lateralization which can influence aversive learning responses. We found that biased

animals show an altered search exploratory pattern Y-maze and increased in learning in a

Pavlovian fear conditioning protocol. Coupled with a lack of differences between lateralized and

non-lateralized animals in unconditioned tests of anxiety, our data suggest that lateralized

zebrafish may **show heightened** reactivity to fear related cues. These results have important

connotations for translational models of depression and anxiety, particularly in the light of well-

established links between laterality and anxiety/depression in humans. Finally, because biased

animals present different behavioral performances in the Y-maze and Pavlovian fear conditioning

protocols, left- and right- preference should be considered when working with zebrafish behavior,

particularly to control variability in performance on more complex tasks.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exists.

Ethical approval

All experiments were carried out following scrutiny by the University of Portsmouth Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Board, and under license from the UK Home Office (Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, 1986) [PPL: P9D87106F].

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the experimental design and the behavioral tasks.

Figure 2. Effects of left- and right- bias in zebrafish on the Y-maze test. (A) Laterality affects total number of turns, repetitions and alternation of adult zebrafish. **(B) Y-maze tetragrams showing the behavioral phenotype of biased and non-biased animals considering the relative frequency of choice (tetragram frequency of choice*100/total number of turns).** Data were represented as mean ± S.E.M. and analyzed by linear mixed effects, followed by Tukey's multiple comparison test. Asterisks indicates statistical differences compared to non-biased group or between biased groups (*p < 0.05, **p <0.01, ***p <0.001 and ******p<0.0001**, n = 47 non-biased, n = 28 left-biased and n = 28 right-biased group).

Figure 3. Left- and right- bias are related to fear avoidance learning responses in adult zebrafish. Data were represented as mean ± S.E.M. and analyzed by two-way RM ANOVA, followed by Tukey's multiple comparison test. **Different letters indicate significant differences between groups (*p < 0.05; *n* = 25 non-biased, *n* = 17 left-biased and *n* = 13 right-biased group).**

Figure 4. Behavioral laterality is not related to locomotor or anxiety-related phenotypes in adult

zebrafish. Data were represented as mean ± S.E.M. and analyzed by **one- or two- way ANOVA**

($n = 22$ non-biased, $n = 11$ left-biased and $n = 15$ right-biased group).

Figure 5. Left- and right- bias do not change thigmotaxis in adult zebrafish. Data were

represented as mean ± S.E.M. and analyzed by **one-way ANOVA** ($n = 20$ non-biased, $n = 11$ left-

biased and $n = 15$ right-biased group).