Socio-reproductive Conflicts and the Father’s Curse Dilemma*

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Submitted October 14, 2017; Accepted March 30, 2018; Electronically published May 31, 2018

ABSTRACT: Evolutionary conflicts between males and females can manifest over sexually antagonistic interactions at loci or over sexually antagonistic interests within a locus. The latter form of conflict, intralocus sexual conflict, arises from sexually antagonistic selection and constrains the fitness of individuals through a phenotypic compromise. These conflicts, and socio-reproductive interactions in general, are commonly mediated by hormones, and thus predictive insights can be gained from studying their mediating effects. Here, we integrate several lines of evidence to describe a novel, hormonally mediated reproductive dilemma that we call the father’s curse, which results from an intralocus conflict between mating and parental efforts. Essentially, a genetic locus exerts pleiotropic and antagonistic effects on the mating effort of one individual and the parental effort of a related individual who is the primary provider of parental care. We outline the criteria for operation of the father’s curse dilemma, provide evidence of the phenomenon, and discuss the predictions and outcomes arising from its dynamics. By integrating the effects of hormones into socio-reproductive conflicts and socio-reproductive effort, clearer links between genotypes, phenotypes, and fitness can be established.

Keywords: genomic conflict, sexual conflict, parent-offspring conflict, testosterone, oxytocin, bank vole.

Evolutionary Conflicts and the Father’s Curse Dilemma

Evolutionary conflicts in reproduction arise due to divergences in evolutionary interests of loci depending on whether they are in males, females, parents, or offspring (Arnqvist and Rowe 2005; Bonduriansky and Chenoweth 2009; Mokkonen et al. 2016; Rowe et al. 2018; table 1). Such conflicts result in fitness trade-offs that can constrain adaptation to phenotypic optima during reproduction (Trivers 1974; Chippindale et al. 2001; Chapman et al. 2003; Arnqvist and Rowe 2005; Bonduriansky and Chenoweth 2009; Cox and Calsbeek 2009; Pennell and Morrow 2013). Prezygotic reproductive investment differs considerably between the sexes due to anisogamy and the resulting difference in reproductive opportunities for females and males. Consequently, males are typically the sex that is under stronger sexual selection: a biased operational sex ratio toward males gives rise to greater variance in reproductive success and greater opportunity for selection compared to females (Clutton-Brock 2007). Evolutionary conflict can arise between males and females when reproductive interests diverge to such an extent that sexually antagonistic selection acts on phenotypes with sex-specific fitness optima in females compared to males. Such sexual conflict can take the form of interlocus sexual conflict, whereby the conflict is between coevolving loci in females and males (Chapman et al. 2003; Arnqvist and Rowe 2005), or intralocus sexual conflict, whereby the conflict occurs within a locus that exerts sexually antagonistic effects on fitness (Pischcheda and Chippindale 2006; Bonduriansky and Chenoweth 2009; Pennell and Morrow 2013). In addition to these prezygotic differences in reproductive investment between the sexes, postzygotic reproductive investment also differs between females and males due to factors such as greater paternal uncertainty experienced by fathers, a greater benefit or lower cost to the sex providing care, and the action of sexual selection (Trivers 1972; Clutton-Brock 1991; Andersson 1994; Arnqvist and Rowe 2005; McNamara and Wolf 2015). These asymmetries in pre- and postzygotic investment define the varying sex roles of females and males and indicate that there are many opportunities for conflict to arise during reproduction.

Mating and caring for offspring are reproductive components that trade off with regard to an individual’s finite resources (Dawson 1996; Stiver and Alonzo 2009). Owing to divergent sex roles, males typically employ greater mating effort, while females expend more parental effort in reproduction (Queller 1997; Kokko and Jennions 2008; Stiver and Alonzo 2009). In both sexes, but more so in males, an individual that maximizes mating effort is expected to increase their fitness through this component of reproductive success: selection will primarily favor those traits that yield higher mating success and more offspring. Conversely, an individual that maximizes their parental effort is also
expected to increase their fitness, especially through the component of offspring survival: selection will primarily favor those traits that produce higher-quality care of offspring during the postnatal period. Investments in mating effort and parental effort frequently result in parent-parent conflict during the postnatal period. Parental care varies more than the number of reproducing females, and so it is assumed that there is no inbreeding or hermaphroditism.

Table 1: Comparison of features in types of evolutionary conflict

| Type of effort involved | Form of evolutionary conflict | Nature of genetic conflict | Entities in conflict | Within or between generations | Distinguishing feature |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Parental effort         | Parent-offspring              | Interlocus                | Parent and offspring| Between                      | Antagonistic coevolution between interacting traits involved in provisioning and soliciting resources during parental care |
| Parental effort         | Imprinting                    | Intralocus                | Alleles in locus; maternal/paternal asymmetry in expression | Between                      | Parent-of-origin silencing of alleles that maintains conflict between paternal and maternal interests within the offspring |
| Mating effort           | Intralocus sexual conflict    | Intralocus                | Brother and sister, father and daughter, mother and son | Within or between             | Sexually antagonistic tug-of-war over a locus |
| Mating effort           | Interlocus sexual conflict    | Interlocus                | Male and female mates | Within                      | Sexually antagonistic coevolution between different loci |
| Mating and parental efforts | Father’s curse dilemma       | Intralocus                | Mother and son, father and daughter | Between                      | A locus exerts antagonistic fitness effects on mating effort in one individual and parental effort in the other |

Note: For the relatedness of individuals, it is assumed that there is no inbreeding or hermaphroditism.

The father’s curse dilemma is an evolutionary conflict between parental effort in females and mating effort in males that arises due to pleiotropy and sexually antagonistic selection on a shared locus (fig. 1). We refer to this conflict as the father’s curse dilemma because it results in a trade-off between mating effort of males that experience greater variance (skew) in reproductive success and parental effort of females that are the primary caregivers during the weaning period (Clutton-Brock 2007; Kokko and Jennions 2008; Aloise King et al. 2013; fig. 1). We emphasize here that although such a conflict between mating and parental efforts has deleterious fitness consequences for both sexes, males have the potential to suffer larger fitness costs due to their greater variance in reproductive success compared to females; given such asymmetry in reproductive success between the sexes, the number of reproducing males is by definition less than the number of reproducing females in a given population. The genomic conflict occurs within a locus pleiotropically linked to both mating and parental efforts, which can impact fitness at different life stages (table 1). Early-life survival of males (during postnatal care) is predicted to be influenced by indirect genetic effects of the mother whereby the mother exerts nongenetic maternal effects associated with parental care on the survival of the offspring. Consequently, juvenile males that have higher-quality parental care and survive the juvenile period are predicted to provide a lower level of parental care (fig. 1). The father’s curse dilemma thus relies on the action of a gene with antagonistic fitness effects to give rise to the evolution-
Figure 1: Antagonistic fitness effect of an allele on parental and maternal efforts between generations. A. An allele that benefits parental effort (PE-beneficial allele) has a corresponding negative effect on mating effort, while an allele that benefits mating effort (ME-beneficial allele) has a corresponding negative fitness effect on parental effort. B. The predicted negative fitness correlation between male mating effort and female parental effort. C. The sexually antagonistic allele through generations, exerting alternating fitness costs on male mating effort and female parental effort.

ary conflict between sexes and ontogenetic stages, with the additional consideration of indirect effects of parental investment (Chippindale et al. 2001; Rice and Chippindale 2001). Such conflicts are expected to be mediated, in particular, by the presence of genetically based hormone signaling systems that exert strong pleiotropic effects on mating and parental efforts due to the central role of hormones in the pre- and postzygotic phases of reproduction (Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Mokkonen et al. 2016).

This article details how fitness trade-offs between mating effort and parental effort that are characteristic of the father’s curse dilemma can lead to evolutionary conflict (fig. 1). We outline theoretical criteria for the father’s curse dilemma; provide evidence for this dilemma primarily from mammalian taxa in the context of the testosterone, arginine vasopressin, and oxytocin hormone systems; and describe predictions as well as evolutionary outcomes that derive from this phenomenon.

Requirements for the Father’s Curse Dilemma

A Sexually Antagonistic Locus with Hormonally Pleiotropic Effects on Mating and Parental Efforts

Through pleiotropy, a genetic locus can exert effects on multiple fitness-relevant traits (Williams 1957; McGuigan et al. 2011). While it is still unclear whether genetic variation associated with mating success is more or less pleiotropic compared to the rest of the genome, we can focus on biological systems with known pleiotropic effects on mating effort: hormone signaling systems (Fitzpatrick 2004; Mank et al. 2008; Cox et al. 2009). Recent evidence indicates that testosterone (T), oxytocin (OXT), and arginine vasopressin (AVP) belong to sexually antagonistic hormone systems (Garver-Apgar et al. 2011; Mills et al. 2012; Gerlach and Ketterson 2013; Peterson et al. 2014; Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Lonn et al. 2017). Hormone systems are influenced through both the fine-tuning action of selection and short- and longer-term responses to environmental stimuli (Wingfield et al. 1990; Ketterson and Nolan 1999; Donaldson and Young 2008; Mills et al. 2009; Hau and Wingfield 2011; Lonn et al. 2017). Hormones mediate fitness-related traits through their effects on behavior and physiology and are often specific in profile to a given sex, life stage, or social context. Steroid hormones such as T promote the growth and development of physiological and physical characteristics that are important for reproduction, especially in males, and are also centrally responsible for mediating reproductive behaviors (Adkins-Regan 2005; Zysling et al. 2006; Cox et al. 2009; John-Alder et al. 2009; Mills et al. 2009; Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Mokkonen et al. 2016). The neuropeptide OXT also exerts pleiotropic effects on reproductive physiology and behaviors that primarily manifest during postnatal interactions between parent and offspring (Donaldson and Young 2008; Lee et al. 2009; McCall and Singer 2012; Hammock 2015; Crespi 2016). The closely related neuropeptide AVP is primarily responsible for mediating prosocial behaviors and aggression, including social aggression, dominance behavior, male bonding, and anxiety (Young et al. 1999; Donaldson and Young 2008; McCall and Singer 2012). These hormones actively shape fitness through their effects on both reproductive traits and social interactions: when phenotypic optima differ between individuals over expression of, or internal receptor-driven responses to, a given hormone, conflict is expected in the hormonally mediated trait and potentially within the genome.
Research in avian and mammalian taxa has shown that T has opposing effects on mating and parental efforts within individuals (Clark and Galef 1999; McGlothlin et al. 2007; Mascaro et al. 2013; Roney and Gettler 2015). The pleiotropic effect of T manifests in primary and secondary sexual traits, including reproductive behaviors (Ketterson and Nolan 1999; Cox et al. 2009; John-Alder et al. 2009; Malo et al. 2009; Mills et al. 2009; Mokkonen et al. 2012; Rosvall et al. 2012). The resulting antagonistic effect of T on mating behavior in females compared to males underlines the direct importance and sex specificity of this hormone on mating effort (Mokkonen et al. 2012). However, given the social-context specificity of T, potential fitness benefits that it confers in mating effort may trade off with other fitness domains, primarily parental effort (Gray et al. 2002; Gray 2003; McGlothlin et al. 2007; Alvergne et al. 2009; Kuzawa et al. 2009; Muller et al. 2009; tables 2, 3). For example, an endocrine response of higher T in parents caring for offspring can result in lower parental attentiveness, greater aggression, and higher probability of deserting the offspring (Cavigelli and Pereira 2000; Mills et al. 2012; Rosvall 2013; Saltzman and Ziegler 2014). To potentially mitigate this cost of T, mammalian fathers in some species downregulate T during the critical period of postnatal care of offspring (Gray et al. 2002; Alvergne et al. 2009; Mascaro et al. 2013; Saltzman and Ziegler 2014). Thus, accounting for trade-offs between mating effort and parental effort will provide important insights into the fitness benefits and costs of sexually antagonistic traits mediated by T.

Uniparental Care of Offspring

Another requirement for the operation of the father’s curse is that an individual belongs to a species in which uniparental care (e.g., maternal care) is the primary form of resource provisioning during the postnatal period. This asynchrony in parental effort is required for the evolutionary conflict between mating and parental efforts to be realized: lower parental effort by males allows them to invest more in mating effort relative to females. Among most taxonomic groups, biparental care is the exception, and males do not experience the fitness constraints and resource demands of parental care (Reynolds et al. 2002; Lukas and Clutton-Brock 2012). A phylogenetic comparison of vertebrate taxa has demonstrated that uniparental care is probably the ancestral mode (Reynolds et al. 2002). Most mammals (as well as other vertebrate taxa) adhere to this form of parental care, and as a result offspring survival is mainly determined by traits that optimize maternal care behaviors, while fathers influence offspring fitness only genetically (fig. 2). Consequently, parental care likely evolves independently in females and males due to sex-specific expression and selection on associated traits (Walling et al. 2008; Bendesky et al. 2017). This presumed uncoupling of parental care behavior in females and males makes it less likely that selection on parental effort can reduce the fitness costs of the father’s curse dilemma through correlated selection on the opposite parental sex; selecting for good-quality paternal care is unlikely to eliminate the fitness costs associated with the father’s curse.

Context Specificity of the Selected Locus Determines Fitness Outcomes

As previously outlined, the father’s curse dilemma is likely to manifest in a fitness trade-off between the parental effort of females and the mating success of males (fig. 1). In practical terms, a female that provides high-quality parental care will produce sons that are relatively less competitive in reproduction. Similarly, a male with high reproductive success will produce daughters that provide a relatively lower quality of parental care. The conflict therefore exists between fathers and daughters, or mothers and sons. However, this observation does not necessarily exclude genomic conflicts between same-sex parent-offspring combinations if a locus can be shown to antagonistically impact parenting effort in one individual and mating effort in a related individual.

While sexual conflicts are usually characterized as evolutionary conflicts between females and males, conflicts between parents and offspring are typically characterized as intergenerational conflicts between immediate relatives. However, in both cases, the locus or loci in conflict exert context-specific effects on fitness that depend on the genome or life stage in which the locus is expressed (e.g., female vs. male genome, juvenile vs. adult life stage, type of social interaction). Sexually antagonistic loci confer fitness benefits on one sex when found in its genome and fitness costs when located in the genome of the opposite sex (Chippindale et al. 2001; Chapman et al. 2003; Arnqvist and Rowe 2005; Bonduriansky and Chenoweth 2009; Cox and Caldebeek 2009). Similarly, imprinted genes exert conflicting effects on fitness in offspring due to the parent-of-origin manner of gene expression (Patten et al. 2013; Haig 2014). A maternally expressed (paternally silenced) locus such as IGF2R within the offspring may thus introduce similar conflictual dynamics whereby the maternal optimum (in this case, suppressed offspring growth in utero) is mismatched with the offspring optimum (greater offspring growth; Haig 2004; Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Saldivar Lemus et al. 2017). Thus, while we focus on sexually antagonistic loci in this article, it is conceivable that any locus that exerts such antagonistic effects could potentially result in father’s curse-like dynamics.

In general, the optimal “social phenotype” for attaining a mate differs from the phenotype for optimal parental care. For example, intramale aggression and dominance behavior (promoted with higher T) may yield a higher probability...
of mating success, while evidence indicates that females (and to a lesser extent males in biparental taxa such as humans) experience greater OXT levels after parturition that facilitate parent-offspring bonding, parental attentiveness, emotional empathy, and physiological effects such as the promotion of lactation (McCall and Singer 2012; Ham-mock 2015; Crespi 2016; tables 2, 3). The affiliative effects of OXT are beneficial for both sexes during this period of parental care; however, such an affiliative effect on male mating behavior—particularly during the competition for mates—is predicted to be costly in terms of lower mating success since greater OXT levels in males are predicted to reduce competi-

| Hormone and study type | Species | Evidence in support of father’s curse | Evidence of sex difference | Citations |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Testosterone:          |         |                                      |                             |           |
| Hormone levels         | Humans  | Lower T in fathers and mothers       | No; T decrease in both sexes | Kuzawa et al. 2009, 2010; Muller et al. 2009; Gettler et al. 2011 |
| Hormone levels         | Humans  | More T variability associated with    | Yes; opposite association between T and parenting in males and females | Endendijk et al. 2016 |
|                        |         | more optimal parenting in fathers,    |                             |           |
|                        |         | less optimal parenting in mothers     |                             |           |
| Hormone levels         | Marmosets | Decreased T in fathers               | NA; males only              | Nunes et al. 2000 |
| Hormone levels         | Marmosets | Exposure to infant scent lowers males’ T | NA; males only              | Prudom et al. 2008 |
|                        | Black redstarts | Short-term, natural peaks in T (induced by GnRH injections) temporarily suppressed paternal behavior (offspring feeding) | NA; males only              | Goymann and Flores Dávila 2017 |
| Oxytocin:              |         |                                      |                             |           |
| Administration         | Marmosets | OXT administration increases food    | NA; males only              | Saito and Nakamura 2011 |
|                        |         | transferring by fathers to offspring |                             |           |
| Hormone levels         | Marmosets | OXT positively associated with infant care | Yes; higher OXT in breeding females | Finkenwirth et al. 2016 |
| Administration         | Marmosets | OXT decreased latency to respond to infant stimuli among males | Yes; OXT decreased latency for males, not females | Taylor and French 2015 |
| Administration         | Meerkats  | Peripheral OXT increased cooperative behavior of adults, including feeding and guarding of pups | NA; did not test for sex difference | Madden and Clutton-Brock 2011 |
| Antagonist             | Prairie voles | Neonatal injection of OXT antagonist reduced alloparental care near weaning | Yes; significant effect in males only | Bales et al. 2004 |
| Hormone levels         | Humans  | Higher-plasma OXT associated with greater parental touch | NA | Feldman et al. 2012 |
| Hormone binding        | Meadow voles | Experienced fathers had greater OXT binding in AON, bed nucleus of the stria terminalis, LS, and lateral amygdala | NA; males only | Parker et al. 2001 |
| Hormone levels         | Humans  | New parents show increases in OXT over 6 months | No; OXT increases in mothers and fathers | Gordon et al. 2010 |
| Hormone levels         | Humans  | High levels of contact with infant associated with OXT increase | No; similar OXT levels and increases in mothers and fathers | Feldman et al. 2010 |
| Administration         | Humans  | OXT increases fathers’ neural response to images of their children | NA; fathers only | Li et al. 2017 |

Note: AON = anterior olfactory nucleus; GnRH = gonadotropin-releasing hormone; LS = lateral septum; NA = not applicable; OXT = oxytocin; T = testosterone.
tive motivation and aggression (Dhakar et al. 2012; Calcagnoli et al. 2015). Thus, the context specificity of hormones can lead to trade-offs between mating effort and parental effort. Most mammalian species meet the criteria for the father’s curse dilemma, given that most of these systems feature overlapping generations, practice uniparental care by the mother (or mainly maternal care), share anciently conserved hormone signaling systems that are associated with sexually antagonistic traits, and involve sophisticated social interactions (Reynolds et al. 2002; Donaldson and Young 2008; Mokkonen and Crespi 2015). Next, we focus on one such species, the bank vole (Myodes glareolus), to illustrate how fitness-related hormones demonstrate the father’s curse dilemma in this species.

### Case Study of the Father’s Curse in Voles

#### Bank Vole System

Bank voles are broadly distributed throughout Europe, primarily inhabiting forests and fields (Hansson 1979; Bujalska and Hansson 2000). The densities of field populations have

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**Table 3:** Evidence for aspects of the father’s curse dilemma from mammalian testosterone and oxytocin hormone systems that show effects on mating effort

| Hormone and study type | Species | Evidence in support of father’s curse | Evidence of sex difference | Citations |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| **Testosterone:** | | | | |
| Hormone levels | Père David’s deer | Higher-plasma T associated with higher dominance and mating | NA; males only | Chunwang et al. 2004 |
| Hormone levels | Bank voles | High-T males show greater social status; exogenous T increases social status, mate searching, reproductive success | NA; males only | Mills et al. 2007, 2009 |
| Hormone levels | Bank voles | Selection for T associated with greater male reproductive success, lower female reproductive success, and vice versa | Yes | Mokkonen et al. 2011, 2012; Mills et al. 2012 |
| Hormone levels | Humans | Positive association between T and mating success | NA; males only | Peters et al. 2008 |
| Hormone levels | Humans | Polyamorous individuals have highest T levels | No; effect in males and females | van Anders et al. 2007 |
| Hormone levels | Baboons | T positively associated with mating effort and parental effort | NA; males only | Onyango et al. 2013 |
| Hormone levels | Rhinoceros | T positively associated with mating effort | NA; males only | Edwards et al. 2015 |
| Administration | House mouse | T administration promotes copulatory behavior | NA; males only | James and Nyby 2002 |
| **Oxytocin:** | | | | |
| Administration | Marmosets | OXT administration delayed sexual solicitation behavior toward a stranger; no effect on sexual behavior toward long-term partner | NA; effect in males and females | Cavanaugh et al. 2014 |
| Administration | Marmosets | OXT administration induced preference for partner over stranger | No; effect in both males and females | Smith et al. 2010 |
| Administration | Rats | OXT administration reduced offensive aggression and increased social exploration toward unfamiliar male, strengthened bond between mates | NA; tested males only | Calcagnoli et al. 2015 |
| Association | Prairie voles | Higher OXT receptor density in the nucleus accumbens associated with greater monogamy | NA; tested males only | Ophir et al. 2012 |
| Administration | Prairie voles | Centrally administered OXT enhanced mating-induced partner preference | No; effect in both males and females | Cho et al. 1999 |
| Antagonist | Prairie voles | OXT antagonist prevents mating-induced partner preference | No; effect in both males and females | Young et al. 2001; Johnson et al. 2016 |

Note: NA = not applicable; OXT = oxytocin; T = testosterone.
Figure 2: Father’s curse dilemma and associated life-history consequences. A, A male mating with low-T (or high-OXT) females will have lower (relative)-fitness sons that are provided more parental care, while a male mating with high-T (or low-OXT) females will have higher-fitness sons that are provided with less optimal parental care. In females (B), the mating dilemma is minimized since males do not generally provide parental care to offspring and provide only genetic benefits to offspring fitness; males will maximize mating effort and minimize parental effort. More competitive males (e.g., high T or low OXT) are predicted to produce daughters that provide less parental care. OXT = oxytocin; T = testosterone.
implications for fitness, as females are territorial and must contend with infanticidal threats during the breeding season (Koskela et al. 1997; Ylönen et al. 1997; Poikonen et al. 2008). The mating system is polygynandrous, whereby males and females mate with multiple individuals (Shuster and Wade 2003; Mills et al. 2007, 2014; Mokkonen et al. 2012). Furthermore, males establish dominance hierarchies in reproductive competition that are mediated by testosterone (Mills et al. 2009; Mokkonen et al. 2011; Lemaître et al. 2012). While females, and not males, provide parental care to offspring, both sexes can increase their reproductive success by acquiring additional mates in a reproductive bout; females are mechanically induced to ovulate more with each additional mating additional mates in a reproductive bout; females are mechanically induced to ovulate more with each additional mate (Clarke et al. 1970; Mokkonen et al. 2012; Mills et al. 2014). Given the propensity of this species to mate with multiple partners, previous work has shown that up to 50% of field litters are sired by multiple males (Mills et al. 2007). However, the prevalence of multiple mating may be even higher, as another recent estimate of lab-based mating trials indicated that approximately 65% of females mated with multiple males, which supports other work that has found an appreciable level of postcopulatory competition in the form of sperm competition in this species (Lemaître et al. 2011, 2012; Mokkonen et al. 2016). These studies indicate that the mating system of bank voles possesses great potential for evolutionary conflicts between mates, parents, and offspring, as well as siblings.

**Testosterone and Oxytocin in Bank Voles**

The father’s curse dilemma is exemplified by two hormones, T and OXT (fig. 2). For the case of T, male bank voles benefit from higher T levels during male-male competition and courtship, while for females, selection for lower T levels results in higher mating rates, which increases their reproductive success (Mills et al. 2009, 2012; Mokkonen et al. 2012). In bank voles, selection for greater male behavioral dominance (in male-male competition) results in (high-T) sisters with reduced litter sizes as well as reduced postnatal maternal care, characterized by lower growth of sons during the period between birth and weaning (Mokkonen et al. 2011; fig. 3). However, as adults, these sons have significantly greater T levels, which is correlated with greater mating and reproductive success and contrasts with reduced reproductive success of sisters (Mokkonen et al. 2011). Thus, for a male, the dilemma is that females that have high-T alleles will provide less effective parental care (characterized by lower postnatal growth; fig. 3), which may result in fewer offspring surviving to adulthood, whereas those high-T alleles being transmitted to offspring will also result in surviving sons having greater future reproductive success.

For the case of OXT, the situation is reversed: females with greater OXT levels are predicted to produce more offspring and provide better care to offspring that results in better survival during the postnatal period of care (Lonn et al. 2017). Males selected for higher OXT are predicted to fare worse in male-male competition and suffer reduced reproductive success due to the action of OXT in promoting affiliative behaviors (Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Crespi 2016; Lonn et al. 2017). Evidence supporting these predictions is found in recent empirical work on the bank vole that has characterized a microsatellite in the promoter region of the oxytocin receptor locus (Oxtr), whereby the number of repeats in the promoter microsatellite directly influences the level of gene expression. These data revealed balancing selection acting on the divergent fitness optima for microsatellite length and thus expression level of the gene (Lonn et al. 2017). In terms of the individuals that survive and reproduce in the field, selection favored females with longer (and males with shorter)
Oxtr allele lengths. Thus, males benefited from lower expression of Oxtr and presumably less activity of OXT, in terms of their survival and reproductive success. Given how OXT mediates parent-offspring bonding and provisioning of resources through lactation, greater OXT production is predicted to result in better-quality parental care (Lee et al. 2009; McCall and Singer 2012). Thus, for a male, the dilemma is that females that have high-OXT alleles will provide better care to offspring that result in greater offspring recruitment but will also result in sons having reduced future reproductive success. For both of these hormones, their positive effect on maternal care (i.e., greater OXT, lower T) is predicted to trade off with their negative effect on the reproductive success of males.

Predictions, Fitness Outcomes, and Conclusions

While this father’s curse dilemma has been outlined for the general case of hormones in mammals and specifically for bank voles, given the widespread prevalence of hormonally mediated sexual conflicts in mammals (Mokkonen and Crespi 2015; Mokkonen et al. 2016), this phenomenon can be generalized to other taxa and traits that experience trade-offs between mating and parental efforts. Essentially, any trait or locus that results in a fitness trade-off between mating and parental effort between related individuals would be subject to the father’s curse dilemma. Natural selection optimizes traits for greater survival, which can constrain adaptation in traits that improve reproductive success. Conversely, sexual selection optimizes traits for greater reproductive success, often at the expense of survival (Kokko and Brooks 2003). Thus, we predict trade-offs between social traits that improve survival and reproductive traits that increase reproductive success through mating or parental effort.

The wealth of research in sexual-conflict theory indicates that sexually antagonistic traits and associated genetic variation should be ubiquitous within the genome and across taxa, though empirical data are still lagging behind the theory (Chapman et al. 2003; Arnvist and Rowe 2005; Bonduriansky and Chenoweth 2009; van Doorm 2009; Pennell and Morrow 2013; Rice 2013; Rowe et al. 2018). Emerging challenges include identifying the genetic loci associated with sexually antagonistic phenotypes and assessing the prevalence of genetic pleiotropy associated with such sexually antagonistic genetic variation. Bioinformatic tools such as gene ontology assays may allow pleiotropy to be more efficiently characterized (Ashburner et al. 2000). Even if the identified sexually antagonistic loci are pleiotropic but do not impact parental effort per se, this information would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the fitness benefits and costs of the evolutionary conflict.

Genetic evidence of the father’s curse is limited; however, focusing on the gene regulatory regions for T, OXT, and AVP hormone receptors may yield further insights into this evolutionary phenomenon. In mammals, the lengths of microsatellite sequences in the 5’ regulatory region upstream of the coding region for these receptor genes correspond to the level of gene expression in a growing number of mammalian taxa (Hammock and Young 2005; Donaldson and Young 2013; Keane et al. 2014; Lonn et al. 2017). Mounting evidence indicates that these receptor genes—AR, Avpr1a, and Oxtr—experience sexually antagonistic selection and mediate mating and parental efforts (Summers and Crespi 2008; Lonn et al. 2017). However, challenges still abound: for example, the prevalence of regulatory region–associated microsatellites for the oxytocin receptor gene remains unresolved, as the Oxtr microsatellite has only recently been characterized (Lonn et al. 2017) and appears to be lacking in other studied mammalian species despite the known relevance of this regulatory region for gene expression (Inoue et al. 1994; Young et al. 1997). Data are also needed that relate hormone receptor microsatellite polymorphisms with the quality of parental care provided by mothers and how the reproductive fitness of male offspring is associated with this relationship (taking into account potential confounding maternal effects). The mediating effects of the hormones T and OXT present an evolutionary dilemma between mating and parental efforts, and we have used these hormone systems here as examples of the father’s curse. While we have focused on these examples of loci in hormonal pleiotropy, it is conceivable that other pleiotropic loci that exhibit sex-differential effects on mating and parental efforts would be candidate genes for participation in a father’s curse dilemma form of conflict. Nonetheless, the evolutionary conflict characterized by the father’s curse dilemma supports the perspective that relationships between kin need to be further incorporated to better understand the nature of evolutionary conflicts (Haig 2014; Mokkonen et al. 2016; Faria et al. 2017).

During reproduction, fitness constraints manifest in sexual conflicts between mates and conflicts between parent and offspring because of the differences in maternal/paternal and maternal/progeny interests, respectively (Parker et al. 2002; Mokkonen et al. 2016; Rowe et al. 2018). An implication of the close relatedness between parent and offspring is the fact that the individuals in conflict share a high proportion of genes (e.g., 50% of autosomes and the x chromosome shared between mothers and sons), which differentiates this type of evolutionary conflict from interlocus sexual conflicts. Any evolutionary modification of a parental trait that negatively impacts the survival of offspring will therefore indirectly harm the fitness of the parent as well. Thus, we predict that the fitness trade-off between male mating effort and female parental effort arising from the father’s curse dilemma will be akin to fitness trade-offs arising in parent-offspring conflicts and (cross-generational) intralocus sexual conflicts, whereby the survival and recruitment of the offspring influ-
enches the parent’s fitness. Nonetheless, in the father’s curse dilemma, while the father exerts a deleterious direct genetic effect on the future parental effort of daughters, the mother exerts two different effects on the fitness of sons: a beneficial indirect genetic effect mediated by maternal investment and a deleterious direct genetic effect on future reproductive success of sons. Thus, a never-ending fitness constraint in reproduction is borne by males.

Acknowledgments

We thank Locke Rowe for organizing this symposium and providing constructive feedback on this work. We also thank two anonymous reviewers and members of the Crawford Lab for Evolutionary Studies for providing helpful feedback on the manuscript. This work was financially supported by the Academy of Finland and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council.

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Symposium Editor: Locke Rowe

“The animal, from which I have made the drawings, is now developing his fourth pair of horns. The second pair of horns were about three inches longer than the first, and the same difference existed between the second and third pair.” From “The Prong-Horn Antelope” by W. J. Hays (The American Naturalist, 1868, 2:131–133).