Adaptive maintenance of fertility in the face of meiotic drive

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Abstract

Selfish genetic elements that gain a transmission advantage through the destruction of

sperm have grave implications for drive male fertility. We report the first evidence for a

male adaptation to this negative consequence of unsuppressed drive. In the X-linked SR

meiotic drive system of a stalk-eyed fly, we found that drive males had greatly enlarged

testes and so maintained high fertility despite the destruction of half their sperm. This was

the case even when males were challenged with fertilising five females. Conversely, we

observed an overt trade-off with mating frequency due to reduced allocation of resources

to accessory glands. Body size and eyespan were also reduced, which are likely to impair

viability, pre-copulatory competition and mating frequency. Gaining an understanding of

the extent to which drivers promote the evolution of adaptive responses in the host is

essential for predictions of equilibrium frequencies in wild populations.

Introduction

Introduction

Meiotic drive genes gain a transmission advantage through manipulation of meiosis or

gametogenesis and are likely to have profound ecological and evolutionary consequences,

ranging from the evolution of sex determination systems and changes in karyotype, to

impacts on population persistence and sexual selection (Hurst and Werren 2001; Jaenike

2001; Werren 2011; Lindholm et al. 2016). Drivers have been uncovered in a wide range of

taxa, with a preponderance of linkage to the sex chromosomes in the heterogametic sex

(Hurst and Pomiankowski 1991; Jaenike 2001; Taylor and Ingvarsson 2003). When meiotic

drive occurs in males, it severely disrupts the maturation and fertilisation capacity of non-

carrier sperm (Burt and Trivers 2006; Lindholm et al. 2016). The consequent loss of

competent sperm imposes a fertility disadvantage to organismal fitness (Price and Wedell

2008), that is exaggerated under conditions of sperm competition (Taylor et al. 1999;

Angelard et al. 2008; Price et al. 2008*a*). The extent to which these and other detrimental

effects of sperm-killer drive promote adaptive responses in the host species has received

limited attention. There is an extensive literature on genetic elements that interfere and

suppress the action of drive (Atlan et al. 1997; Presgraves et al. 1997; Dyer 2012;

Larracuente and Presgraves 2012; Branco et al. 2013). For example, in *Drosophila* species,

suppressors of X-linked drive have been found on the Y chromosome (Carvalho et al. 1997;

Cazemajor et al. 1997; Branco et al. 2013) and throughout the rest of the genome (Carvalho

and Klaczko 1993; Atlan et al. 2003; Tao et al. 2007). A more recent suggestion is that drive

may promote the evolution of female polyandry in order to dilute the ejaculates of drive

males (Haig and Bergstrom 1995; Zeh and Zeh 1997; Wedell 2013; Holman et al. 2015).

There is some evidence for this from experimental evolution studies using populations

exposed to meiotic drive in *D. pseudoobscura* (Price et al. 2008*b*) and *Mus musculus*

(Manser et al. 2017), and from natural populations in which the rate of multiple mating

correlates positively with the frequency of drive in *D. pseudoobscura* (Price et al. 2014) and

D. neotestacea (Pinzone and Dyer 2013). Female mate choice may additionally evolve in

response to drive. In stalk-eyed flies, meiotic drive has been linked to small eyespan, which

may allow females to avoid mating with carrier males through assessing eyespan (Wilkinson

et al. 1998; Cotton et al. 2014). Female house mice could avoid mating with drive males

through detecting unique major histocompatibility alleles linked to the driving *t* complex

(Silver 1985; Lindholm et al. 2013), although evidence remains unclear (Lindholm and Price

2016).

Another, as yet unexplored, route by which males could adapt to drive is by increasing the

allocation of resources to sperm production, to offset the destructive effect of drive on

gametogenesis. Sperm production is positively correlated with testis size in multiple species

(Møller 1989; Gage 1994; Pitnick and Markow 1994; Pitnick 1996; Stockley et al. 1997; Fry

2006), and increased testis size is a well characterised evolutionary response to heightened

sperm competition favouring greater sperm production (Hosken and Ward 2001; Pitnick et

al. 2001; Simmons and García-González 2008; Gay et al. 2009). Such an adaptation in drive

males might plausibly occur if genes involved in testis development are physically linked

with the drive element. Meiotic drive elements are typically found within inversions or

other areas of low recombination (Lyon et al. 1988; James and Jaenike 1990; Johns et al.

2005; Dyer et al. 2007, 2013; Harvey et al. 2014; Reinhardt et al. 2014). These regions not

only keep driver and insensitive responder loci together but facilitate the spread of

modifiers that enhance transmission distortion (Hartl 1975; Larracuente and Presgraves

2012) and are predicted to be enriched for male beneficial sexually-antagonistic alleles

(Rydzewski et al. 2016). For similar reasons, alleles that enable increased investment in

testes could become associated with the drive haplotype.

We test this idea using the Malaysian stalk-eyed fly species *Teleopsis dalmanni*. This species

harbours SR, an X-linked driver, which produce strongly female-biased broods due the

destruction of Y-bearing sperm (Presgraves et al. 1997; Wilkinson and Sanchez 2001). The

X^{SR} drive chromosome is estimated to have diverged from a non-driving ancestor (X^{ST})

around 500,000 years ago (Paczolt et al. 2017), and is characterised by a large inversion(s)

covering most of the chromosome (Johns et al. 2005; Paczolt et al. 2017). X^{SR} is found at

appreciable frequencies (10 – 30%) across populations and generations (Wilkinson et al.

2003; Cotton et al. 2014) but appears to lack genetic suppressors (Reinhold et al. 1999;

Wolfenbarger and Wilkinson 2001; Paczolt et al. 2017). The mating system in *T. dalmanni* is

highly promiscuous. Females join male lek sites at dusk with matings occurring the following

dawn (Wilkinson et al. 1998; Chapman et al. 2005; Cotton et al. 2015). Females prefer to

join the roosting sites and mate with males that have large eyespan (Wilkinson and Reillo

1994; Cotton et al. 2010). Sperm competition is the norm, and ejaculates compete in a

raffle, without precedence for first or last males (Corley et al. 2006). This means that there

has been ample time and selective opportunity for adaptive responses to evolve in males

carrying the drive chromosome.

To test for male adaptive changes in response to drive we determined whether SR and

standard (ST) males differed in their reproductive (testis and accessory gland size) and

morphological traits (eyespan and body size). Testis size predicts the amount of sperm

found within female storage (Fry 2006). Accessory glands produce all non-sperm

components of the ejaculate, and their size is associated with male mating frequency (Baker

et al. 2003; Rogers et al. 2005*a*, 2005*b*). Body size and eyespan are also important

predictors of male mating frequency (Small et al. 2009; Cotton et al. 2010). We determined

SR male fertility under a situation maximizing the importance of sperm number. Males were

allowed a 10-hour period in which to mate with low or high numbers of females and the

number of fertilized eggs produced were counted. We then changed the experimental

design to one emphasizing the importance of mating frequency. Males were exposed to

females over a time-constrained 30-minute period, and the number of copulations that SR

males achieved was compared to that of ST males.

Methods

Details of stock collection and day-to-day upkeep can be found in the appendix.

Experimental males were taken from the SR-stock population, whose males are a ~50:50

mix of X^{SR} and X^{ST} genotypes. Experimental females were taken from the ST-stock

population, which lacks meiotic drive. Non-virgin males from the SR-stock were allowed to

mate freely with either one or five virgin ST-stock females, over a period of 10 hours from

artificial dawn. Mated females were allowed to lay eggs for 14 days, by which time most

females had stopped laying fertile eggs. Fecundity was recorded through egg counts, and

egg hatch was used as an estimate for fertility. On the following day, experimental males,

and a similar number of unmated males, were anaesthetised on ice and their testes and

accessory glands were removed (figure 1*A*) and photographed under differential

interference contrast microscopy. Organ area was measured at x50 magnification by tracing

the outline. Male eyespan (Hingle et al. 2001*a*) and a proxy for body size, thorax length,

(Rogers et al. 2008) were measured. The entire protocol was repeated in 16 batches.

In a second experiment, SR-stock males were introduced to two ST-stock non-virgin females

at artificial dawn. All copulations were counted over 30 minutes. A copulation was defined

as intromission lasting more than 30 seconds, as copulations shorter than this do not result

in spermatophore transfer (Rogers et al. 2006). Males that attempted to mate but were

unsuccessful (defined as following and attempted mounting, but no intromission) were

presented with a different set of females and observed for an additional 30 minutes. To

minimise any effects on mating frequency due to female choice, the experimental males

were standardised to a narrow range of eyespan (7.5 – 8.5 mm). This protocol was repeated

over 14 batches.

Males were genotyped using two X-linked INDEL markers, *comp162710* and *cnv395*, or a

microsatellite marker, *ms395*. Allele size of these markers reliably indicates the SR genotype

of the males in the laboratory population (Meade et al. 2018, *submitted*).

Statistical analysis

All tests were carried out in R version 3.32 (R Core Team 2016). We tested if male genotypes

differed in their morphological (body size and eyespan; linear models) and reproductive

traits (testis size and accessory gland size; linear mixed effects models). Differences in

relative trait sizes between genotypes, as well as in absolute trait sizes (models where body

size is excluded) are reported. Female total number of fertile eggs (Poisson generalised

linear mixed effects model (GLMM)) and proportion fertility (fertile eggs, non-fertile eggs;

binomial GLMM) are compared when mated to SR or ST males. We also tested if male

reproductive traits, and their interaction with male genotype, were important predictors of

fertility. Lastly we tested whether SR and ST males differed in their mating frequency over

30-minutes by comparing the likelihood that SR and ST males mate at all (binomial GLMM),

as well as the total number of copulations among males that mated at least once (Poisson

GLMM).

To avoid collinearity of male morphological and reproductive traits with body size, models

used residual values (Dormann et al. 2013). Reported P values were calculated with type II

tests, or type III tests where significant interactions were present (Fox and Weisberg 2011).

Where appropriate, batch was included as a random effect. Further details can be found in

the appendix.

Results

SR trait size

SR males had small body size (mean ± s.e. 2.29 ± 0.013 mm) compared to ST males (2.336 ±

0.009 mm; $F_{1,357}$ = 8.745, P = 0.003; figure 1*B*). SR males also had small absolute ($F_{1,357}$ =

42.631, P < 0.001; mean ± s.e. SR: 8.048 ± 0.046mm; ST: 8.402 ± 0.031mm; figure 1*B*) and

relative eyespan ($F_{1,355}$ = 0.713, P = 0.016), especially when body size was small (body size by

genotype interaction $F_{1,355}$ = 4.175, P = 0.042).

Despite their small size, SR testis size was large (mean ± s.e 1.94 ± 0.050 mm^2) compared to

ST males (1.54 ± 0.028 mm^2; $F_{1,280.16}$ = 73.796, P < 0.001; figure 1C). SR males also had large

relative testis size ($F_{1,282.78}$ = 99.982, P < 0.001). In contrast, SR males had small accessory

gland size (mean ± s.e. SR: 0.306 ± 0.011 mm^2; ST: 0.348 ± 0.010 mm^2; $F_{1,335.36}$ = 16.353, P <

0.001; figure 1D), and this relationship remained true after accounting for their small body

size ($F_{1,334.03}$ = 7.801, P = 0.006).

SR fertility

SR males did not differ from ST males in total (mean ± s.e. SR: 112.047 ± 8.290, ST: 107.053

± 5.597; χ^2_1 = 2.416, P = 0.120, N = 215; figure 2A-B) or proportion fertility (mean ± s.e. SR:

0.33 ± 0.024, ST: 0.767 ± 0.018; χ^2_1 = 2.469, P = 0.116, N = 215) when held with females over

an extended 10-hour period. Males mating with five females achieved higher total fertility

than those mating with a single female (χ^2_1 = 43.698, P < 0.001, N = 215), but were unable to

fertilise a higher proportion of eggs (χ^2_1 = 6.021, P = 0.014, N = 215). The interaction

between mating group (one or five females) and genotype did not influence total (χ^2_1 =

0.591, P = 0.442, N = 215) or proportion fertility (χ^2_1 = 1.377, P = 0.241, N = 215).

Male testis size was an important predictor of fertility. Both total (χ^2_1 = 6.216, P = 0.013, N =

165; figure 2C-D) and proportion fertility (χ^2_1 = 16.646, P < 0.001, N = 165) were greater

amongst males with larger relative testis size. The addition of testis size did not alter the

relationship between genotype and total (χ^2_1 = 0.018, P = 0.895, N = 173) or proportion

fertility (χ^2_1 = 0.260, P = 0.610, N = 173). There was no interaction between testis size and

genotype predicting total (χ^2_1 = 0.164, P = 0.686, N = 173) or proportion fertility (χ^2_1 = 0.617,

P = 0.432, N = 173). Accessory gland size did not predict total (χ^2_1 = 0.032, P = 0.858, N =

165) or proportion fertility (χ^2_1 = 0.160, P = 0.689, N = 165).

SR mating frequency

A total of 493 copulations from 193 males were observed over the 30-minute mating trials.

SR males copulated (mean ± s.e. 2.75 ± 0.175, N = 81) fewer times on average than ST males

(3.55 ± 0.186, N = 76; χ^2_1 = 6.304, P = 0.012; figure 1*E*), but were not less likely to mate at

least once (SR: 81/104, ST: 76/89; χ^2_1 = 1.665, P = 0.197, N = 193).

Discussion

One of the main features of drive in males is reduced fertility due to the dysfunction of non-

carrier sperm. Here, we present evidence of an adaptive response to this deficit. Male *T.*

dalmanni carrying the X^{SR} drive chromosome have greatly enlarged testes (figure 1*C*), an

~70% increase compared to standard males. This enables SR males to achieve fertility at a

level equivalent to that of standard males when given the opportunity to mate to a single

female over an extended period of 10 hours. When challenged with fertilising five females,

males fertilised a smaller proportion of their eggs, but SR males performed just as well as ST

males. These patterns are likely to arise because the production of sperm scales with testis

size, as seen in many insect species (Gage 1994; Pitnick and Markow 1994; Pitnick 1996;

Stockley et al. 1997), including *T. dalmanni* (Fry 2006). This interpretation is supported by

previous findings that SR male ejaculates contain similar numbers of sperm as ST males,

both after single and multiple matings (Meade et al. 2018, *submitted*), and that testis size is

an important predictor of male fertility. Despite the destruction of half their sperm, the

increased investment in sperm production of drive males allows them to deliver sufficient

sperm to achieve similar competitive ability to standard males.

We found a significant trade-off between testis and accessory gland size in drive males, as

their accessory glands were small, especially for their body size (figure 1*D*). Previous work

showed that male mating rate is phenotypically (Baker et al. 2003) and genetically linked

with accessory gland size (Rogers et al. 2005*a*). Here, when males were observed under

time constraint (30 minutes), SR mating frequency was low (figure 1*E*). Furthermore, SR

males were small and had small eyespan for their body size (figure 1*B*), which previous work

has shown is important in determining success in male-male antagonistic interactions

(Panhuis and Wilkinson 1999; Small et al. 2009) and mate choice (Panhuis and Wilkinson

1999; Hingle et al. 2001*b*; Cotton et al. 2010). Reduction in this suite of trait sizes will likely

have a serious impact upon male mating frequency. In the wild, males compete for roosting

sites while females assess males and roost with their chosen male overnight, with large

eyespan males attracting more females (Wilkinson and Reillo 1994; Cotton et al. 2010).

Males mate with females on their leks over a brief half hour period at dawn, after which

females depart if they fail to quickly gain a mating (AP, *personal observation*). Small and

unattractive SR males that cannot mate at a high enough rate will bias mating success

against them and toward the better endowed ST males.

Our study reveals that SR males adopt a different investment strategy in their reproductive

and somatic traits. A portion of their resources allocated to reproduction is wasted due to

meiotic drive, requiring increased investment in testes to raise sperm production. The main

route to this appears to be through the diversion of resource from the accessory glands. It

may also come from reduced investment in body size and eyespan. However small body size

and eyespan may arise from low genetic condition of drive males due to the accumulation

of deleterious mutations within the inversion(s) on X^{SR}. Inversions significantly suppress

recombination because pairing is partially inhibited during synapsis or because crossovers

give rise to unbalanced gametes (Kirkpatrick 2010). Stalk-eyed flies have three pairs of

chromosomes, and the SR inversion(s) covers nearly all of the X chromosome, meaning

approximately one third of all stalk-eyed fly genes are subject to weak natural selection

(Johns et al. 2005; Paczolt et al. 2017). This will have a negative effect on costly, condition-

dependent traits, like body size and eyespan (David et al. 2000; Cotton et al. 2004; Bellamy

et al. 2013). These views help to explain the investment patterns we observe. Our overall

hypothesis is that if drive males inevitably have small eyespan, they will be unattractive and

gain fewer mating opportunities. Consequently, investment in accessory glands which will

enable higher mating rates will give lower returns than diversion of resources into larger

testes, allowing SR males to produce ejaculates of equivalent size to those of standard

males, and be able to compete under the conditions of high sperm competition seen in

stalk-eyed flies. These ideas about the linkage of allocation trade-offs, condition and mating

rates need further investigation, in particular under the mating conditions that occur in the

wild.

Here we demonstrate for the first time that drive males can increase the production of

viable sperm and maintain fertility, despite sperm destruction, through investment in testes.

Other adaptive responses, such as genetic suppression, polyandry or female choice of non-

drive males, are likely to reduce the transmission advantage gained by drive, and should

lead to reductions in the equilibrium frequency that drive will reach (Hartl 1975; Taylor and

Jaenike 2002; Holman et al. 2015). In sharp contrast, increased investment in sperm

production will intensify, rather than prevent, the transmission of the driver, because the

benefit to the individual male in gaining fertility is also beneficial to the drive element itself.

We found that the increased investment in sperm production was associated with reduced

accessory gland size and eyespan, traits that play a vital role in pre-copulatory competition

and mating frequency. Whether these are general responses or particular to the stalk-eyed

fly's development and life history is unclear. Increased investment in sperm production as a

response to meiotic drive has neither been theoretically modelled nor empirically studied

previously, but it will have implications for the spread and equilibrium frequency of drive.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to conceiving the project and methodology; LM and RK collected

data on fertility and morphology; SF collected data on mating frequency; LM analysed the

data; LM, KF and AP led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed critically to

the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

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Data accessibility

Data will be uploaded to the Dryad Digital Repository

Ethical statement

No ethical approval was required for this research

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Figure 1

A, *T. dalmanni* testes (T) and accessory glands (Ag) after dissection of males. *B–D*, male

morphological and reproductive trait size for SR (red) and ST (blue) males, plotted against

male body size. *B,* male eyespan. *C*, male testis area. *D*, male accessory gland area. SR males

had smaller body size, eyespan and accessory gland size than ST males, but larger testis size.

Grey shading shows ± s.e. *E*, Mating frequency, measured as total number of copulations

(mean ± s.e.) observed over 30 minutes, for SR (red) and ST (blue) males.

Figure 2

A–B, upper: box plots (median and interquartile range) and *lower:* Kernel probability density

of measures of total fertility of SR (red) and ST (blue) males. *A,* mated to a single female. *B,*

mated to five females. SR and ST males did not differ in the number of eggs that they

fertilised. *C–D,* male testis area plotted against total fertility. *C,* mated to a single female. *D,*

mated to five females. Total fertility increased with testis size, for SR and ST males. Grey

shading shows ± s.e.