Genetic parameter estimates for growth performance of crossbred piglets

RAJNI CHAUDHARY1, LALRENGPUII SAILO2, AKANSHA SINGH3, A KARTHIKEYAN4, ARNAV MEHROTRA5, S K MONDAL, N R SAHOO7 and AMIT KUMAR8

ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh 243 122 India

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The growth performance of pigs has a direct and substantial bearing on the profitability of swine farming. Piglets with lower growth rates are costly to produce due to lower feed conversion efficiency, extra facility costs and management complications (Deen et al., 1998, Wolter et al., 2003, Baxter et al. 2013). Birth weight of pigs is an important component of growth performance as it is directly correlated with piglet survival, behavior, and weight gain (Fix et al. 2010; Muns et al. 2013, Alves et al. 2018). For efficient selection at an early stage, information about genetic parameters of piglet growth is crucial. Weekly body weights of male and female piglets from birth to weaning are important for subsequent selection (Banik et al. 2014). Unbiased estimation of such parameters is complicated by the presence of maternal genetic and permanent litter effects (Mondal et al. 2014). Presumably due to the labour costs involved in recording such traits and insufficient pedigree information, there is a paucity of studies about the weekly growth performance of individual piglets accounting for the influence of direct additive, maternal genetic and litter environmental effects simultaneously. This study accounted for these factors through 6 different animal models to derive genetic parameter estimates with an aim to optimize piglet growth performance through future selective breeding programs.

The data were collected from the records of Landrace × Desi (Indigenous) pigs (62.5 to 75% Landrace inheritance) maintained at Swine Production Farm, Livestock Production and Management Section, Indian Veterinary Research Institute (ICAR-IVRI), Izatnagar. Records of 5739 Landrace × Desi (indigenous) crossbred pigs born over a period of 18 years (1995–2013) were analyzed to estimate variance components and genetic parameters for growth performance recorded at weekly individual. Traits considered in pre-weaning stage were weekly body weights from birth (BW) to weaning (W8). Post-weaning weights at weeks 12 (W12) and 32 (W32) were also analyzed during investigation. The breeding and management policy and the climatic conditions at the farm have been described in detail by Mondal et al. (2014).

Initially, the influence of different non-genetic factors (periods, seasons, litter size groups) on the traits was determined through least squares analysis. The significant factors affecting the traits were included in six different animal models to derive genetic parameter estimates using restricted maximum likelihood methods. The significant effects were included in the animal models for the estimation of genetic variance and covariance using WOMBAT software package (Meyer 2007), employing a Derivate Free (DF) Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) approach (Meyer 1989).

Six different single trait linear models as described by Meyer (1992) were used as follow;

\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + \epsilon \quad \text{(Model-1)} \]
\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + Z m + \epsilon, \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Cov}(a, m) = 0 \quad \text{(Model-2)} \]
\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + Z m + \epsilon, \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Cov}(a, m) = A \sigma_{am} \quad \text{(Model-3)} \]
\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + Z c + \epsilon \quad \text{(Model-4)} \]
\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + Z m + Z c + \epsilon, \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Cov}(a, m) = 0 \quad \text{(Model-5)} \]
\[ Y = \beta X + Z a + Z m + Z c + \epsilon, \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Cov}(a, m) = A \sigma_{am} \quad \text{(Model-6)} \]

where, \( Y \) is the vector of observations, \( \beta, a, m, c, \) and \( \epsilon \) are vectors of fixed, direct additive, maternal additive, permanent environmental and residual effects, respectively. \( X, Z_a, Z_m \) and \( Z_c \) are incidence matrices that relate these effects to observations. The most appropriate model was determined on the basis of Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), wherein the best model had the lowest BIC value.

The least-squares means and genetic parameter estimates for weights at different ages are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Based on the BIC values, the phenotypic variance partitioning of body weight traits up to 5 weeks of age (BW-W5) was best explained by model 4, containing direct additive and permanent litter effects. For W6, W7 and W8, model 2 containing direct and maternal additive genetic effects was found to be most suitable. For post-weaning weights recorded at week 12 and 32, model 4 was the best. For BW the direct heritability estimate (\( h^2 \)) was
highest through model 1 (0.46) but even after suitable partitioning of variance in subsequent models, the direct additive variance remained. Model 4 estimated $h^2$ as 0.33 which suggested ample scope for improvement through mass selection of piglets for birth weight. Direct heritability for pre-weaning traits in pigs is a manifestation of the genetic potential of the embryo and piglets for growth during gestation and lactation, respectively (Kaufmann et al. 2000). Our findings agree with the estimate of 0.32 reported by and Canario et al. (2010) in Norwegian Landrace. However, generally low $h^2$ estimates for birth weight have been reported in the literature, ranging from 0.10–0.13. The variation in heritability estimates reported in literature may be due to differences in breeds, management and the models used in analysis. For litter environmental effects ($c^2$) at birth, the literature estimates ranged from 0.02–0.34 (Kaufmann et al. 2000, Solanes et al. 2004, Chimonyo et al. 2006, Mondal et al. 2014). Our estimate of 0.16 was in close agreement with Canario et al. (2010) who reported $c^2$ as 0.15. For W1-W5, the $h^2$ estimates declined and ranged from 0.18–0.24. This may be due to the increased influence of litter environment which had estimates ranging from 0.21–0.23. Solanes et al. (2004) and Ilatsia et al. (2008) have reported a similar trend of decreased $h^2$ and increased $c^2$

Table 1. Least–squares means (±S.E.) for piglet body weights at different ages.

| Trait | N   | Mean±S.D. (kg) |
|-------|-----|---------------|
| BW    | 5739| 1.00±0.01     |
| W1    | 3618| 2.02±0.02     |
| W2    | 3468| 3.25±0.03     |
| W3    | 3392| 4.54±0.05     |
| W4    | 3338| 5.83±0.06     |
| W5    | 3302| 7.01±0.07     |
| W6    | 3219| 8.20±0.09     |
| W7    | 3000| 9.48±0.10     |
| W8    | 2803| 11.00±0.15    |
| W12   | 1788| 18.49±0.25    |
| W32   | 998 | 64.52±0.90    |

Table 2. Genetic parameter estimates of piglet weights at different ages using REML procedures

| Trait | Model | $h^2$   | $m^2$   | $c^2$   | BIC    |
|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| BW    | 1     | 0.46±0.03| –       | –       | -32639.8|
|       | 2     | 0.25±0.05| 0.25±0.03| –       | -33132.2|
|       | 3     | 0.40±0.08| 0.35±0.05| –       | -33129.6|
|       | 4     | 0.33±0.05| – 0.16±0.02| –       | -33191.4|
|       | 5     | 0.31±0.04| 0.34±0.04| 0.14±0.03| -33160.7|
|       | 6     | 0.44±0.07| 0.10±0.06| 0.13±0.03| -33139.2|
| W1    | 1     | 0.41±0.04| –       | –       | -6695.8|
|       | 2     | 0.14±0.05| 0.27±0.03| –       | -7146.1|
|       | 3     | 0.24±0.07| 0.36±0.05| –       | -7141.7|
|       | 4     | 0.18±0.05| – 0.21±0.03| –       | -7262.5|
|       | 5     | 0.18±0.04| 0.0005±0.04| 0.21±0.04| -7230.5|
|       | 6     | 0.32±0.09| 0.08±0.06| 0.19±0.04| -7222.0|
| W2    | 1     | 0.43±0.04| –       | –       | -5119.5|
|       | 2     | 0.13±0.05| 0.31±0.03| –       | -4631.7|
|       | 3     | 0.26±0.08| 0.40±0.05| –       | -4638.1|
|       | 4     | 0.15±0.05| – 0.24±0.03| –       | -4492.6|
|       | 5     | 0.15±0.05| 0.00±0.05| 0.24±0.05| -4524.5|
|       | 6     | 0.31±0.09| 0.06±0.06| 0.23±0.04| -4536.0|
| W3    | 1     | 0.52±0.04| –       | –       | -12576.3|
|       | 2     | 0.19±0.05| 0.28±0.04| –       | -12099.0|
|       | 3     | 0.27±0.08| 0.39±0.06| –       | -12087.0|
|       | 4     | 0.21±0.05| – 0.23±0.03| –       | -12013.8|
|       | 5     | 0.20±0.05| 0.02±0.04| 0.22±0.05| -12045.0|
|       | 6     | 0.33±0.09| 0.09±0.08| 0.22±0.05| -12065.6|
| W4    | 1     | 0.52±0.04| –       | –       | -18011.4|
|       | 2     | 0.22±0.06| 0.27±0.04| –       | -17590.9|
|       | 3     | 0.25±0.08| 0.37±0.06| –       | -17561.1|
|       | 4     | 0.21±0.06| – 0.23±0.03| –       | -17490.2|
|       | 5     | 0.21±0.06| 0.01±0.04| 0.22±0.04| -17521.8|
|       | 6     | 0.30±0.09| 0.09±0.08| 0.45±0.05| -17546.6|
| W5    | 1     | 0.48±0.04| –       | –       | -22154.4|
|       | 2     | 0.23±0.06| 0.27±0.04| –       | -21758.4|
|       | 3     | 0.31±0.08| 0.39±0.06| –       | -21696.8|

$h^2$, direct heritability; $m^2$, maternal heritability; $c^2$, variance ratio due to permanent environmental component of the litter; BIC, Bayesian Information Criterion.
estimates from birth until 3 weeks of age. Literature estimates for $h^2$ at W3 were generally lower than ours and ranged from 0.03–0.18 (Solanes et al. 2004, Chimonyo et al. 2006, Canario et al. 2010).

For W6 and weaning weight (W8), the $h^2$ estimates (0.18–0.20) further diminished. There was a significant role of maternal influence ($m^2$) ranging from 0.30–0.37. Maternal genetic effects are presumably due to genetically controlled components of uterine nutrient supply, uterine capacity, and milk production (Kaufmann 2000). There was no significant role of litter effects as determined by the best model. The trend of decreasing heritability estimates from birth to weaning agreed with the findings of Solanes et al. (2004) and Alves et al. (2018) although trends to the contrary have also been reported (Kaufmann et al. 2000, Mondal et al. 2014). The heritability estimates at weaning were within range (0.06–0.47) of literature estimates (Kaufmann 2014). The heritability estimates at weaning were within range (0.06–0.47) of literature estimates (Kaufmann et al. 2000, Zhang et al. 2000, Solanes et al. 2004, Iltiasia et al. 2008). There was a moderate proportion of direct heritability (0.31–0.33) and permanent litter effects (0.21–0.36) for post-weaning piglet weights recorded at 12 and 32 weeks of age. The maternal effects were non-significant after the piglets had weaned from their mothers. Iltiasia et al. (2008) reported similar moderate estimates of post-weaning $h^2$ (0.26–0.39) and non-significant maternal effects.

**SUMMARY**

The direct heritability estimates for piglet weights in pre and post weaning stages were moderate and improvement through mass selection is plausible. In the pre-weaning stage, the piglets had maximum genetic potential at birth (BW) to be exploited through direct selection. The 3 random effects, namely direct additive, maternal additive and litter permanent environmental effects had significant roles during different phases of pre-weaning growth and all must be included in the model used for formulating a breeding program. For post-weaning traits, the direct additive and permanent litter effects were the predominant factors governing the variability. The non-significance of post-weaning maternal influence was as per expectation because the piglets moved away from maternal care after 8th week of age.

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