Scientists have long known that variation in animal color patterns carry far more than cosmetic significance. Darwin first connected pigmentation with adaptive advantage, noting that male finches with bright red plumage enjoyed greater reproductive success than their drab competitors. Explaining why coloration confers such advantages, however, has proved somewhat easier than showing how it arises. Biologists studying how neighboring regions of the vertebrate body plan develop differences in appearance and form have identified a small number of signaling pathways common to all animals. How and whether these pathways also control the developmental expression and variation of surface attributes like hair color, hair density, and hair length are unclear.

By studying an old mouse mutant called droopy ear, Gregory Barsh and colleagues show that a member of the well-known family of T-box genes is required for a key pigmentation pattern in mice.

Many vertebrate species—be they fish, bird, or mammal—have a much lighter belly than back. Studies in mice indicate these dorsoventral pigment differences arise from differential expression of the Agouti gene in the ventral and dorsal regions of the developing mouse; Agouti produces a pale yellow color and thus mice with light bellies have Agouti expressed in their ventral but not dorsal region. Droopy ear was discovered more than 50 years ago by virtue of its effects on head and ear shape, but it also affects pigmentation patterns; mutant mice have expanded ventral-specific Agouti expression into the dorsal region.

First, Sophie Candille, a graduate student in Barsh’s laboratory, searched for the gene that underlies the defect in droopy ear. When the researchers homed in on the chromosomal region known to harbor droopy ear, they found Tbx15—a member of the T-box gene family. T-box genes are found in a wide range of species and play diverse roles during embryonic development.

In the droopy ear mouse, Tbx15 carries a mutation that makes the protein nonfunctional. The researchers made certain that Tbx15 really is the droopy ear gene by deleting most of the gene’s coding region and showing that this “knocked-out” gene produces the typical droopy ear mouse.

The pattern of embryonic Tbx15 expression—determined by observing messenger RNA transcripts in developing tissues of the head, trunk, and limbs—suggests that early expression of Tbx15 in the dorsal flank sets coordinates for dorsoventral differences in hair length and pigmentation. Candille et al. demonstrate that the regional pigment differences characteristic of adults is indeed established soon after embryonic Tbx15 expression. So this boundary in pigmentation is set up very early during development. Interestingly, the early coordinates of the future pigment boundary do not correspond to any other known developmental boundary.

The Tbx15 pigmentation effects seen in these lab mice, the researchers note, resembles coat variations in other mammals, including German shepherds and an endangered mouse whose lighter dorsal markings once gave it an adaptive advantage on the white sand reefs where it lives (sadly, such markings offer no protection against loss of habitat). T-box genes are also found in humans; mutations in Tbx1, Tbx4, Tbx5, and Tbx22 can cause developmental abnormalities of the heart, limbs, or of the head and neck. Mutations of human Tbx15 have not yet been identified, but could contribute to regional differences of pigmentation (in dorsal and ventral surfaces of the limbs, for example) or to development of the head and neck.

The identification of Tbx15 adds a new player to the genes that help pattern the developing embryo—attention now turns to the controls that regulate Tbx15 and the Tbx15 targets, which set up the pattern.

Candille SI, Van Raamsdonk CD, Chen C, Kuiper S, Chen-Tsai Y, et al. (2004) Dorsoventral patterning of the mouse coat by Tbx15. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.00020003

You might say that caspases are obsessed with death. The primary agents of programmed cell death, or apoptosis, caspases kill cells by destroying proteins that sustain cellular processes. Apoptosis, a highly controlled sequence of events that eliminates dangerous or unnecessary cells, contributes to a wide variety of developmental and physiological processes—in a developing embryo, apoptosis creates the space between fingers and adjusts nerve cell populations to match the number of cells they target; in an adult, apoptosis counters cell proliferation to maintain tissue size and density. Now it appears that caspases may also play a role in creating life. As Bruce Hay, Jun Huh, and colleagues report, multiple caspases and caspase regulators are required for the proper formation of free-swimming sperm in the fruitfly Drosophila.

Caspases, which typically exist in a quiescent state in nearly all cells, are regulated through a complex network of activators and inhibitors. Once activated, a “caspase cascade” ultimately cleaves and irreversibly alters the function of essential cellular proteins, leading to apoptosis. A few of the dozen-plus known caspases appear to contribute to inflammation responses, but the vast majority are enlisted to...
Centrosome-independent spindle assembly

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assembly and sorting of microtubules of noncentrosomal origin in cells that contain centrosomes. The task of flagging such microtubules is complicated by the fact that centrosomes become quite active microtubule organizers once cell division begins. Thus, as soon as the membrane around the nucleus breaks down, microtubules from the centrosome invade the nuclear region, making it hard to identify any noncentrosomal microtubules that might appear. To get around this problem, Elena Rebollo in the Gonzalez lab set up two experimental conditions under which centrosomes remain functional but are kept affixed to the cell membrane—and, therefore, away from the nucleus—in Drosophila spermatocytes. One takes advantage of a genetic mutation (called asp, for abnormal spindle); the other uses a transient treatment with a drug (called colcemid) that depolymerizes microtubules.

In these modified cells, microtubules can be seen growing not only over the membrane-bound centrosomes, as expected, but also over the nuclear region, away from the centrosomes. Nucleation, or formation, of such noncentrosomal microtubules has a relatively late onset, starting only once chromosomes are condensed, and takes place on the inner side of the remnants of the nuclear envelope. In a fraction of cells, these microtubules are sorted into bipolar spindle-shaped structures, highly reminiscent of the anastral spindles found in oocytes. Chromosome segregation—a critical stage of cell division—and cell division itself tend to be aberrant in these cells.

These results, Rebollo et al. propose, strongly suggest that microtubules of noncentrosomal origin may significantly contribute to spindle assembly even in cells that contain active centrosomes. Moreover, by facilitating the nucleation of such noncentrosomal microtubules, the degraded nuclear envelope may play a previously unsuspected role in spindle assembly in Drosophila spermatocytes. It is unlikely, the researchers also conclude, that the anastral spindles they have observed can fill in as a backup to ensure successful cell division. More likely, they argue, both centrosomal and noncentrosomal microtubules are required for proper spindle assembly and robust cell division in cells with centrosomes. As the authors point out, Drosophila is a rich model system that should help scientists further investigate the intricacies of spindle assembly. The answers will help us understand how the cell executes one of its most important duties: safeguarding genomic stability for future generations.

Rebollo E, Llamazares S, Reina J, Gonzalez C (2004) Contribution of noncentrosomal microtubules to spindle assembly in Drosophila spermatocytes. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020008

Mechanism Suggests How HIV Protein Disrupts Immune Cell Migration

One of the cornerstones of immune system function is movement. When word spreads that a virus has entered the body, chemical signals tell lymphocytes to proliferate and travel to the site of infection. Efforts to combat HIV have focused on understanding how the virus disrupts this immune response in the hopes of developing drugs to block its replication as well as vaccines to control the virus itself. Toward this end, scientists are investigating how each of the virus’s nine genes—which all appear to have multiple functions—contribute to HIV infection.

When HIV infects a cell, viral enzymes copy its RNA genes into DNA, which can then invade the infected cell’s chromosomes. The viral DNA might lay dormant or it might use the cell to reproduce more viruses, which go on to infect other cells. The course of infection is determined by interactions between circulating T cells and antigen-presenting cells (cells that present evidence of infection), like macrophages, which may unwittingly aid the virus by transferring it to the T cells. Macrophages, for example, produce proteins that tell T cells to come check out an infection. A viral protein called Nef sparked intensive research after observations that patients with a rare strain of HIV lacking Nef took a very long time to develop AIDS symptoms. Nef has been linked to molecules involved in macrophage- and other antigen-signaling pathways and may use the molecules to appropriate these pathways for its own ends—enhancing virulence by facilitating viral replication. How Nef does this is not entirely clear. Now Jacek Skowronski and his colleagues at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York have identified the key molecules that Nef enlists to co-opt the signaling machinery of immune cells.

To understand how this might happen, biochemically speaking, Skowronski’s lab first needed to determine which molecules Nef associates with. An adaptor protein, Nef does not directly catalyze reactions, but binds to enzymes that do. The researchers identified two proteins, DOCK2 and ELMO1, that form a complex with Nef. DOCK2 regulates enzymes, called Rac1 and Rac2, that are required for normal lymphocyte migration and antigen-specific responses. ELMO1 has also been shown to help DOCK2 activate Rac. Because DOCK2 activates Rac as part of two different signaling pathways—one activated by the T cell receptor, which mediates T cell activation, and one by a chemokine receptor, which controls T cell migration—the researchers investigated whether Nef could affect these important pathways by modulating Rac activity. They found that Nef in fact activates Rac by binding to the DOCK2-ELMO1 complex. And they went on to...
Protein Essential for Malarial Parasite to Reach and Infect Liver Cells

Plasmodium, the microscopic parasite that causes malaria, passes through two hosts, two reproductive modes, four habitats, and over half-a-dozen distinct developmental stages in one lifecycle. When a Plasmodium-infected mosquito bites a human, it injects the parasite—sequestered in the mosquito’s salivary glands in its sporozoite stage—into the victim’s bloodstream. Within hours, the sporozoites invade the liver—a critical stage for establishing infection—and spend the next few weeks asexually dividing inside liver cells, eventually releasing thousands of merozoites into the bloodstream. Merozoites quickly invade red blood cells and begin a second round of asexual proliferation. The infected cells rupture and die, releasing more parasites and toxins. The toxins cause malaria’s characteristic fever and chills, and the liberated merozoites initiate another cycle of red blood cell attacks.

show that HIV uses these components of the chemokine receptor pathway to disrupt T cell migration. To generate an effective immune response, it is crucial that T cells travel to sites within lymphatic tissues where they interact with other lymphocytes. By inhibiting T cell migration, the researchers propose, Nef prevents these critical interactions, thereby providing a mechanism for stifling the immune response.

These results, the authors argue, provide the biochemical evidence that Nef targets a protein “switch” that can interfere with important aspects of T cell function. In this way, Nef subverts the immune response pathways controlled by receptors on the surface of T cells to effectively disarm the immune system and turn T cells into viral replication factories. Understanding how Nef interacts with these proteins to spread infection could lay the foundation for valuable new therapies aimed at inhibiting and arresting HIV infection by blocking Nef-mediated effects.

Janardhan A, Swigut T, Hill B, Myers MP, Skowrons, JI (2004) HIV-1 Nef binds the DOCK2-ELMO1 complex to Activate Rac and inhibit lymphocyte chemotaxis. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020006

An unresolved question has been how the circulating sporozoites reach the liver cells in the first place, since liver cells are separated from the bloodstream by a layer of endothelial and Kupffer cells, which form the walls of the liver capillaries. (Kupffer cells project into the bloodstream and remove contaminants.) Having identified a protein required for sporozoite migration through the capillary lining, Tomoko Ishino, Masao Yuda, and their colleagues at Mie University School of Medicine in Japan may have found an answer.

Only four of the roughly 150 vertebrate-infecting Plasmodium species affect humans. P. falciparum, the most pathogenic of the human-infecting species, is closely related to avian and rodent species. One rodent species,—P. berghei—shares fundamental aspects of structure, physiology, and lifecycle with P. falciparum and so serves as a model for the human parasites. Since sporozoites must infect mosquito salivary glands before they can infect the mammalian liver, Yuda’s team searched for sporozoite genes that are predicted to encode secretory or membrane proteins and are expressed only in mosquito salivary glands. Their search revealed a coding region conserved in several species of Plasmodium.

Tracing the gene’s activity through the parasite’s life cycle, Yuda’s team confirmed that it was expressed only in sporozoites in the mosquito salivary gland—not in the mosquito midgut, where sporozoites are produced after mosquitoes feed on the blood of an infected person. The corresponding protein was localized to micronemes, specialized secretory organelles found at the front end of malaria parasites. Because micronemes are known to play a central role in Plasmodium motility and invasion, the researchers predicted this protein would also be important in migrating to or invading liver cells. They named the protein SPECT, for sporozoite microneme protein essential for cell traversal.

Yuda’s team tested SPECT’s function by generating spect-disrupted mutants and observing how the altered parasites affected their hosts. Spect disruption did not affect parasite proliferation in rat red blood cells or interfere with parasite development in the mosquito midgut or salivary glands, but it did have an effect on the parasite’s ability to infect the liver. Rats injected with spect-disrupted parasites had significantly lower levels of liver infection than rats injected with nonmutant parasites. Since it was unclear whether the spect-disrupted mutants lost their infectivity or simply could not pass through the cell layer, the researchers inoculated human liver cells with the mutants and found that they infected the cells normally.

Yuda’s team also tested SPECT’s impact on sporozoite cell-passage ability; if the mutants couldn’t reach the liver cells, they couldn’t infect them. Spect-disrupted parasites completely lost their ability to pass through cells. Since traversal of the cellular barrier between liver cells and the circulatory system is a crucial step in malarial infection, the authors conclude, SPECT and other proteins involved in shuttling sporozoites into liver cells could be effective targets for malaria treatment and prevention.

Ishino T, Yano K, Chinzei Y, Yuda M (2004) Cell-passage activity is required for the malarial parasite to cross the liver sinusoidal cell layer. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020004
A Truly Broad View of Gene Expression Spotlights Evolution and Diversity

Bioinformatics and microarrays have given scientists powerful new tools to investigate the structure and activity of genes on a global scale. Rather than studying just a few genes, scientists can analyze tens of thousands within and across species. Microarrays flag which genes are expressed under particular cellular conditions in an organism, while genome sequencing offers clues to gene function and regulation. By comparing the genomic properties of different species, scientists can spot patterns that help them identify functional and regulatory elements, learn about genome structure and organization, and gain a better understanding of the evolutionary forces that shape life on Earth.

The potential of these technologies to reveal insights into the fundamental structure and function of biological systems continues to grow along with the wealth of gene sequence and expression data—but the ability to interpret and merge these datasets lags behind the ability to collect them. In an effort to overcome these limitations, Sven Bergmann, Jan Ihmels, and Naama Barkai developed a comparative model that integrates gene expression data with genomic sequence information.

Because functionally related genes are expected to be coexpressed in different organisms and because the sequence of some of these functionally related genes may also be conserved between organisms, Bergmann and colleagues hypothesized that “conserved coexpression” could serve as an indicator of gene function on a genomic level. (Conserved genes are those that have changed little since they first evolved. Conserved coexpression describes functionally related genes that are activated together in different species.) But first they had to determine whether coexpression was conserved among species. Analyzing the gene expression profiles of six distantly related organisms—bacteria, yeast, plant, worm, fruitfly, and human—the researchers found that functionally related genes were indeed coexpressed in each species. The most strongly conserved sets of coexpressed genes are associated with core cellular processes or organelles. These results indicate that conserved coexpression can improve the interpretation of genome sequence data by providing another functional indicator for homologous sequences.

Since functionally related genes are expressed together in different organisms, it would be reasonable to think their regulatory networks are also conserved. To explore this idea, the researchers grouped coexpressed genes and their regulatory elements into “transcription modules” for each organism. They found significant variation in the number, organization, and relative importance of these modular components. Which components contributed most to an organism’s global transcription program, for example, depended on the organism. But they also found that the transcription networks are highly clustered—meaning that genes connected to a specific gene are also connected to each other. This finding indicates that gene expression programs, regardless of their size or individual components, are highly modular. Each transcriptome contains modules that have been conserved over time along with “add-on” modules that reflect the needs of a particular species. This modularity supports the notion that variation between and among species arises from the diversity of gene expression programs.

Although the regulatory details of individual gene groups varied, the researchers found common ground in the overall landscape of the expression data. The transcription programs exhibit properties typical of dynamically evolving “real-world” networks that are designed to perform in uncertain environments and to maintain connections between elements independent of scale. These properties were originally identified in studies of social networks and the World Wide Web, but they aptly describe the real-world challenges of the cell. Studies of dynamically evolving networks show that nodes (i.e., genes and proteins) added at an early stage (much like highly conserved genes) are more likely to develop many connections, acting as a hub. Following these organizational principles, transcription networks would have a relatively small number of highly connected “hub genes”—though a much higher number than one would expect in a random network. And that is what the authors observed: the networks they constructed from the expression data had the expected number of highly connected hub genes, which tend to be essential and conserved among organisms. Since these highly connected genes are likely to have homologues in other organisms, they can serve as powerful and efficient tools for assigning function to the thousands of uncharacterized sequences found in sequence databases. This model presents a framework to explore the underlying properties that govern the design and function of the cell and provides important clues—in the form of conserved transcription modules—to the evolutionary building blocks that generate diversity.

Bergmann S, Ihmels J, Barkai N (2003) Similarities and differences in genome-wide expression data of six organisms. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020009

Researchers Add to Proteomics Toolbox

Genes use a simple language—written in the molecules of DNA—to build thousands of proteins in a dizzying variety of sizes and shapes. With only four different nucleotide building blocks, DNA codes for the 20 different amino acids (each with their own structures and properties) that provide the foundation for the enormous diversity of protein form and function. This diversity makes the systematic study of all the proteins of a given organism (called proteomics), a challenging enterprise.

Interactions between proteins underlie nearly every fundamental process within the cell. They can form higher-order multiprotein complexes like those involved in transcription and replication, help transport proteins to their proper location in
of the single strand, preparing it to copy the homologous template by “repair DNA synthesis,” which patches up the lesion.

To investigate how RPA functions in double-strand break repair in a living organism, Wang and Haber created cells with a double-strand break at a specific site and monitored the activity of proteins recruited to repair the damage. With this approach, the researchers could observe these interactions in living yeast to determine what role RPA plays in repairing DNA damage and how it works with the Rad51 protein. The authors show that as soon as a double-strand break occurs, the RPA protein binds to the exposed strand ends, before the Rad51 protein does. This is not unexpected, because this binding order supports the model that RPA prepares the way for Rad51, perhaps by stabilizing the strand long enough for Rad51 filaments to establish themselves. The surprise was that RPA appears to be necessary even after Rad51 binds to the DNA strand, perhaps by stabilizing the

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interaction with homologous DNA sequences. That RPA is required for successful repair is supported by evidence that a particular mutated form of RPA can stimulate Rad51 DNA binding normally, but inhibits strand exchange and template copying, thus preventing repair of DNA damage. Wang and Haber’s work highlights the complex repertoire of DNA–protein and protein–protein interactions that manage and manipulate the genome in the service of genomic stability. The study of DNA repair mechanisms in living cells—a daunting task—promises to lend valuable insights into the truly dynamic nature of maintaining genome stability. Wang X, Haber JE (2004) Role of *Saccharomyces* single-stranded DNA-binding protein RPA in the strand invasion step of double-strand break repair. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020021

**Structure and Implications of JAMM, a Novel Metalloprotease**

Proteins may be the workhorse of the cell, but when a cell can synthesize one protein in a matter of minutes, chances are some will become obsolete. Though many proteins put in years of productive service, others quickly outlive their usefulness and can even damage the cell. Proteins that help form bone and muscle, for example, function for years while regulators of mitosis and cell proliferation might finish their jobs in seconds. Such short-timers are soon tagged as superfluous by a chain of small proteins called ubiquitin, which marks the proteins for degradation in an enzyme called the proteasome. Once in the proteasome, these proteins are broken down and can then be recycled for more productive ventures.

The proteasome Rpn11 subunit contains a key region called the JAMM motif, which Deshaies’ lab has shown previously is required for the proteasome to remove ubiquitin tags. For the work discussed in this paper, the researchers set out to understand how the proteasome strips off ubiquitin tags from proteins about to be destroyed by determining the three-dimensional structure of the JAMM motif.

The researchers tested many genes to look for a JAMM-containing protein that would crystallize properly and found one in the heat-loving prokaryote *Archaeoglobus fulgidus*. After determining the structure of the JAMM protein (called AfJAMM), the researchers discovered that AfJAMM looks nothing like the well-known deubiquitinating enzymes. But the arrangement of a set of amino acids that binds a zinc ion and forms the proposed active site of AfJAMM does resemble that found in a well-known protein-degrading metalloprotease called thermolysin, even though in other respects AfJAMM and thermolysin have very different features. The researchers mutated amino acid residues in another JAMM protein called Csn5 (they expected these residues to be critical for isopeptidase activity as well, based on comparisons of the AfJAMM and thermolysin structures) and found that the residues are indeed important for Csn5 function. These results suggest that JAMM does indeed represent a novel family of metalloproteases.

As for the wider function of JAMM proteins, the researchers speculate that these proteins are likely to be involved in a variety of important regulatory systems since they appear in life forms that lack ubiquitin and ubiquitin-like proteins. The crystal structure reported in this paper will provide a valuable tool for investigations into the underlying structural and functional mechanisms of these enzymes. And it may have important therapeutic implications. Proteasome inhibitors are promising anticancer therapies—fighting cancer by blocking machinery required by rapidly dividing cells. In the hopes of developing more targeted therapies, scientists are trying to fine-tune their control of the ubiquitin system and the proteasome. Inhibiting the JAMM domain of enzymes like Csn5, which remove ubiquitin-like tags from proteins upstream of the proteasome, for example, might just do the trick.

Ambroggio XI, Rees DC, Deshaies RJ (2003) JAMM: A metalloprotease-like zinc site in the proteasome and signalosome. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020002
Evolution of Primate Sense of Smell and Full Trichromatic Color Vision

Conventional wisdom says that people deficient in one sense—such as vision or hearing—often acquire heightened acuity in another. And some studies support this notion by showing that areas of the brain known to control vision can respond to other forms of sensory stimuli in persons without sight. These adjustments, of course, take place over the lifetime of an individual. Now it appears that similar adjustments may occur over evolutionary time. Investigating the deterioration of olfactory receptor (OR) genes in primates, Yoav Gilad and his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany and the Weizmann Institute in Israel found a correlation between the loss of OR genes and the acquisition of full trichromatic color vision.

OR genes—the molecular basis for the sense of smell—form the largest gene superfamily in mammalian genomes. But a high percentage of these genes are “pseudogenes,” DNA sequences that are remnants of genes that are no longer functional. Following an evolutionary “use-it-or-lose-it” rule, pseudogenes tend to evolve in larger gene families where there’s no selective advantage in having, say, 100 versus 120 genes. While humans, nonhuman primates, and mice have roughly the same number of OR genes, in humans a much higher percentage of these are pseudogenes, at 60%, while nonhuman apes have about 30%, and the mouse has about 20%. Reliance on the sense of smell, it appears, decreases for animals that develop a dependence on other senses, such as hearing or sight, to survive. In characterizing this high proportion of pseudogenes, Yoav Gilad et al. asked: Is this characteristic of all primates? If not, at what point in primate evolution did the increase occur?

Looking at 19 primate species—including one human, four apes, six Old World monkeys, seven New World monkeys, and one prosimian—Gilad et al. randomly sequenced 100 distinct OR genes from each of the species. The team found that Old World monkeys had roughly the same percentage of OR pseudogenes as nonhuman apes, but a much higher percentage than New World monkeys—except for one, the howler monkey. The percentage of OR pseudogenes in the howler monkey was much closer to that seen in the Old World monkeys and apes than in its New World cousins. The sense of smell, it appears, deteriorated both in the ape and Old World monkey lineage and in the howler monkey lineage. Since Old World monkeys, apes, and the howler monkey do not share an exclusive common ancestor, this deterioration must have evolved independently in both groups. Surprisingly, howler monkeys share another sensory feature with apes and Old World monkeys: trichromatic color vision.

In trichromatic color vision, three retinal protein pigments, called opsins, absorb various wavelengths of light, which the brain processes to produce full-color images. Apes and Old World monkeys carry three opsin genes, and most New World monkeys carry only two, though females can sometimes have three. Only howler monkeys routinely have three genes occurring in both sexes. Thus, full trichromatic vision evolved twice in primates—once in the common ancestor of apes and Old World monkeys, about 23 million years ago, and once in the howler monkey lineage, about 7–16 million years ago. The evolution of color vision, the authors propose, coincided with a growing complement of OR pseudogenes and a deterioration of the sense of smell. Gilad et al. suggest that investigating the types of visual cues required for finding food may shed light on the nature of this connection.

Gilad Y, Wiebe V, Przeworski M, Lancet D, Pääbo S (2004) Loss of olfactory receptor genes coincides with the acquisition of full trichromatic vision in primates. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020005

Brain Activity during Slow-Wave Sleep Points to Mechanism for Memory

How does your brain pass the time while you’re sleeping? If you’ve ever wrestled the demons of insomnia, you know what sleepless nights can do to your mental agility. Sleep cycles in mammals are characterized by two distinct, successive sleep stages: slow wave and rapid eye movement (REM). Both stages of sleep have uniquely associated electrical activity in the brain, which neuroscientists can measure by placing electrodes on the brain during sleeping and waking states. What neuroscientists can’t easily measure is the purpose of these two sequential sleep stages.

The notion that sleep helps to improve memory was introduced over 80 years ago. Since then, several studies have demonstrated that sleep deprivation following the acquisition of a new memory strongly impairs its consolidation. Insight into the mechanisms underlying this effect came from the observation that neuronal activity patterns detected during waking reappear during ensuing sleep, suggesting that newly acquired “memory traces” may be replayed in the brain to solidify neural connections and thus “consolidate” memory. These reverberating patterns of activity have been observed in both mammals and birds, pointing to a very general biological phenomenon.

Still, the relationship between brain reverberation and memory consolidation
remains unclear for a number of reasons. First, studies to date have observed only subtle, short-lived reverberations lasting less than an hour and can't explain the memory-disrupting effects of sleep deprivation applied several hours and even days after initial memory encoding. And since brain reverberation in mammals has only been investigated in the hippocampus and cerebral cortex, it is unclear whether the phenomenon is specific to this neural circuit or is a more general property of the brain. Furthermore, reverberation studies have so far relied on neural activity measured in animals that were highly trained on specific laboratory tasks and therefore may simply not be representative of the acquisition of new memories. Finally, experience-dependent neural reverberation has been detected in both phases of sleep as well as waking, but no quantitative comparison of the different contributions of each state has been established.

In a study designed to address these concerns, Sidarta Ribeiro and his colleagues at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, recorded over a hundred neurons continuously over the course of the normal sleep–wake cycle in rats, focusing on four major forebrain areas that are essential for rodent-specific behaviors. Halfway through the recording time, animals were transiently allowed to explore four strictly novel objects, each of them designed to provide different spatial and sensory cues. The researchers found that in all the forebrain areas examined the neuronal firing patterns recorded when the rats initially explored the new objects reverberated for up to 48 hours after these objects were removed. The reverberation of neuronal activity sampled when rats explored familiar environs was insignificant. Reverberation was most significant during slow-wave sleep (a state that accounts for nearly 40% of a rat's life), decreased during waking periods, and was highly variable during REM sleep.

In this study, Ribeiro et al. demonstrate that long-lasting neuronal reverberation following novel waking experiences can occur in several forebrain sites and is strongly enhanced during slow-wave sleep. Because neuronal reverberations are sustained for long periods, this may provide a mechanism to recall and amplify memories until they are effectively stored. On the basis of differences observed between REM and slow-wave sleep in this and previous studies, the authors propose that the two phases of sleep play separate and complementary roles in memory consolidation. Thus, the two stages of sleep give the brain a chance to process the novel events of the day in peace.

Ribeiro R, Gervasoni D, Soares ES, Zhou Y, Lin S-C, et al. (2004) Long-lasting novelty-induced neuronal reverberation during slow-wave sleep in multiple forebrain areas. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020024