

PERSPECTIVE

Order within chaos: Harnessing *Plasmodium falciparum* var gene extreme polymorphism for malaria epidemiology

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Genotyping methods

The characterization of *Plasmodium falciparum* genetic diversity is key to understand evolutionary pressure, measure the impact of elimination campaigns, monitor drug resistance, etc. A common genotyping method is to PCR amplify microsatellite markers or polymorphic genes, such as the *msp* family, the size of the resulting amplicon(s) being variable between different isolates [1]. Amplicon ultra-deep sequencing now allows multiplexing samples and are particularly useful to determine the proportion of each strain in infections with multiple genotypes [2]. Alternatively, genotyping a few dozen single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) generates a molecular barcode specific to each isolate. Whole genome sequencing (WGS) is the most comprehensive approach, but the cost remains high for large-scale studies.

Over the last decade, the Day lab has pioneered a PCR approach based on *P. falciparum*'s most polymorphic gene family: the *var* genes [3]. The roughly 60 *var* genes have a similar organization consisting in a succession of Duffy binding-like (DBL) and cysteine-rich interdomain region (CIDR) domains with the near ubiquitous presence of DBL α subtype (Fig 1A) [4]. Through this approach, the DBL α domain is amplified using degenerate primers that match two short conserved motifs on either side of the domain. The approximately 450 bp-long sequence in between is extremely variable, making the total number of unique DBL α domains worldwide virtually infinite [5]. This cost-effective method is used as a surveillance tool across a variety of epidemiological settings. Unlike microsatellites that are presumably neutral markers, the DBL α typing offers the added advantage of characterizing the parasite's most immunogenic surface protein family [6].

DBL α sequences differentiate *Plasmodium falciparum* populations

To test the suitability of DBL α sequences for population genetics analysis, Tonkin-Hill and colleagues processed 32,682 sequences from 1,248 *P. falciparum* isolates collected in 10 different countries located in South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania [7]. To account for the frequent recombination events between *var* genes, they developed a novel computationally intensive method known as jumping hidden Markov Model (JHMM) which is able to infer the posterior probability that each location in an isolate's DBL α type amino acid sequence is most closely related to every other DBL α type [8,9]. They accumulated the probabilities between DBL α found in an isolate to provide an estimate of the expected proportion of relatedness between isolates. These proportions were then aggregated to provide estimates of an isolate's DBL α repertoire that most closely matched each country, hence attributing a geographical origin to each isolate (Fig 1B). Country-specific clustering was observed, even in Africa where *P. falciparum*



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Citation: Guery M-A, Claessens A (2021) Order within chaos: Harnessing *Plasmodium falciparum* var gene extreme polymorphism for malaria epidemiology. PLoS Genet 17(2): e1009344. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgen.1009344>

Editor: Carmen Buchrieser, Institut Pasteur, CNRS UMR 3525, FRANCE

Published: February 25, 2021

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Funding: The author(s) received no specific funding for this work.

Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

genetic diversity is particularly high [10], indicating that the majority of DBL α types are country specific. Excluding intracountry comparisons, countries located in the same continent show greater matching proportions of DBL α sequences, especially for Africa and South America. Regarding intercontinent comparisons, DBL α types coming from South America show greater relatedness to DBL α types found in Africa compared to Asia or Oceania (Fig 1C).

These results are in line with conclusions drawn from previous works, indicating that *P. falciparum* was introduced from Africa to South America during the slave trade [11]. Also, the JHMM proportions suggest that the *var* populations in Asia/Oceania more closely resemble African populations than those seen in South America, consistent with the expansion of *P. falciparum* out of Africa toward Asia [12]. Finally, the DBL α method is also able to distinguish between *Laverania* species.

The exception to the rule: Conserved *var* genes

While most DBL α in the Tonkin-Hill dataset were detected only once, some appeared to be conserved at the global scale. The top 100 most prevalent DBL α , present in at least 50 isolates, were found to be distributed all over the countries sampled. This result was confirmed with a BLAST search against the NCBI and MalariaGEN-derived databases [13]. Although the in vitro recombination rate of group A *var* genes is lower than group B or C [9], the DBL α 1 (specific to group A *var* genes) was proportionally represented in the Top 100. The overall mind-boggling genetic diversity of DBL α sequences make these specific “conserved” DBL α even more interesting.

What is driving this selection? Some DBL α could be in linkage disequilibrium with drug resistance alleles [14]. However, the authors showed that only 10% of conserved DBL α were associated with drug resistance markers, indicating that other selection forces are at play and remained to be discovered. Interestingly, they identified conserved DBL α on chromosome 6, in which long-range haplotypes have been reported in African *P. falciparum* genomes [15].

Plasmodium diversity: A matter of scale

In summary, Tonkin-Hill and colleagues produced the first global scale DBL α types analysis. Their JHMM approach is promising when dealing with relatedness between sets of sequences, even though its computational cost remains to be lowered. Comparing DBL α sequences led to a clustering similar to what was observed using WGS in Africa, for a fraction of the cost. To further investigate the ability of DBL α comparisons to track *P. falciparum* populations, more samples are needed, especially from Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of The Congo, where divergent parasites have recently been identified [10]. Follow-up studies should also include countries where malaria is highly seasonal, to measure the impact of transmission (or lack thereof) on parasite population genetic diversity.

To conclude, Tonkin-Hill and colleagues provide compelling evidence for further DBL α -based genotyping studies, not just for “varologists” but most epidemiological studies.

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