TCR ITAM multiplicity is required for the generation of follicular helper T-cells

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The T-cell antigen receptor (TCR) complex contains 10 copies of a di-tyrosine Immunoreceptor-Tyrosine-based-Activation-Motif (ITAM) that initiates TCR signalling by recruiting protein tyrosine kinases. ITAM multiplicity amplifies TCR signals, but the importance of this capability for T-cell responses remains undefined. Most TCR ITAMs (6 of 10) are contributed by the CD3ζ subunits. We generated 'knock-in' mice that express non-signalling CD3ζ chains in lieu of wild-type CD3ζ. Here we demonstrate that ITAM multiplicity is important for the development of innate-like T-cells and follicular helper T-cells, events that are known to require strong/sustained TCR-ligand interactions, but is not essential for ‘general’ T-cell responses including proliferation and cytokine production or for the generation of a diverse antigen-reactive TCR repertoire.

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The T-cell antigen receptor (TCR) performs several essential cellular functions in T lymphocytes including conferring antigen recognition, initiation of activating signalling cascades in response to ligand binding, and regulation of key developmental steps required for intrathymic T-cell maturation. Subunits of the TCR complex can be classified into two distinct functional groups: ligand binding or signal transduction. The TCRs expressed by the majority of T lymphocytes contain clonotypic heterodimers composed of TCRγ and TCRβ chain proteins that are generated by V(D)J recombination of germline gene segments during early stages of T-cell development in the thymus. TCRγ/β dimers confer ligand-binding specificity and associate non-covalently with dimers composed of the invariant signal transducing subunits: CD3γ, CD3δ, CD3ε and CD3ζ. Although the exact subunit composition of mature γβ TCR complexes has not been unequivocally established, current data support an octameric structure with the following stoichiometry: TCRγβ, CD3γε, CD3δε and CD3ζζγδ.

Each of the invariant TCR subunits (CD3γ, CD3δ, CD3ε and CD3ζ) contains one or more copies of a semi-conserved sequence, the Immunoreceptor Tyrosine-based Activation Motif (ITAM), within their cytoplasmic domains that are composed of two YxxL/I/I cassettes (Y = tyrosine, L = leucine, I = isoleucine, x = any amino acid) separated by 6–8 amino acids. ITAMs operate at the apex of the TCR signalling cascade and iTAM tyrosine phosphorylation is the earliest detectable signalling event that occurs following TCR cross-linking or ligand binding. TCR engagement by peptide-MHC (pMHC) complexes results in membrane-dissociation of ITAMs and rapid phosphorylation of ITAM tyrosine residues by Src family protein tyrosine kinases. Recruitment and activation of the dual SH2 domain protein tyrosine kinase ZAP-70 to tyrosine phosphorylated ITAMs promotes ZAP-70-mediated phosphorylation of the cytosolic adapters LAT and SLP-76, leading to the recruitment and activation of multiple effectors including Sos, PLCγ and Vav1 that trigger Ras activation, calcium mobilization and cytoskeletal reorganization in T-cells, events that are essential for T-cell effector functions.

Although some TCR subunits contain additional conserved functional motifs, ITAMs are the predominant signal transducing sequences within the TCR complex.

A longstanding and still unresolved question is why the TCR complex contains multiple signal transducing subunits and multiple ITAMs. CD3γ, CD3δ and CD3c each contain one ITAM, whereas CD3ζ contains three ITAMs, yielding a total of 10 ITAMs within a single octameric TCR complex. Mutagenesis experiments in which individual ITAMs within the CD3 signalling subunits were inactivated have shown that no single ITAM is essential for either T-cell maturation or T-cell activation indicating that TCR ITAMs are at least partially functionally redundant.

Several groups have independently examined the importance of ITAM multiplicity for TCR-mediated signalling by generating mouse models where transgene or retrovirus encoded ITAM-mutant CD3ζ chains were expressed in CD3ζζζζ mice. Data from each study documented a requirement for CD3ζ ITAMs in regulating the set-point for both positive and negative thymocyte selection. However, the impact of reducing the TCR signalling potential on mature T-cell responses was not examined extensively, and the results obtained were inconsistent, likely reflecting differences in the experimental mouse models.

To address outstanding and unresolved questions concerning the role and importance of ITAM multiplicity for TCR-mediated signalling, we analysed two lines of ‘knock-in’ mice generated by gene targeting in embryonic stem cells: 6Y/6Y, which encodes a ‘wild-type’ CD3ζ chain, and 6F/6F, which encodes a CD3ζ protein where each of the 6 ITAM Y residues was mutated to Phenylalanine (F), rendering these ITAMs non-functional for signal transduction (Fig. 1a). Both ‘knock-in’ alleles were placed under the control of endogenous CD3ζ regulatory sequences so that expression of the 6Y and 6F CD3ζ proteins mimics that of endogenous CD3ζ, both developmentally and quantitatively.

In the current study, we used the 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mouse models to investigate the importance of CD3ζ ITAMs, and by extension, TCR ITAM multiplicity, for T-maturation and T-cell effector functions. Unexpectedly, we found that attenuation of the TCR signalling potential has an apparently negligible impact on generation of a broad antigen-reactive TCR repertoire or on ‘general’ T-cell responses such as proliferation and cytokine production. However, the maturation of innate-like T-cells (γδ T-cells and INKT T-cells) as well as the generation of T follicular helper (TFH) cells, events that are known to depend on TCR interactions that result in long dwell times and high signal intensity, were markedly impaired in 6F/6F mice. These results reveal that a key function of ITAM multiplicity is to facilitate developmental and functional responses that are dependent on strong or sustained TCR/ligand interactions.

Results

TCR ITAM reduction results in altered TCR-Vγ chain usage. The predicted subunit composition of γβ TCRs expressed in homozygous germline 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F ‘knock-in’ mice is depicted in Fig. 1a. Since the mature TCR complex (TCRγβ/CD3γε/CD3δε/CD3ζζ) contains a total of 10 ITAM signalling motifs (6 contributed by the CD3ζζ homodimer and 4 contributed by the CD3γε and CD3δε dimers) the signalling potential of the TCR is theoretically reduced by 60% (6/10 ITAMs) in 6F/6F mice relative to ‘wild-type’ 6Y/6Y mice.

As demonstrated previously, T-cell development is only mildly impaired in 6F/6F mice; the main defect being a reduction in the number of mature CD4+ CD8− (CD4-single positive (CD4-SP)) and CD4− CD8+ (CD8-SP) thymocytes and peripheral CD4-SP and CD8-SP T-cells relative to 6Y/6Y control mice. Based on our previous findings, we suspected that reduction of the TCR signalling potential might alter the repertoire of TCRs that successfully navigate the selection process in the thymus. Indeed, positive selection of 6F/6F thymocytes expressing a transgenic MHC Class I (MHC I)-restricted (H-Y) or an MHC Class II (MHC II)-restricted (AND) γβ TCR transgene was almost completely blocked at the immature CD4+ CD8− (double positive (DP)) stage (Fig. 1b,c). Moreover, CD8-SP thymocytes and T-cells in H-Y; 6F/6F mice and CD4-SP T-cells in AND; 6F/6F mice were almost exclusively T3.70−Va11−, respectively, indicating that their maturation required the expression of endogenously encoded TCRζ chain(s) (Supplementary Fig. 1). We detected no significant difference in TCR-Vβ chain usage by polyclonal CD4-SP or CD8-SP thymocytes or naïve (CD44+ CD62L−) CD4-SP or CD8-SP T-cells in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice (Fig. 1d). However, TCR-Vγ usage was significantly different in mature (CD44+ CD4-SP and CD8-SP thymocytes and naïve (CD44+) CD4-SP and CD8-SP peripheral T-cells from 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice (Fig. 1e and Supplementary Fig. 2a). Moreover, when TCRβ expression was fixed by introduction of a Vβ3 transgene, the frequency of Vβ3 pairing with its preferred Vγ partners (Vγ11 for CD4-SP and Vγ8 for CD8-SP thymocytes and T-cells) was significantly different in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice (Supplementary Fig. 2b).

To investigate the TCR-Vβ chain repertoire in greater detail, we performed next generation deep sequencing of rearranged TCRβ chain genes in purified naïve CD4-SP T-cells from 6Y/6Y, 6F/6F and C57BL/6 (B6) mice. CD3R length distributions of productive TCRβ rearrangements (Fig. 1f) and CD3R sequence
diversity (Supplementary Fig. 2c) was similar in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F samples. In addition, linear regression analysis demonstrated that the extent of CDR3 sequence identity between 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F CD4-SP T-cells was similar to that between 6Y/6Y and B6 CD4-SP T-cells (Supplementary Fig. 2c). Taken together, these results indicate that attenuation of TCR signalling potential does not prevent thymocyte positive selection and does not alter TCR-Vβ usage but instead results in skewing of the TCR.

**Figure 1 | T-cell development in 6F/6F mice.** (a) Schematic of γβ TCR complexes expressed in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice. Left, TCR complex expressed on γβ T-cells in 6Y/6Y mice containing a total of 10 ITAMs contributed by CD3γ(1) CD3δ(1) CD3ε(2) and CD3ζζ(6). Right, TCR complex expressed on γβ T-cells in 6F/6F mice containing a total of four ITAMs contributed by CD3γ(1) CD3δ(1) CD3ε(2). In 6F/6F mice, the three ITAMs within each TCRz chain were inactivated by substitution of both Tyrosine (Y) residues within each ITAM with Phenylalanine (F) residues. (b) Upper panels, representative CD4 versus CD8 staining profiles of thymocytes from H-Y TCR transgenic female 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. Lower panels, number of CD4+CD8+ and CD4−CD8+ (CD8−) thymocytes in H-Y TCR transgenic female 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. N = 13 mice of each genotype. (c) Upper panels, representative CD4 versus CD8 staining profiles of thymocytes from AND TCR transgenic 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. Lower panels, number of CD4+CD8+ and CD4−CD8+ (CD8−) thymocytes in AND TCR transgenic 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. N = 10 mice of each genotype. (d) Vβ surface staining of naïve (CD44lo CD25−) CD3hi CD4-SP splenocytes (top) or naïve (CD44lo) CD3hi CD8-SP splenocytes (bottom). Data are from 10 gender-matched 8-week-old mice of each genotype. (e) Vα surface staining of naïve (CD44lo CD25−) CD3hi CD4-SP splenocytes (left) or naïve (CD44lo) CD3hi CD8-SP splenocytes (right) from 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice. Data are from 10 gender-matched 8-week-old mice of each genotype. For b-e, data were analysed by unpaired t-test (two tailed) and are represented as mean ± s.d. *P<0.05; **P<0.01. (f) CDR3 lengths (per cent of total in-frame reads) of TCR-Vβ loci from naïve CD4-SP T-cells from 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice.
$\text{TCR}^+ \text{CD4}^+ \text{DN thymocytes, even in the presence of CD28 co-stimulation (Supplementary Fig. 2d).} \text{The increase in developmentally diverted thymocytes in 6F/6F mice is presumably due to the fact that these cells have escaped clonal deletion as a result of reduced TCR signalling potential.}$

High intensity TCR signalling is also required for maturation of innate-like T-cells, which include iNKT-cells and $\gamma \delta \text{TCR}^+ \text{T-cells} (\gamma \delta \text{T-cells})$ that express invariant or semi-invariant TCRs and are thought to encounter their cognate antigens in the thymus$^{24–27}$. We observed a significant reduction in the number of PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer$^+$ thymocytes and peripheral iNKT-cells in 6F/6F mice (Fig. 2a–c). Consistent with the results of a previous study$^{28}$, a higher percentage of PBS-57:CD1d tetramer$^+$ CD4-SP thymocytes in 6F/6F mice were immature (CD44$^{lo}$, TCR$^h$) indicative of a block in iNKT-cell development$^{29}$ (Fig. 2b). We also detected a significant reduction of $\gamma \delta \text{TCR}^+ \text{thymocytes}$ and peripheral $\gamma \delta$ T-cells in 6F/6F mice (Fig. 2d). These findings demonstrate that a full complement of TCR ITAMs is required for the generation of T-cell populations that express invariant TCRs and that are known to require relatively high affinity/high intensity intrathymic signalling for their complete maturation.

**Defective clonal deletion in 6F/6F mice.** In contrast to positive selection, which is mediated by relatively low affinity TCR–ligand interactions and low signal intensity TCR signalling, negative selection requires high intensity TCR signalling$^{21,22}$. We previously demonstrated that negative selection is impaired in 6F/6F mice as assessed by a reduction in superantigen-mediated deletion; however, overt autoimmunity is not observed in 6F/6F mice$^{20}$. In a recent report, it was show that in addition to clonal deletion, autoreactive thymocytes can also be negatively selected by ‘developmental diversion’ into $\gamma \delta \text{TCR}^+ \text{CD4}^- \text{CD8}^-$ (double negative (DN)) thymocytes$^{23}$. Although clonal deletion normally predominates in wild-type mice, accumulation of developmentally diverted $\gamma \delta \text{TCR}^+$ DN thymocytes can be observed in the absence of CD28 co-stimulation or if apoptosis is prevented by overexpression of the pro-survival factors Bcl-2 or Mcl-1 (ref. 23). Examination of 6F/6F DN thymocytes revealed that reduction of TCR signalling potential results in an increase in ‘developmentally diverted’ CD5$^{hi}$, PD-1$^{hi}$ and CD69$^{+}$ repertoire mainly, if not entirely, through changes in TCR$\alpha$ chain usage.

**Figure 2** | iNKT-cell and $\gamma \delta$ T-cell development in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice. (a) Representative (one of eight) PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer versus TCR$\beta$ profiles of thymocytes, splenocytes or lymphocyte-enriched cells from liver. (b) Representative (one of five) staining of CD4-SP thymocytes with PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer versus CD44. Percentages of TCR$^+$ CD44$^{hi}$ PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer$^+$, and TCR$^+$ CD44$^{lo}$ PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer$^+$, iNKT-cells within the indicated gates are shown. (c) Summary of PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer staining experiments. Shown are per cent PBS-57:CD1d-tetramer-positive cells within total thymocytes, total splenocytes or lymphocyte-enriched cells from liver. N = 5 mice of each genotype. (d) Left panels, representative CD3e versus TCR$\delta$ staining of CD4$^-$CD8$^-$ thymocytes from 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice. Right, bar graph shows summary data from six age-matched mice of each genotype. For (a–d), data were analysed by unpaired t-test (two tailed) and are represented as mean ± s.d. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01.
Signalling responses are unequally impacted in 6F/6F mice. Analysis of signalling pathways downstream of the TCR revealed that, similar to what we had previously found in thymocytes, activation of TCR-proximal signalling effectors including ZAP-70, SLP-76 and Cbl was reduced in 6F/6F peripheral T-cells relative to 6Y/6Y T-cells under the same stimulation conditions (Supplementary Fig. 3a,b). However, the effect of reducing TCR signalling potential on activation of more distal effectors and responses was variable. For example, calcium mobilization was unaffected in 6F/6F T-cells, whereas Akt and Erk activation were strongly attenuated (Fig. 3a, Supplementary Fig. 3a,b). In contrast to the results obtained with a different CD3ε ITAM-mutant model system, we found that CD3ζ ITAMs were not critical for either c-Myc or Notch activation in response to TCR engagement (Fig. 3b). From these results, we conclude that loss of CD3ζ-chain signalling does not equivalently impact the activation of signalling effectors downstream of the TCR, suggesting that there may be different thresholds for the activation of individual signalling intermediates and pathways.

T-cell proliferation is minimally impacted in 6F/6F mice. To determine if reducing the number of TCR ITAMs impairs mature T-cell functional responses, we first analysed in vitro TCR body-mediated proliferation and cytokine production. Notably, naïve CD4-SP and CD8-SP T-cells from 6F/6F mice exhibited only mildly impaired proliferative responses to either anti-CD3 induced stimulation or stimulation with anti-CD3 plus anti-CD28 (Fig. 4a, Supplementary Fig. 4a). We consistently observed a slight reduction in the proliferative response of 6F/6F T-cells with lower amounts of stimulating antibody, but proliferation was equivalent to that of 6Y/6Y T-cells when the amount of activating antibody was increased. Induction of CD69 and the interleukin-2Rα (IL-2Rα) chain (CD25) in response to TCR stimulation was also unaffected or only minimally impaired in 6F/6F T-cells (Supplementary Fig. 4b,c). Polyclonal 6F/6F CD4-SP and CD8-SP T-cells upregulated CD40L or granzyme B, respectively, in response to TCR cross-linking (Fig. 4b,c). A higher percentage of naïve 6F/6F T-cells produced IL-2 in response to TCR + CD28 stimulation although the total amount of IL-2 per cell was not increased (Fig. 4d,e). Interferon-γ (IFNγ) production by in vitro-activated naïve CD4-SP 6F/6F T-cells was also the same or greater than in 6Y/6Y T-cells, whereas IL-4 production by activated naïve 6F/6F CD4-SP T-cells was consistently reduced compared with identically treated naïve 6Y/6Y CD4-SP T-cells (Supplementary Fig. 4d,e). As reported previously, 6F/6F mice are lymphopenic and contain increased percentages of CD44hi CD62Llo ‘memory-phenotype’ CD4-SP and CD8-SP T-cells (Supplementary Fig. 5a). We observed that a higher percentage of ex vivo CD44hi CD62Llo CD4-SP and CD8-SP T-cells in 6F/6F mice produced IL-2, IFNγ and TNFα as assessed by intracellular staining (Supplementary Fig. 5b).

No overt gaps in the 6F/6F antigen-reactive TCR repertoire. The differences in TCRα chain usage by positively selected 6F/6F T-cells relative to control 6Y/6Y T-cells raised the question of whether there are ‘gaps’ in the antigen-reactive T-cell repertoire in 6F/6F mice that would manifest by failure to respond to particular foreign antigens. To investigate this, we first immunized mice with the T-dependent antigen NP-Keyhole limpet haemocyanin (NP-KLH). As shown in Fig. 4f, 6F/6F mice mounted NP IgM antibody responses to NP-KLH that were similar to those of 6Y/6Y control mice. Similar results were obtained with another T-dependent antigen, NP-chicken gamma-globulin (NP-CGG).

Next, we determined the total number of naïve T-cells that are specific for the I-Ab MHC II-binding non-self-peptides, 2W, a variant of peptide 52–68 from the I-E alpha chain, and FltC, peptide 427–441 from the FltC protein of Salmonella typhimurium, or the Kb MHC I-binding peptide from ovalbumin (OVA 257–264). Peptide-specific T-cells from spleen and total lymph nodes from each mouse were enriched with the relevant pMHC tetraters as described and enumerated by flow cytometry. 6F/6F mice contained naïve 2W-specific and FltC-specific CD4-SP T-cells as well as naïve OVA-specific CD8-SP T-cells that were present in numbers similar to those detected in 6Y/6Y mice (Fig. 4g and Supplementary Fig. 5c). We also detected peptide-specific CD4-SP and CD8-SP thymocytes in 6F/6F mice by tetramer enrichment (Supplementary Fig. 5c). To evaluate the proliferative potential of the naïve CD4-SP T-cell populations, mice were injected intravenously with 2W and FltC peptides plus lipopolysaccharide to elicit a synchronous systemic antigen-specific T-cell response. Six days later, total spleen and lymph node peptide-specific CD4-SP T-cells were tetramer enriched and enumerated. As shown in Fig. 4g, proliferative expansion of naïve 2W- and FltC-specific T-cells in 6F/6F mice was as good or better than that observed in 6Y/6Y mice. Therefore, the number and expansion potential of naïve T-cells specific for these epitopes was not decreased in 6F/6F mice.
analysed in each group. One week after immunization, sera obtained from tail bleeds were analysed for NP-reactive IgM by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. Twelve mice were FliC/I-Ab-specific CD4-SP T-cells in 6Y/6Y (left panels) and 6F/6F (right panels) mice were analysed by tetramer enrichment. Upper panels, number of experiments. MFI of IL-2 (100 U ml\(^{-1}\)) was determined by intracellular staining. Naïve CD4-SP T-cells were stimulated with plate-bound anti-CD3 anti-CD28 antibodies overnight then examined for CD40L expression by surface staining and flow cytometry. Naïve CD8-SP T-cells were stimulated with plate-bound anti-CD3 + anti-CD28 antibodies for 3 days, incubated with IL-2 (100 U ml\(^{-1}\)) for 24 h, restimulated with PMA + ionomycin for 4 h, then examined for granzyme B expression by intracellular staining and flow cytometry. (d,e) Naïve CD4-SP T-cells were stimulated with plate-bound anti-CD3 + anti-CD28 for 2 days and the percentage of IL-2\(^{+}\) cells (d) and the MFI of IL-2 (e) was determined by intracellular staining. (f) IgM antibody response to T-dependent antigens. Mice were immunized with NP-KLH in CFA. One week after immunization, sera obtained from tail bleeds were analysed for NP-reactive IgM by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. Twelve mice were analysed in each group. (g) Enumeration of antigen-specific T-cell pools in 6F/6F mice. Total numbers of lymph node and spleen 2W/I-A\(^{b}\)-specific and FliC/I-Ab-specific CD4-SP T-cells in 6Y/6Y (left panels) and 6F/6F (right panels) mice were analysed by tetramer enrichment. Upper panels, number of peptide-specific CD4-SP peripheral T-cells in un-immunized mice. Lower panels, number of peptide-specific CD4-SP peripheral T-cells in mice 6 days after i.v. immunization with peptide + LPS. Shown are one representative of two to four independent experiments.

We next evaluated the potential of 6F/6F T-cells to generate antigen-specific memory T-cells after LCMV Armstrong infection. Forty-five days after LCMV infection, memory T-cells reactive against each of the LCMV antigens that were screened by tetramer binding were detected in 6F/6F mice (Fig. 5d–f and Supplementary Fig. 6b). In general, memory T-cells in 6F/6F mice were composed of a higher percentage of CD62L\(^{+}\) CD44\(^{+}\) T effector memory (T\(_{EM}\)) and fewer CD62L\(^{+}\) CD44\(^{+}\) central memory (T\(_{CM}\)) phenotype cells compared with 6Y/6Y controls (Supplementary Fig. 7a). In accord with this finding, a higher percentage of tetramer-binding T-cells in 6F/6F mice, particularly GP61-reactive T-cells, expressed elevated levels of KLRG1\(^{31}\), (Supplementary Fig. 7b).

Defective generation of TFH cells in 6F/6F mice. Previous data have shown that strong TCR/pMHC interactions, particularly those with a long dwell time, favour the conversion of naïve CD4 T-cells into TFH\(^{32}\). Although this model predicts that the generation of TFH cells should also be dependent on stronger or more sustained TCR signals, a requirement for high intensity signalling has not been demonstrated experimentally. To evaluate

Generation of memory T-cells is unimpaired in 6F/6F mice. We next evaluated the potential of 6F/6F T-cells to generate antigen-specific memory T-cells after LCMV Armstrong infection. Forty-five days after LCMV infection, memory T-cells reactive against each of the LCMV antigens that were screened by tetramer binding were detected in 6F/6F mice (Fig. 5d–f and Supplementary Fig. 6b). In general, memory T-cells in 6F/6F mice were composed of a higher percentage of CD62L\(^{+}\) CD44\(^{+}\) T effector memory (T\(_{EM}\)) and fewer CD62L\(^{+}\) CD44\(^{+}\) central memory (T\(_{CM}\)) phenotype cells compared with 6Y/6Y controls (Supplementary Fig. 7a). In accord with this finding, a higher percentage of tetramer-binding T-cells in 6F/6F mice, particularly GP61-reactive T-cells, expressed elevated levels of KLRG1\(^{31}\), (Supplementary Fig. 7b).

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Figure 5 | Generation of effector and memory T-cells in 6F/6F mice. (a–c) Mice were infected with LCMV Armstrong and spleen T-cells were analysed 8 days later. (a) Dot plots show percentage of tetramer-positive CD8-SP or CD4-SP splenocytes. (b) Number of tetramer-positive CD8-SP (NP396, GP33 and GP276) or CD4-SP (GP61) splenocytes in 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. (c) Number of IFNγ+ TNFα+ splenocytes detected after 5 h in vitro re-stimulation with the indicated peptides. N = 6 6Y/6Y and 6 6F/6F mice. Data were analysed by unpaired t-test (two tailed) and are represented as mean ± s.e.m. *P<0.05. (d–f) Mice were infected with LCMV Armstrong and spleen T-cells were analysed 45 days after infection. (d) Dot plots show percentage of tetramer-positive CD8-SP or CD4-SP splenocytes. (e) Number of tetramer-positive CD8-SP or CD4-SP splenocytes in 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice. (f) Number of IFNγ+ TNFα+ splenocytes detected in 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice after 5 h in vitro re-stimulation with the indicated peptides. N = 5 6Y/6Y and 6 6F/6F mice. Data were analysed by unpaired t-test (two tailed) and are represented as mean ± s.e.m. *P<0.05.
TFH-cell development, age-matched 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice were injected with sheep red blood cells (SRBC), and 7–10 days later splenocytes were harvested and analysed by flow cytometry. As shown in Fig. 6a, the percentage and total number of TFH (CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁺) CD4-SP T-cells was significantly reduced in 6F/6F mice compared with 6Y/6Y controls. The reduction in TFH cells was not due to a delayed development as a similar reduction in TFH numbers was also detected in 6F/6F mice 14 days after immunization. In addition to their numerical reduction, TFH cells in 6F/6F mice expressed reduced levels of the transcription factor Bcl6 (Fig. 6d). Consistent with impaired generation of TFH cells, 6F/6F spleens contained fewer germinal centres (GCs) and reduced numbers of (Fas⁻ GL-7⁺) GC B-cells (Fig. 6b,c). A significant reduction in TFH cells and GC B-cells was also observed when 6F/6F mice were immunized with NP-CGG or NP-KLH. Analysis of NP-specific antibodies in immunized mice revealed impaired immunoglobulin class switching (Fig. 6e,f) and immunoglobulin affinity maturation (Fig. 6g) in 6F/6F mice also reflecting a defect in GC formation.

Since Tregs are increased in 6F/6F mice, we considered the possibility that this could explain the impaired TFH-cell response. To resolve this issue, we generated bone marrow chimeras by injecting lineage-depleted bone marrow cells from 6Y/6Y or 6F/6F mice (both CD45.2) together with an equal number of B6:CD45.1 lineage-depleted bone marrow cells into lethally irradiated B6:CD45.1 mice. Six weeks after bone marrow transfer, chimeric mice were immunized with SRBC and spleens were analysed 10 days later. As shown in Fig. 7a–c, a specific reduction in the development of 6F/6F TFH cells was observed in chimeric mice, demonstrating that the 6F/6F defect is T-cell intrinsic. In agreement with this conclusion, in *vivo* induction of CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁺ TFH-phenotype T-cells from

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**Figure 6 | Impaired induction of T follicular helper (TFH) cells in 6F/6F mice.** 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice were injected with sheep red blood cells (SRBCS) and 10 days later spleens were harvested for analysis. Percentage and numbers of (a) TFH (CD4⁺ CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁺) cells and (b) germinal centre B (GC) cells (B220⁺ Fas⁺ GL-7⁺) detected in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice. N = 9 6Y/6Y and 9 6F/6F mice. (c) Immunofluorescence staining of spleens from 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice 1 week after immunization with SRBCS. One representative of three experiments. Scale bar, 200 μm. (d) Mean fluorescence intensity of anti-Bcl6 mAb staining of conventional CD4-SP T-cells (CD4⁺ CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁻) and TFH cells (CD4⁺ CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁺). (e–g) 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice (six each) were immunized with NP-KLH or NP-CGG. One week after immunization, serum was obtained by tail bleeding and analysed for NP-reactive IgG by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). (e) Anti-NP IgG1. (f) Anti-NP IgG2a. (g) Ratio of high affinity/low affinity anti-NP IgG1 determined by ELISA with plates coated with NP(4) or NP(32). For bar graphs, data were analysed by unpaired t-test (two tailed) and are represented as mean ± s.d. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
naïve 6F/6F CD4-SP precursors was also impaired relative to 6Y/6Y controls (Supplementary Fig. 8a,b). 6F/6F T-cells were also defective in the generation of Foxp3⁺ CXCR5⁺ PD-1⁺ 'Follicular Tregs', whereas the generation of conventional Tregs was enhanced as previously reported (Fig. 7d). The reduction in 6F/6F TFH cells could not be attributed to a reduction in naïve CD4-SP precursors since TFH induction frequency was also significantly reduced compared with 6Y/6Y mice when calculated as per cent of total Foxp3⁻ cells (Fig. 7e).

Finally, we considered the possibility that the defect in generation of TFH cells in 6F/6F mice might be due to differences in the naïve antigen-specific T-cell pool as a result of effects of the 6F mutation on positive selection. To address this issue, we infected 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice with *Listeria monocytogenes* that expresses a 2W peptide-OVA fusion protein (*Lm*-OVA) since we had established that 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice contain similar numbers of naïve 2W peptide-reactive CD4 T-cells (Fig. 4g). One week after infection, spleens were harvested and 2W tetramer-positive T-cells were enumerated by flow cytometry. As shown in Fig. 7f, splenocytes from 6F/6F mice contained significantly fewer numbers of 2W-reactive TFH as well as significantly fewer 2W-reactive (CXCR5hi PD-1hi) TFH.
designed to place expression of ‘wild-type’ (6Y) CD3z developmentally relevant genes. Revealing the complexity of the T-cell maturation process and concerns that such non-physiological approaches might lead to non-signalling tyrosine to phenylalanine-mutated (6F) CD3z of endogenous or mutant TCR signalling subunits in CD3NATURE COMMUNICATIONS | DOI: 10.1038/ncomms7982 | www.nature.com/naturecommunications

...sible for normal TCR signalling responses. Uncertainty regarding the purpose of TCR ITAM multiplicity can also be attributed in part to the inconsistent results obtained with different genetic reconstitution mouse models where the CD3z ITAMs were inactivated12,14,17–19. Each model used heterologous gene-expression methods to reconstitute wild-type or mutant TCR signalling subunits in CD3z−/− mice raising concerns that such non-physiological approaches might lead to confounding results, particularly in light of accumulated data revealing the complexity of the T-cell maturation process and its dependence on the precisely orchestrated expression of developmentally relevant genes.

For this study, we used a gene ‘knock-in’ mouse model designed to place expression of ‘wild-type’ (6Y) CD3z chain or a non-signalling tyrosine to phenylalanine-mutated (6F) CD3z chain cassette under the control of the endogenous CD3z gene regulatory sequences. In a previous report, we demonstrated that expression of the 6Y and 6F ‘knock-in’ alleles faithfully mimics that of endogenous CD3z. Here we document that 2β T-cell development is only mildly impaired in 6F/6F mice despite a theoretical 60% reduction in the signal transducing potential of the TCR. However, when the specificity of the TCR was fixed by introduction of an 2βTCR transgene, positive selection of 6F/6F thymocytes expressing the defined TCR was almost completely abrogated. The T-cells that were generated in these mice were dependent on expression of rearranged endogenous TCRz chains to complete their maturation in the thymus. From these results, we infer that most 2βTCRs that normally promote positive selection fail to transmit signals appropriate for positive selection in 6F/6F mice. Consequently, a different TCR repertoire is positively selected in 6F/6F mice. Our data also indicate that at least some of the TCR 2β heterodimers that are positively selected in 6F/6F mice bind with higher affinity to selecting self-ligands than most 2βTCRs that normally promote positive selection as evinced by the increased percentage of ‘memory-phenotype’ peripheral T-cells in 6F/6F mice even in a lympho-replete background.

An unexpected finding in the current study was that despite the profound effects of TCR ITAM reduction on positive selection, the extent of TCR-Vβ CDR3 diversity in the pool of naïve CD4-SP T-cells from 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice is no greater than it is between 6Y/6Y and B6 mice. Thus, the differences in the 2βTCR repertoire in 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice can primarily be attributed to differences in TCRz chain usage by a similar repertoire of TCRβ chains. These results are consistent with the idea that TCR-Vβ genes have been evolutionarily selected to react with MHC proteins. It is currently unknown if the differential TCR-Vz usage by mature 6F/6F T-cells is primarily the result of selection from the pool of TCR z/β heterodimers initially expressed on DP thymocytes or is due to iterative sampling of TCRz chains through pro cessive TCRz locus rearrangement. In any event, it is notable that the main consequence of reducing TCR signalling potential is skewing of the mature 2βTCR repertoire through alternative TCRz chain usage rather than failure of positive selection.

Although it might have been predicted that significant differences in TCRz chain usage by positively selected 2βTCRs would skew the potential antigen-reactive repertoire of the mature T-cell pool, we failed to identify any obvious ‘gaps’ in the TCR repertoire, which would be revealed by non-responsiveness to particular foreign antigens. Although by no means comprehensive, these results suggest that there is a striking degree of plasticity in the selection process that ensures preservation of the antigen-specific TCR repertoire despite attenuation of the TCR signalling potential. These findings raise the interesting possibility that, similar to ‘super-antigen’ recognition, ligand recognition is primarily dictated by the TCRβ chain with TCRz functioning to stabilize TCRβ/ pMHC interactions or adjust ligand-binding affinity. γδ T-cell and iNKT-cell development were impaired to a greater extent in 6F/6F mice than was 2β T-cell development. By definition, immature γδ T-cells and iNKT-cells, which express invariant or semi-invariant TCRs, are less prone to ‘revision’ of TCR–ligand binding affinity by pairing of TCRγ or TCRβ chains with alternate TCRδ and TCRz chains, respectively. Unlike conventional 2β T-cells, maturation of γδ T-cells and iNKT cells also apparently requires interaction with their cognate ligands in the thymus and is thought to be contingent on relatively high intensity TCR signalling. Negative selection of conventional 2βTCR+ thymocytes by clonal deletion, which also requires high intensity TCR signalling, was likewise impaired in 6F/6F mice. However, we also found that ‘clonal diversion’ of autoreactive thymocytes to the 2βTCR+ DN fate is increased in 6F/6F mice, similar to the effect observed when CD28 co-receptor stimulation is removed or when pro-survival factors are overexpressed in DP thymocytes. The fact that thymocytes are still negatively selected, albeit by clonal diversion rather than clonal deletion, helps to explain the absence of autoimmune disease in 6F/6F mice.

Similar to what we had observed in 6F/6F thymocytes, the impact of inactivating CD3z ITAMs on TCR signalling responses varied considerably depending on the signalling pathway and the proximity of the downstream effectors to the TCR. TCR-mediated activation of proximal effectors including ZAP-70, SLP-76 and Cbl was reduced in 6F/6F T-cells, whereas the effect on downstream responses was variable. Activation of some intermediates such as Erk and Akt was strongly attenuated, whereas calcium mobilization and activation of NF-κB, Jnk and p38 were unimpaired or only mildly affected. These results are most consistent with a kinetic proofreading model for TCR signalling where downstream effectors/pathways exhibit different activation thresholds, with some responses appearing to be more ‘analogue’ whereas others are more ‘digital’. T-cell proliferation in vitro in response to TCR cross-linking or in vivo in response to LCMV infection was unaffected, slightly impaired, or in some cases enhanced in the absence of CD3z ITAMs. These results are concordant with those obtained when the cytotoxic adapter SLP-76 was deleted or mutated to reduce TCR signalling potential which failed to observe an effect on T-cell proliferation but contrast markedly with those obtained using a different 6F/6F
model system where it was found that a full complement of ITAMs is crucial for T-cell proliferation. As discussed above, these discrepancies, which we believe can be attributed to differences in the model systems employed, further underscore the importance of retaining normal gene regulation and cell specificity in the design of mouse models of TCR signal attenuation.

In a previous study, we documented that the differential effects of ITAM reduction on downstream signalling pathways, most notably attenuation of Akt activation and relative sparing of the calcium and NF-kB pathways favors Treg development and results in an increase in the number of both thymus derived and peripherally derived Tregs in 6F/6F mice. In this report, we show that the same reduction in the number of TCR ITAMs in response to TCR engagement is not impaired in 6F/6F T-cells. In addition, we observed that IL-2 production essential for the generation of TFH cells, was reduced in TFH cells in 6F/6F mice. This suggests that IL-2 receptor signalling is selectively required for and linked to specific effector responses. These findings contribute to the objective of accurately predicting the effects of TCR signal attenuation on both T-cell maturation and T-cell functional responses as a means of evaluating potential targeted and off-target effects of drug treatments for human immune disorders.

**Methods**

**Antigen models and statistics.** The generation of 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F ‘knock-in’ mice was described previously. Both mutant lines were back-crossed to C57BL/6 background and B6.CD45.1 congenic mice were obtained from the NIAID Taconic exchange repository. Mice were housed in a barrier facility and all procedures in this study were approved by the NIH Animal Care and Use Committee (ACUC). All experiments were conducted with age-matched (typically 4–6 months old) and gender-matched control and experimental groups. In bar graphs, error bars are s.d. or s.e.m. as noted in the figure legend. Statistical analysis was performed with two-tailed, unpaired Student’s t-tests with GraphPad Prism software (For all figures: *P<0.05, **P<0.01, ***P<0.001). The number of mice per experiment was determined by several factors: (1) The ACUC directive to use the minimum number of animals required to obtain valid results; (2) a minimum number of three mice per group for statistical confidence if individual samples could be analysed separately; (3) larger numbers of mice were used for pooling of cells from individuals if rare or purified cell populations were required for specific experiments; (4) in some cases, such as enumeration of thymocytes or splenocytes, samples were available and could be included from mice killed for other experiments. Any animals exhibiting signs of disease, wasting or failure to thrive were excluded from the study.

**Antibodies reagents and flow cytometry.** Fluorescent dye-labelled antibodies to CD45.1(A20), CD4(RM4–5), CD3(53–7.3), CD8(53–6.7), CD24(ML5), CD25(FK3–228), CD3 (PC61.5), CD2 (Caltag), Cxcr5(2G8), Cd45.1(A20), Cd45.2(B6) from Bio Techne; CD127 from BD Bioscience; CD28 from Biolegend and Anti-CD3, anti-CD28, anti-CD69 from eBioscience. Anti-CD68, anti-CD163, anti-CD11c, and anti-CD86 were purchased from BioLegend. Anti-CD25 was purchased from R&D Systems. Fluorochrome-conjugated PBS-57:CD1d and LCMV peptide tetramers (GP67–77, GP33–41, NP396–404, NP205–212 and GP276–286) were obtained from the NIH Tetramer Core Facility. Biotin-labelled soluble I-Ab molecules containing 2W, OVA, LL0199–201 or F1CA27–441 peptides covalently attached to the I-Ab beta chain were produced with the 1-Ab alpha chain in Drosophila melanogaster S2 cells, then purified and made into tetramers with streptavidin (SA)–phcoerythrin or SA–allophycocyanin (Prozyme, San Leandro, CA, USA) as described previously. Cells were pre-incubated with blocking to 6Y/6Y mice with biotinylated anti-CD3 (clone 145-2C11; BD Biosciences) and streptavidin–fluorescein isothiocyanate (SA-FITC) (554413), or anti-CD1d (17-1D10; BD Biosciences) and SA-phcoerythrin (SA-PE). Cell division was assessed by determining the percentage of CFSE lo/med cells by flow cytometry.

**Cell stimulation and Western blotting.** Cell stimulation, cell calcium mobilization and Western blotting experiments were performed as described. Briefly, lymph node T-cells (5 × 10⁶) were stimulated at 37 °C during the indicated periods of time with preformed immune complexes composed of biotinylated anti-CD3 (10 μg ml⁻¹; 145-2C11; BD Biosciences) and anti-CD28 (10 μg ml⁻¹; Sigma Aldrich). After stimulation, cells were immediately resuspended in lysis buffer containing: 1% Triton X-100, 10 mM Tris pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 2 mM NaVO₄, 10 mM NaF, 1 mM EDTA and 1 protease inhibitor tablet (Roche). Cell equivalents (2 × 10⁶) were loaded on 4–12% gradient gels (Invitrogen) and were analysed by immunoblot. Antibodies used for blotting included Notch1 (D11E11), Myc (9402), Erk (9101) and PAkt (9271), ZAP phosphorylated at Tyr319 (2701), from Cell Signaling Technologies; pS6P-76 (558367) from BD Bioscience; pChk1 (26140) from Santa Cruz Biotechnologies For stimulation of T-cells after LCMV infection the following peptides were used: GP61–80, NP396–404, GP33–41, NP205–212 and GP276–286. Full size images are presented in Supplementary Fig. 3c,d.

**Cell purification and CFSE labelling.** Purified T-cell populations were obtained from lymph nodes using a magnetic bead/column system (MACS; Miltenyi Biotech). Naive CD4-SP T-cells were isolated by first labelling total lymph node cells with anti-CD3 (10 μg ml⁻¹; 145-2C11; BD Biosciences) and anti-CD8 (20 μg ml⁻¹; Sigma Aldrich). After stimulation, cells were immediately resuspended in lysis buffer containing: 1% Triton X-100, 10 mM Tris pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 2 mM NaVO₄, 10 mM NaF, 1 mM EDTA and 1 protease inhibitor tablet (Roche). Cells equivalents (2 × 10⁶) were loaded on 4–12% gradient gels (Invitrogen) and were analysed by immunoblot. Antibodies used for blotting included Notch1 (D11E11), Myc (9402), Erk (9101) and PAkt (9271), ZAP phosphorylated at Tyr319 (2701), from Cell Signaling Technologies; pS6P-76 (558367) from BD Bioscience; pChk1 (26140) from Santa Cruz Biotechnologies For stimulation of T-cells after LCMV infection the following peptides were used: GP61–80, NP396–404, GP33–41, NP205–212 and GP276–286. Full size images are presented in Supplementary Fig. 3c,d.

**Virus infections and immunizations.** Eight to 12 week-old gender-matched 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice were infected intravenously with 2 × 10⁷ PFU of LCMV.

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Armstrong clone 53b. Stocks were prepared by a single passage on BHK-21 cells, and viral titres were determined by plaque formation on Vero cells. For in vivo TFH induction, mice were injected intraperitoneally with SRLCs (5 × 10^5; Innovative Research) or NP-CCG, NP-KLH (100 μg; Vector Labs). IgM and IgG enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (BD Biosciences) were performed with NP4-BSA or NP32-BSA-coated plates (Vector Labs).

**Generation of bone marrow chimeras.** Donor bone marrow cells were depleted of lineage-positive cells by the addition of anti-CD3, anti-CD4, anti-CD8, anti-CD11b, anti-FcαRII and anti-CD19 antibodies followed by purification using the magnetic column system. About 5 × 10^5 cells were injected into the tail veins or retro-orbital sinus of irradiated B6 (950 rads) mice.

**Immunohistochemistry.** Mouse tissues were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde (Protocol) and embedded in paraffin. Sections (6 μm) were stained with haematoxylin and eosin, or, for immunofluorescence staining, tissue sections were fixed in 4% (w/v) paraformaldehyde and blocked with 1% (w/v) BSA and 10% (v/v) goat serum in PBS before incubation with fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated rat anti-mouse B220 (abCAM) or rat anti-mouse CD3 (abCAM). Images were obtained on an Axiovert LSM 510-META inverted microscope (Zeiss), except for tiled images, which were captured and assembled on a Fluoview FV1000 (Olympus).

**Real-time PCR.** For gene-expression studies, total cell RNA was isolated with a PicoPure RNA isolation kit (Arcturus). RNA samples (100 ng of each) were reverse transcribed with the SuperScript First-Strand Synthesis system (Invitrogen) and were amplified by RT-PCR. Transcripts were quantified with a Roche LightCycler 480. Duplicates were run for each sample in a 96-well plate; Actb (encoding b-actin) served as the endogenous reference gene. The relative quantification method was used, with the ratio of the messenger RNA (mRNA) abundance of the gene of interest normalized to the abundance of b-actin mRNA and with the average of control thymocyte samples serving as the calibrator value. The specificity of the products was confirmed by melting curves and electrophoresis.

**TCR-Vβ sequencing.** Naive (CD44^−/−CD25 ^−) CD4 SP T-cells were purified from 8-week-old female 6Y/6Y and 6F/6F mice and genomic DNA was extracted using a Qagen DNA isolation kit. Deep sequencing of Vβ CDR3 regions was performed by Adaptive Biotechnologies, Seattle, WA, USA.

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**Author contributions**

S.H., A.C.P., L.L., K.-D.S., J.J., N.T., H.C., M.P., R.L., E.Z. and J.P. performed experiments for the paper. M.K.J., D.M. and P.E.L. designed the experiments and P.E.L. wrote the manuscript.

**Additional information**

**Supplementary Information** accompanies this paper at http://www.nature.com/naturecommunications

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