Sibling bullying during infancy does not make wimpy adults

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Despite frequent suggestions that dominance–subordination relationships in infancy can affect subsequent agonistic potential during adult life, to our knowledge no explicit test has been made. Experiments have shown that adverse conditions during early development can have long-term effects on a variety of traits ranging from growth to competitive behaviour. In many vertebrate species, the main social setting in which the infant develops is a sibling group where competition is often mediated by a dominance hierarchy. Here, we show in a long-lived marine bird that subordination to an aggressive sibling throughout infancy does not compromise aggressiveness years later during adult life. Former junior and senior chicks of the blue-footed booby (Sula nebouxii) always develop an archetypical relationship of dominance–subordination in which, throughout the four-month nesting period, one chick (generally the elder) reliably pecks, bites and threatens while the other reliably responds with submissive postures [11]. Detailed developmental analysis and experimental pairings of unfamiliar chicks have shown that these ‘trained winner’ and ‘trained loser’ roles are learned, persistent and powerful enough to prevail over large counteracting age/size inequalities [12]. But do trained winners outperform trained losers when it comes to defending territory, nest site and progeny against adult intruders several years later?

The booby’s dominance relationship confronts junior chicks with two additional developmental challenges [13]. First, during the first week of life, junior chicks receive fewer feeds and 17 per cent less fish from parents. This inequality continues thereafter and during the first three weeks of life junior chicks weigh 11 per cent less than senior chicks and exhibit a lower growth rate. However, between the fifth and tenth weeks, the growth of juniors exceeds that of seniors and by 70 days of age juniors are nearly as large and heavy as seniors. Second, levels of circulating corticosterone in junior chicks are 109 per cent higher than in senior chicks, at least between the ages of 15 and 20 days, probably owing to food deprivation. In addition, in an ‘El Niño’ year at least (under unfavourable environmental conditions), mothers deposited 10 per cent less yolk in second eggs than in first eggs, although the masses of first and second eggs did not differ [14]. Failure of former trained winners to outperform former trained losers in agonistic interactions during breeding would imply that aggressive subordination throughout infancy does not prejudice the development of adult aggressive behaviour, and further imply that neither do food deprivation followed by compensatory growth, elevated corticosterone or yolk deficit.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adverse conditions experienced during early development can play a key role in the life-history trajectories of organisms [1,2]. Experiments have shown that nutritional deficits during early development of vertebrates can prejudice growth, sexual attractiveness, immunocompetence, metabolic rate and competitive behaviour [1,2]. Even when poor nutrition is followed by compensatory growth, delayed costs can be expressed during adulthood [2], for example, in cognitive performance and dominance status [3,4]. Likewise, experimentally elevated circulating corticosterone in nestling birds can produce deficits in exploratory behaviour and competitiveness in adult life [5]. But does experience of aggression during early development, as aggressor or victim, affect an animal’s aggressive behaviour during adulthood?

Possibly, the most promising context for testing for such an effect is provided by the dominance relationships that mediate competition between infant broodmates and littermates (reviewed in [6]). It is frequently suggested that this sibling agonism affects competitive abilities and agonistic potential during adult life (e.g. [7–10]). Sibling relationships are often the main social setting in which the infant develops, and they can be sustained through a substantial part of early development, but no convincing test of their effects on agonistic behaviour during adulthood has been made in any species.

Here, we examined a long-lived marine bird for long-term or delayed effects of nesting dominance–subordination and its correlates on a social trait that is key to successful reproduction: aggressive nest defence. Two-chick broods of the blue-footed booby (Sula nebouxii) always develop an archetypical relationship of dominance–subordination in which, throughout the four-month nesting period, one chick (generally the elder) reliably pecks, bites and threatens while the other reliably responds with submissive postures [11]. Detailed developmental analysis and experimental pairings of unfamiliar chicks have shown that these ‘trained winner’ and ‘trained loser’ roles are learned, persistent and powerful enough to prevail over large counteracting age/size inequalities [12]. But do trained winners outperform trained losers when it comes to defending territory, nest site and progeny against adult intruders several years later?

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2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

(a) Study species

Throughout courtship, incubation and brood care, male and female blue-footed boobies singly and jointly defend a 7–20 m² patch of ground against neighbours and prospectors [15]. Defence involves ritualized handling of nest material, menaces, yes head-shakes, wing flaps and, occasionally, direct pecks and jabbing. Confrontations at territory boundaries during brood care pose a risk of territory loss, injury, damage to the brood and even infanticide ([11,16]; H. Drummond and O. Sánchez-Macouzet 1981–2010, personal observation).
but gender of the defending adult had a strong effect on the subject’s responses (between 15.00 and 18.00 h, with no effect of time of day on the subject’s behaviour during the next 4 min. All subjects responded to the intruder stimulus with aggressive displays almost immediately, with a negative-binomial error distribution. In addition to status, explanatory variables in the initial model included sex, age, age², hatch date (standardized to the rest of the natal cohort), a body size index (first component from a principal component analysis of body size (beak and ulna, ± 1 mm) and body mass (± 10 g)), number of chicks in the subject’s brood and current neighbourhood density (number of nests within 5 m). All explanatory variables and non-significant interactions and main terms were dropped sequentially to simplify the model. The reported significance of each term was assessed using likelihood ratio (L-ratio) tests to compare the simplified minimal adequate model with the model including a non-significant term or with the model excluding a significant term [18]. Analyses were carried out using R (R Development Core Team, v. 2.11.0).

3. RESULTS
Former senior and junior chicks did not differ in their aggression scores (GLM: L-ratio1,72 = 0.268, p = 0.60) or a quadratic term (GLM: L-ratio1,70 = 1.078, p = 0.30), and no difference in aggressiveness between former seniors and juniors emerged over the lifespan, at least up to age 13 years (GLM: status × age: L-ratio1,69 = 0.696, p = 0.40; figure 2).

Aggression was not significantly related to the subject’s hatch date (GLM: L-ratio1,75 = 1.116, p = 0.29), body size index (GLM: L-ratio1,73 = 0.266, p = 0.61), brood size (GLM: L-ratio1,74 = 1.072, p = 0.30) or neighbourhood density (GLM: L-ratio1,76 = 2.779, p = 0.10), or to any of the interactions included in the initial model (in all tests, p > 0.47).

4. DISCUSSION
Contrary to expectation, former juniors of both sexes defended their nests against a conspecific intruder stimulus as aggressively as former seniors. Measures of adult aggression in other contexts, including escalated battles, could yet reveal a difference between former juniors and seniors, but our findings suggest that the aggressive competitive ability of junior boobies is not compromised, at least up to age 13 years, by aggressive subordination throughout infancy, nor by food deprivation and elevated corticosterone in the same period, nor by an earlier yolk deficit. Nor, apparently, is aggressive competitive ability enhanced at any age up to 13 years by growing up in the privileged circumstances of a dominant sibling. As far as we know, this is the first study of a vertebrate species in the
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