Unified Theory of Interspecific Allometric Scaling

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(Dated: October 15, 2018)

A general simple theory for the interspecific allometric scaling is developed in the $d+1$-dimensional space ($d$ biological lengths and a physiological time) of metabolic states of organisms. It is assumed that natural selection shaped the metabolic states in such a way that the mass and energy $d+1$-densities are size-invariant quantities (independent of body mass). The different metabolic states (basal and maximum) are described by considering that the biological lengths and the physiological time are related by different transport processes of energy and mass. In the basal metabolism, transportation occurs by ballistic and diffusion processes. In $d = 3$, the 3/4 law occurs if the ballistic movement is the dominant process, while the 2/3 law appears when both transport processes are equivalent. Accelerated movement during the biological time is related to the maximum aerobic sustained metabolism, which is characterized by the scaling exponent $2d/(2d+1)$ (6/7 in $d = 3$).

The results are in good agreement with empirical data and a verifiable empirical prediction about the aorta blood velocity in maximum metabolic rate conditions is made.

PACS numbers: 87.10.+e, 87.23.-n

Metabolic rate $B$ and body mass $M$ are connected by the relation $B = aM^b$, where $b$ is the allometric exponent and $a$ is a constant. For several decades it was accepted that the basal metabolic rate (BMR) among almost all organisms [1, 2, 3] (interspecific scaling) was characterized by $b = 3/4$ (Kleiber’s law [4]). A few years ago, theoretical explanations of the ubiquity of the 3/4-law based on the resource distribution network common to all organisms [5, 6] were proposed. Kleiber’s law has however been questioned recently. On the observational side, it is not clear whether the value of $b$ is 3/4, 2/3 or even variable in both interspecific and intraspecific (same species) scaling [3, 7, 10]. On the theoretical side, there are several debates about the validity of these models [8, 11] underlining the rational basis for the scaling law. A related open question is why maximum aerobic sustained metabolic rate (MMR) of endothermic animals scales with an exponent larger than that of BMR [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

In this work we show how, on the basis of a few quite general hypotheses, all the aspects of the allometric scaling of organisms. As all biological processes depend on characteristic times, it is natural to include a characteristic time, as well as various characteristic lengths, when specifying the metabolic state of an organism [15, 16]. We therefore associate the metabolic state of an organism with a point in a $d+1$-dimensional space of biological lengths and a biological time. Here $d$ is the number of spatial dimensions; although we usually have $d = 3$, we will work in general dimension $d$. Examples of biological lengths $L$ and times $\tau$ are the total aorta length in mammals, the length of capillaries, the mean distance from cell surface to mitochondria in unicellular organisms, the duration of one heartbeat, the capillary blood transit time or the turnover time for glucose [1, 2, 3, 10].

We now look for simple, general relations constraining the distribution of points in the space of metabolic states. It is usual for an animal to make several transitions between states $A_{basal}$ and $A_{max}$, through a series of complex biochemical processes. We do not consider these transitions. Rather we are interested in describing how natural selection has shaped the state $A_{basal}$ and other ones belonging to the space of metabolic states of all organisms (or a group of them). An organism is characterized by the fundamental quantities of mass and available energy for the metabolic processes. We therefore identify the mass $M$ and available energy $E$ as the fundamental variables characterizing an organism. Since we have a $d + 1$-dimensional space we shall use the
mass density $\rho_{d+1}(L_1, \ldots, L_d, \tau)$ (mass per unit volume and unit time) and the energy density $\sigma_{d+1}(L_1, \ldots, L_d, \tau)$ (available energy per unit volume and unit time). We assume that during evolution, natural selection enforces the constraints of size-invariant (independent of body mass) $\rho_{d+1}$ and $\sigma_{d+1}$ (our first and second hypotheses, respectively). Our third hypothesis is that the scaling of the metabolic states is determined by the dominant dynamical transport processes of nutrients (mass and energy), which are characterized by size-invariant quantities (diffusion coefficient, average velocity, etc.). Note that the first and second hypotheses furnish two relations valid for all metabolic regimes. Different metabolic scalings will appear because there are different ways to transport nutrients.

From the second hypothesis we obtain that

$$E = \sigma_{d+1} \tau V_d,$$

where $\tau V_d$ is the $d+1$-volume and $V_d = L_1 L_2 \cdots L_d$. Since power is defined as $P = dE/dt$, energy can be written in terms of $B$, the power averaged over the time scale $\tau$, as $E = B \tau$. We identify $B$ as the metabolic rate. Therefore from the first and second hypotheses we obtain that

$$M = \rho_{d+1} \tau V_d, \quad \text{and} \quad B = \sigma_{d+1} V_d. \quad (1)$$

Let us briefly present a qualitative argument about an optimal delivery that supports our postulates. Consider two organisms with the same body mass $M$ belonging to the same group. The organism with the larger biological volume $V_d$ has the larger nutrient distribution network and more fuel and oxygen are arriving to the cells in a unit time. Therefore its cells must have a fast metabolism in order to consume the fuel. Of course, a fast metabolism is related to a small biological time. On the other hand, a small $V_d$ implies in a larger biological time $\tau$. These arguments suggest that the product $\tau V_d$ is constant for these organisms.

An immediate consequence of our hypotheses is that the power per mass (specific metabolic rate), namely

$$B/M = \sigma_{d+1} \frac{1}{\rho_{d+1} \tau},$$

is inversely proportional to the metabolic time. Animals with a small $\tau$, such as small mammals, require larger power by unit mass than ones with a large $\tau$ (large mammals) because their cells have a large mitochondrial density.

Obviously, $\tau$ cannot be 0 neither $\infty$: there must be a minimal and a maximal metabolic times $\tau_{min}$ and $\tau_{max}$. For animals, a lower bound for $\tau_{min}$ can be found from the observation that the biological volume of an organism $V_d$ cannot be larger than its spatial volume $V$, since the biological lengths $L_i$ characterize the organism’s anatomy on the scale of the body, or some organ or cellular structure. For compact animal bodies we have that $M = \rho V$, where $\rho$ is the usual $d$-dimensional mass density, which is approximately constant. Using $\rho V = M = \rho_{d+1} \tau V_d$ in $V > V_d$, we obtain

$$\tau > \tau_{min} = \rho/\rho_{d+1}. \quad \text{Since} \ B/M \text{ cannot be zero it must exist an size-invariant } (B/M)_{min} \text{ related to the minimum power per mass to keep the organisms just alive, the so-called tissue maintenance specific metabolic rate} \ \Omega. \ \text{This implies that} \ \tau_{max} = \sigma_{d+1}/(\rho_{d+1}(B/M)_{min}).$$

Note if $\tau$ is size-invariant, such as $\tau_{max}$, we have isometric scaling of the metabolic rate ($b = 1$).

The relation $M \propto \tau V_d$, derived from the first hypothesis, is a generalization of the result of Banavar et al. \[1\], namely $V_{net} \propto L^{d+1}$, where $V_{net}$ is the total volume of an efficient distributive network. Using that the blood volume $V_{net}$ is proportional to mass, they obtained $M \propto L^{d+1}$, a basic relation to deduce the 3/4-law. The two relations are equal when $\tau \propto L$, a condition valid for the BMR. Moreover, the result $M \propto L^{d+1}$ is also crucial to obtain the BMR exponent in the model of West, Brown and Enquist (WBE) \[3\]. This relation is also a generalization of the equation $F \propto (L_p/u)B$ of Banavar et al. \[4\], where $L_p$ is the physical length of the system and $u$ is the characteristic length scale. If we rewrite this equation as $M \propto \rho V_d$, where $\rho$ is the tissue density and $t$ is the physiological time related with the rate of energy use per unit volume, it becomes similar to Eq. \[1\].

Although, from our third assumption, we need some dynamical size-invariant quantities, like the blood flow speed velocity $v_0$ in the aorta or in the capillaries, the length $l_c$ and the radius $r_c$ of capillaries are not necessarily invariants.

Let us first study the case of transport via diffusion. We have only one metabolic length scale ($L_1 \propto L_2 \propto \cdots \propto L_d \propto L$), so the biological volume is given by $V_d \propto L^d$. Since diffusion over short distances is fast, it is possible that the metabolic rate of very small organisms is governed by this process. It is well known that $L = D_0 \tau^{1/2}$, where $D_0$ is the size-invariant diffusion coefficient. Since $\tau = (L/D_0)^2$, we obtain from Eq. \[1\] that $M \propto L^{d+2}$. This relation furnishes how $L$ depends on $M$ and we can use again Eq. \[1\] to obtain that

$$L \propto M^{\frac{1}{d+2}}, \quad \tau \propto M^{\frac{1}{d+2}}, \quad B \propto M^{\frac{d}{d+2}}.$$

In $d = 3$, the metabolic exponent is $b = 3/5$.

For larger organisms diffusion is inadequate. Transport by convection is then utilized on large length scales. In mammals, for example, we find the cardiovascular system that transports blood to the capillaries, where the cells are fed by diffusion. Since blood circulates in a ballistic regime, we consider that the BMR is basically driven by ballistic transport, namely $L = v_0 \tau$, where the velocity $v_0$ is size-invariant. Now we must specify how the different metabolic steps are related. We call BMR-1 the scenario of a single metabolic relevant length $L_1 \propto L = v_0 \tau$ and a single time $\tau$, both related to the ballistic transport. The other lengths, related to other metabolic steps, have evolved to meet it, namely $L_2 \propto \cdots \propto L_d \propto L$. Using that $V_d \propto L^d$ in Eq. \[1\], we write

$$L \propto \tau \propto M^{\frac{1}{d+1}},$$
For $d = 3$ we find the $3/4$-law, namely $\tau \propto L \propto M^{1/4}$ and $B \propto M^{3/4}$. These results are the same as those of WBE [5], Banavar et al. [6,7].

In the BMR-2 scenario, we have different relevant lengths and times related to the metabolic processes. However, due to the concept of symmorphosis [18], which states that all metabolic steps have co-evolved in order that no step is more limiting than another, we will end up with a single time $\tau$ and $d - 1$ rescaled lengths. In a “cylindrical” symmetry we have $L_1 \propto L = v_0 t_1$ (ballistic term) and $d - 1$ lengths proportional to $R = D_0 t_{1/2}^{1/2}$ (diffusion). Both $v_0$ and $D_0$ are size-invariant. From the symmorphosis principle ($t_1 = t_2 = \tau$), it follows that $R = (D_0/v_0^{1/2}) L^{1/2}$. The biological volume is $V_d \propto R^{d-1} L$. From Eq. (11) we obtain that

$$L \propto \tau \propto M^{\frac{1}{d-3}}, \quad R \propto M^{\frac{1}{d-3}},$$
$$B \propto M^{\frac{d-3}{d-4}}.$$

Then in $d = 3$ the BMR-2 scenario yields the $2/3$ law, without mention of the area/volume ratio. We obtained both $3/4$ and $2/3$ laws from the same transport processes: convection and diffusion. If convection is the dominant limiting process we have the $3/4$ law; if the two processes are equivalent we obtain the $2/3$ law.

The circulatory networks of endothermic animals are dynamical ones which are adjusted according to the metabolic state. The transition from resting to maximum activity can be described very briefly as follows: (a) the heart increases its rate and output; (b) the mean arterial pressure and peripheral extramuscular resistance increase; (c) arterial blood volume increases due to constriction of the veins; (d) extramuscular flow remains essentially constant, somewhat reduced in some organs but increased in others; and (e) total flow and muscular flow increase, with all muscular capillaries activated. The items (a), (c) and (e) suggest that we have a “forced movement” during the characteristic time $\tau$. This means that the typical constant velocity can be written as $v = a_0 \tau$, where $a_0$ is a size-invariant acceleration. Consequently the MMR is driven by an inertial movement accelerated during time $\tau$, implying that $L = v \tau = a_0 \tau^2$.

If inertial transport is the only relevant process (MMR-1 scenario), it follows that $L_1 \propto L_2 \ldots \propto L_d \propto L = a_0 \tau^2$. Since $V_d \propto L^d$ and $\tau \propto L^{1/2}$, we obtain from Eq. (11) the metabolic relations:

$$L \propto M^{\frac{d}{d-3}}, \quad \tau \propto M^{\frac{d}{d-3}},$$
$$B \propto M^{\frac{d-3}{d-4}}.$$ 

For $d = 3$ we have that $L \propto M^{2/7}, \tau \propto M^{1/7}$ and $B \propto M^{6/7}$. This results agree with the ones obtained through a generalization of WBE ideas to MMR scenario [14].

In the MMR-2 scenario, diffusion and inertial movement are equally relevant. We again choose a “cylindrical” symmetry so that have that $L_1 \propto L = a_0 \tau^2$ while the remaining $d - 1$ lengths are of order $D_0 \tau^{1/2}$. It follows from Eq. (11) that

$$L \propto M^{\frac{1}{d-3}}, \quad \tau \propto M^{\frac{1}{d-3}},$$
$$B \propto M^{\frac{d-3}{d-4}}, \quad \tau \propto M^{\frac{d-3}{d-4}}.$$ 

When $d = 3$, we obtain that $L \propto M^{1/2}, \tau \propto M^{1/4}, R \propto M^{1/8}$ and $B \propto M^{3/4}$.

The transportation network can be characterized by “aorta” and “capillaries”. Note that the aorta $L_a$ and capillary $l_c$ lengths are both proportional to $L$. Since the nutrient fluid is conserved, the volume rate of flow is given by

$$\dot{Q} = \pi R_a^2 v_a = N_c \pi r_c^2 v_c,$$
where $R_a$ and $v_a$ are the aorta radius and fluid velocity and $N_c$, $r_c$ and $v_c$ are capillary number, radius and fluid velocity, respectively. It is natural to write that $\dot{Q} \propto B$. In the basal regime, $v_a$ and $v_c$ are size-invariant. Then we obtain that $R_a \propto B^{1/2}$ and $N_c r_c^2 \propto B$. Making the extra assumption that $r_c$ is invariant, it follows that the capillary density $\rho_c = N_c / B$ is $\rho_c \propto B / M \propto 1 / \tau$. For $d = 3$ we have the following results: (a) BMR-1 - $R_a \propto M^{3/8}$ and $\rho_c \propto M^{-1/4}$; (b) BMR-2 - $R_a \propto M^{1/3}$ and

| Variable | Exponent |
|----------|-----------|
|          | Predicted | Observed | Ref. |
| MMR      | 0.86 (MMR-1) | 0.83(7) | 9 |
|          | 0.88(2)   | 12 |
|          | 0.87(3)   | 13 |
|          | 0.85      | 21 |
|          | 0.87(5)   | 22 |
| Capillary density | $-0.14$ (MMR-1) | $-0.14(7)$ | 3,19 |
| Heart rate at MMR | $-0.14$ (MMR-1) | $-0.17(2)$ | 23 |
|          | $-0.16(2)$ | 24 |
|          | $-0.15$   | 25 |
| BMRR-1   | 0.75 (BMRR-1) | 0.74(2) | 9 |
|          | 0.66 (BMRR-2) | 0.67   | 8 |
|          | 0.69(1)   | 26 |
| Heart rate at BMRR | $-0.25$ (BMRR-1) | $-0.25(2)$ | 1,9 |
|          | $-0.33$ (BMRR-2) | $-0.27$ | 3, 26 |
| Aorta radius | 0.36 (MMR-1) | 0.36  | 3, 26 |
|          | 0.38 (BMRR-1) | 0.31   | 26 |
|          | 0.33 (BMRR-2) | 0.31   | 26 |

TABLE I: Allometric exponent $y$ describing the dependence of a variable $Y$ on body mass $M (Y \sim M^y)$. Under parenthesis is the error in the last significative of the observed quantities.


\( \rho_c \propto M^{-1/3} \). In the maximum regime, we have that \( v_c = a_0 \tau \), implying that now \( v_c \) depends on the mass. Note that this suggests new empirical studies. Then, we obtain that \( R_a^2 \propto B/\tau \). Now \( v_c \) is not necessarily invariant, as in the basal case. Since \( \rho_c r_a^2 v_c \propto 1/\tau \) we obtain that \( \rho_c \propto 1/\tau \) if we make the extra assumptions that both \( v_c \) and \( r_c \) are independent of body mass. The results are: (c) MMR-1 - \( R_a \propto M^{3/14} \) and \( \rho_c \propto M^{-1/7} \); (d) MMR-2 - \( R_a \propto M^{1/4} \) and \( \rho_c \propto M^{-1/4} \).

Let us compare our predictions for \( d = 3 \) with experimental data (see Table [1]). The values predicted in the MMR-2 context are far from the experimental ones. On the other hand, the MMR-1 scenario describes very well the MMR data. The exponent \( b = 6/7 \approx 0.86 \), larger than the basal value, is in very good agreement with data. Muscular capillary density of mammals is linked to MMR, instead of BMR, because only during exercise are all the muscular capillaries perfused. The capillary density scales as \( \rho_c = \rho_c / M \propto M^{-1/7} \), in good agreement with the average experimental value for various regions of muscle [3, 10]. Since \( \tau \propto M^{1/7} \), frequencies must scale as \( f \propto \tau^{-1} \propto M^{1/7} \) with \( f = -1/7 \approx -0.14 \). This value, smaller than the basal one, is also in good agreement with data for heart and respiration rates in strenuous exercise. The results for the capillary invariant radius \( r_c \) and \( l_c \propto M^{2/7} \), agree roughly with the theoretical-empirical estimation of Dawson [20]. \( (l_c \propto M^{0.21} \) and \( r_c \propto M^{0.08} \).

Since the length of aorta cannot change from basal to maximum metabolic regimes, it should scale as the prediction of MMR scaling. The predicted exponent 0.29 agrees well with data. The aorta radius could in principle follow the two scalings because of the elasticity of the aorta and the dynamical body adaptations of mammals in the transition BMR - MMR. The experimental value 0.36 has however a better agreement with the MMR-1 value 5/14.

Consider now the predictions of BMR scaling. Recently the empirical values of the BMR exponent of mammals were reanalyzed using diverse procedures [3, 4, 22] that furnished values in the interval between \( b_2 = 2/3 \) and \( b_1 = 3/4 \), which are the predicted values of BMR-2 and BMR-1, respectively. Heart and respiration rates are close to the BMR-1 value \(-1/4 \) and other biological variables [5] have values close to multiples of \( 1/4 \). On the other hand, empirical data near multiples of \( 1/3 \) are also reported [10]. Therefore, the two scenarios are possible. This last possibility explains why \( b \) is greater in large versus small mammals data: diffusion and ballistic transports can be equally important in small organisms (BMR-2) but not in large ones, where ballistic transport is crucial (BMR-1). Finally, let us emphasize that we make a verifiable empirical prediction: the aorta blood velocity \( (v_a) \), which is scaling-invariant in BMR conditions, grows with mass in the exercise-induced MMR condition \( (v_a \propto \tau) \). The related exponent, which is predicted to have the value \(-0.14 \) in the MMR-1 scenario, was never measured. Its empirical determination can be an experimental test of the importance of the transportation processes for the allometric scaling of metabolism.

**Acknowledgements** - We are grateful to R. Dickman and S. O. Kamphorst for careful readings of the manuscript. JKLS thanks A. Maritan for useful discussions by e-mail. We thank CNPq, CAPES and FAPEMIG, Brazil, for financial support. LAB was also supported in part by FAPESP, Brazil.

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