Entropic Elasticity, Cooperative Extensibility and Supercoiling Property of DNA: A Unified Viewpoint

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Recent in vitro experiments done on single double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) molecules or DNA-protein complexes reveal that DNA double-helix has nontrivial elastic properties$^{[1,2]}$. At low external forces, it can be viewed as a simple wormlike chain$^{[3]}$; at moderate forces, it becomes a rod with a large stretching modulus. But if pulled with a large force of about 70 pN the molecule as a whole can suddenly be driven to an almost fully percoiled, a pulling force as small as 0.3 pN can distort 3 pN can distort 3 times its native

A unified model is constructed to study the recently observed DNA entropic elasticity, cooperative extensibility, and supercoiling property. With the introduction of a new structural parameter (the folding angle $\phi$), bending deformations of sugar-phosphate backbones, steric effects of nucleotide basepairs, and short-range basestacking interactions are considered. The comprehensive agreement of theoretical results with experimental observations on both torsionally relaxed and negatively supercoiled DNAs strongly indicates that, basestacking interactions, although short-ranged in nature, dominate the elasticity of DNA and hence are of vital biological significance.

87.15.By, 36.20.Ey, 61.25.Hq, 87.10.+e
Then total bending energy of the backbones, \( E_b \), can be written as

\[
E_b = \frac{\kappa}{2} \left( (dt_1/ds)^2 + (dt_2/ds)^2 \right) ds \tag{2}
\]

and

\[
E_b = \int_0^L \left[ \kappa (dt/ds)^2 + \kappa \left( \frac{d\phi}{ds} \right)^2 + \frac{\kappa}{R^4} \sin^4 \phi \right] ds, \tag{3}
\]

where \( L \) is the total contour length of each backbone. This expression proves to be very useful. The second and the third terms in Eq. (3) are deformation energy caused by the bending of the backbones with respect to the central axis, and the first term, \( \kappa (dt/ds)^2 \), is the bending energy of DNA central axis contributed by the backbone bending rigidity \( \kappa \). So far, baspairs are viewed as thin rods and their contribution to the bending rigidity of DNA chain is not considered. Because of steric effects caused by finite volume and area, baspairs will certainly increase the bending rigidity of DNA chain. The simplest way to consider such effects is to replace \( \kappa \) in the first term of Eq. (3) with a phenomenological parameter \( \kappa^* \), with \( \kappa^* > \kappa \). Hereafter this is assumed.

Besides steric effects, nucleotide basepairs contribute also to the bending rigidity of DNA. This energy mainly originates from noncovalent van der Waals interactions between adjacent basepairs [24]. Baspair interaction is short-ranged and is characterized by an attraction potential proportional to \( 1/r^6 \) and a strong repulsion potential proportional to \( 1/r^{12} \). The line density of such Lennard-Jones type potential can be written as

\[
\rho(\phi) = \begin{cases} 
\rho_0 \left( \frac{\cos \phi}{\cos \phi_0} \right)^2 - 2 & \text{for } (\phi \geq 0), \\
\rho_0 \left( \frac{\cos \phi_0 - 2 \cos \phi}{\cos \phi_0} \right)^2 & \text{for } (\phi < 0), 
\end{cases} \tag{4}
\]

and the total baspair stacking energy is \( E_{L,J} = \int_0^L \rho ds \). In Eq. (4), \( r_0 \) is the backbone arclength between adjacent bases. \( \phi_0 \) is a parameter related to the equilibrium distance between a DNA dimer; \( \epsilon \) is the baspair stacking intensity which is generally base-sequence specific. Here we focus on macroscopic properties of DNA and just consider \( \epsilon \) in the average sense and take it as a constant, with \( \epsilon \approx 14.0k_BT \) as indicated by quantum chemical calculations [24]. The asymmetric baspair stacking potential Eq. (4) ensures a relaxed DNA to take on a right-handed double-helix configuration with its folding angle \( \phi \sim \phi_0 \). However, if adjacent basepairs are pulled apart slightly from the equilibrium distance by external forces or thermal stretching fluctuations, the baspair stacking interaction intensity quickly decreases because of its short-range nature. In other words, the baspair stacking potential can endure only a limited pulling force. We believe this to be closely related to the observed DNA highly cooperative extensibility. It may also account for the novel elasticity of negatively supercoiled dsDNA, since negative supercoiling actually leads to an effective pulling force. This insight, which is developed in more detail in the following, seems to be confirmed by experiments [24].

We first discuss the elastic response of the model DNA when a pulling force \( F = f z_0 \) along direction \( z_0 \) is applied at its ends. The total energy functional is then

\[
E = E_b + E_{LJ} - \int f \cos \phi \cdot z_0 ds. \tag{5}
\]

and the Green function \( G(t, \varphi; t', \varphi'; s) \), which determines the probability distribution of \( t \) and \( \varphi \) along DNA chain, is governed by

\[
\partial^2 G \bigg/ \partial s^2 = \frac{\kappa}{4\ell_p^* \epsilon f^*} \varphi \cdot z_0 - V(\varphi) \bigg/ \partial f, \tag{6}
\]

where \( \ell_p^* = \kappa^* / k_BT \) and \( V(\varphi) = \rho(\psi) / k_BT + \ell_p^* \sin^4 \varphi / R^2 \). The spectrum of the above Green equation is discrete and hence for long chains, the average extension can be obtained either by differentiation of the ground-state eigenvalue, \( g \), of Eq. (3) with respect to \( f \):

\[
\langle Z \rangle / L = (1/L) \int_0^L \langle \cos \phi \cdot z_0 \rangle ds = k_BT \partial g / \partial f, \tag{7}
\]

or by a direct integration with the normalized ground-state eigenfunction, \( \Phi(t, \varphi) \), of Eq. (3):

\[
\langle Z \rangle / L = \int \int |\Phi|^2 \cdot z_0 \cos \phi dt d\varphi. \tag{8}
\]

![FIG. 1. Force-extension relation of DNA. Experimental data is from Fig. 2A of [3]. Theoretical curve is obtained by the following considerations: (i) \( \ell_p = 1.5 \text{ nm} \) [4] and \( \epsilon = 14.0k_BT \) [21]; (ii) \( \ell_p^* = 53.0/2(\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \text{ nm} \) [30], \( r_0 = 0.34/(\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \text{ nm} \) and \( R = (0.34 \times 10.5/2\pi)(\tan \varphi)_{f=0} \text{ nm} \) [31]; (iii) adjust the value of \( \phi_0 \) to fit the data. For each \( \phi_0 \), the value of \( (\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \) is obtained self-consistently. The present curve is drawn with \( \phi_0 = 62.0^\circ \) (in close concord with the structural property of DNA [21]), and \( (\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \) determined to be 0.573840. DNA extension is scaled with its B-form contour length \( L(\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \).]

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Both \( g \) and \( \Phi(t, \varphi) \) can be obtained numerically through standard diagonalization methods and identical results are obtained by Eqs. (4) and (5). The resulting force vs extension relation in the whole relevant force range is shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 3. Our theoretical curves are obtained with just one adjustable parameter (see caption of Fig. 1), the agreement with experiments is strikingly excellent. According to our theory, the on-set of cooperative extension of DNA axial length at forces about 70 pN is mainly caused by the yielding of the short-range basestacking interaction [26].

Below the onset of cooperative elongation, DNA seems to be very stiff and calculations show that at \( f = 50 \) pN the total extension of DNA is only 4.1% longer than its B-form contour length, in close accordance with the value of 4.6% reported by Smith et al. [4]. This is related to the fact that the basestacking intensity \( \epsilon \) is very strong [26]. At low forces \( (f < 10 \) pN), because the fluctuation of the folding angle \( \varphi \) is extremely small, it can just be neglected and DNA elasticity is caused by thermal fluctuations of the axial direction \( t \) (entropic elasticity). It is easy to prove that the now well-known entropic elasticity (wormlike chain) model [8] with contour length \( L(\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \) and persistence length \( 2t_p(\cos \varphi)_{f=0} \) is just an excellent approximation of the present theory (here \( \langle \cos \varphi \rangle_{f=0} \) is the average of \( \cos \varphi \) at zero force). This point is demonstrated clearly in Fig. 2.

The elasticity of such a supercoiled DNA chain is determined by the following energy functional: \( E = E_b + E_{L,T} - f \int \cos \varphi \cdot t \cdot \mathbf{z}_0 ds - \Gamma_b T Lk \), where \( \Gamma_b T \) is torque associated with the topological constraint. However, the writtering number expression given by Eq. (5) is correct only for \( t \cdot \mathbf{z}_0 = -1 \), i.e., for chains whose tangential vector \( t \) never points to \(-\mathbf{z}_0 \) [25]. This condition is satisfied actually only for a highly extended chain whose \( t \) fluctuates slightly around \( \mathbf{z}_0 \). In this case Eq. (5) leads to \( W(t) \approx (1/2) \int (t_x dt_y / ds - t_y dt_x / ds) ds \), where \( t_x \) and \( t_y \) are respectively the \( x \) and \( y \) component of \( t \). This approximation is used hereafter. If we are to use Eq. (5) in the general case, a cutoff procedure seems necessary to avoid divergent results [13].

The Green equation for this case is written as

\[
\frac{dG}{ds} = \left[ \frac{\partial^2}{\partial t^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial s^2} + \frac{f \cos \varphi}{k_BT} \cdot \mathbf{z}_0 \right] - V(\varphi) + \frac{1}{R} \sin \varphi + \frac{1}{16\pi} \left( t_x^2 + t_y^2 \right) G = 0,
\]

and the force-extension and torque-supercoiling can then be determined through the ground-state eigen relations value and eigenfunction of Eq. (5). Finally, the relation between extension and linking number is obtained by elimination of torque \( \Gamma \) from these two relations.

The numerically calculated relations between extension and supercoiling degree \( \sigma \) at various fixed forces are shown in Fig. 3 and compared with the experiment of Strick et al. [9]. Here \( \sigma \) is defined by \( \sigma = \langle Lk \rangle / \langle Lk \rangle_{\sigma=0} \), where \( \langle Lk \rangle_{\sigma=0} = \int_0^L ds \sin \varphi \Gamma_{\sigma=0} / R \) is the linking number for a torsionally relaxed DNA. The parameters for the theoretical curves in Fig. 3 are the same as those of Figs. 1 and 3, no adjustment has ever been made to fit the data. For negatively supercoiled DNA, the theory is in quantitative accordance with experiment (left half of Fig. 3).
For $\sigma < 0$, both theory and experiment give three distinct regions of DNA elasticity: (i) For forces $> 1.3$ pN, DNA extension does not shrink with the increase of negative supercoiling, on the contrary, it may even slightly increase as $|\sigma|$ increases. (ii) For $1.3 \geq f > 0.3$ pN, there exists a critical negative supercoiling degree $\sigma_c$. Extension of DNA shrinks as $\sigma$ decreases from 0 to $\sigma_c$, then it remains approximately constant as $\sigma$ further decreases. $\sigma_c \approx -0.02$ at 0.6 pN. (iii) For $f \leq 0.3$ pN, DNA extension shrinks constantly with the increase of $|\sigma|$. In this case, no evident difference between the behaviors of negatively and positively supercoiled DNAs is observed, i.e., DNA can be regarded as achiral [15].

Thus, the complex elastical property of a negatively supercoiled DNA as well as that of an overstretched DNA can be satisfactorily understood by the same framework. In this context, although DNA double-helix is quite good at enduring external forces it is much weaker at enduring torques: while a force $\sim 70$ pN is needed for a torsionally relaxed DNA to trigger cooperative changes of configurations [30], 0.6 pN is just sufficient for a negatively supercoiled DNA with $\sigma$ as small as $-2\%$. This “shortcoming” of DNA might have been well noticed and captured by various proteins. For example, it seems that RecA protein stretches DNA by exerting a torque on the molecule [24].

However, as shown in the right half of Fig. 3 for positively supercoiled DNA the agreement between theory and experiment is poor. It is possible that positive supercoiling leads to strong radial as well as axial compressions on DNA basepair planes as to make them shrink considerably or even corrupt. In support of this point, recent experiment of Allemand et al. [7] indicates that positively supercoiled DNA can take on very surprising configurations in DNA's local structure since in vivo DNAs usually have a linking number deficit of $-6\%$.

Thus, for us to take into account the possible deformability of DNA basepairs in our theory to understand the elasticity of positively supercoiled DNA. We plan to perform such an effort.

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