

Chapter 9

Odour-mediated host selection and discrimination in mosquitoes

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Abstract

Haematophagous female mosquitoes differ in their selection of hosts, ranging from generalists to specialists. Specialist mosquitoes, particularly those that prefer to feed on humans, constitute a significant threat to human health, as they can transmit pathogens causing, e.g. malaria, yellow fever, dengue and West Nile fever. To select and discriminate among potential vertebrate host species, mosquitoes rely heavily on their sense of smell. In this chapter, we distinguish between host preference and choice, terms that often are used erroneously in conjunction with host selection and discrimination, and the methods used to define these behaviours. Increasing evidence suggest that mosquitoes rely on odour blends, often composed of shared generic volatile organic compounds, for host discrimination. The identity of these host-related compounds is discussed, along with available information on their cognate chemosensory receptors and neural circuitry. Fundamental knowledge underlying the molecular mechanisms regulating odour-mediated host selection will continue to be key for our improved understanding of the genetic basis and evolution of host discrimination. While there has been significant progress in revealing the mechanisms regulating odour-mediated host discrimination in mosquitoes, we conclude that there are still open questions to address.

Keywords: host preference, host choice, chemosensory receptors, evolution

9.1 Introduction

More than 3,500 mosquito species have been described worldwide, including both blood-feeding and non-blood-feeding taxa (Clements, 1999; Lehane, 2005). Host choice by haematophagous mosquitoes is highly diverse, as are their habitats, with female mosquitoes feeding on humans, non-human primates, other mammals, birds, amphibians and even mudskippers, as well as invertebrates (Clements, 1999; Harris *et al.*, 1969; Reeves *et al.*, 2018; Tempelis, 1975; Verhulst *et al.*, 2018). Mosquitoes locate and discriminate among potential hosts based primarily on the detection of olfactory cues in host emanates (Cardé, 2015; McBride, 2016; Takken and Knols, 1999; Takken and Verhulst, 2013; Tchouassi *et al.*, 2022). The majority of mosquito species does not exhibit a preference for specific hosts, but feeds opportunistically within a host range available in their respective habitat (Clements, 1999; Lyimo and Ferguson, 2009; Takken and Verhulst, 2013). The proportion of mosquito species that bite in a non-random manner have been demonstrated

to select hosts based on unique odour signatures (Costantini *et al.*, 1998; DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; Lehane, 2005; Rudolfs, 1922; Takken and Verhulst, 2013), although the exact mechanism remains vague. This chapter will focus on odour-mediated inter-specific host discrimination; for a review including other sensory modalities, see Wolff and Riffell (2018).

Host preference and host choice are often used interchangeably, but describe two different, although related, concepts (e.g. Fikrig and Harrington, 2021). Host preference is defined as the intrinsic character underlying selection by a female mosquito for one host type over another (e.g. Boreham and Garrett-Jones, 1973). Host choice, on the other hand, is the feeding pattern of a female mosquito in nature that is the result of host preference and other factors, such as host availability (i.e. abundance and accessibility), host defensive behaviour, past foraging experience and physiological state (Lyimo and Ferguson, 2009; Takken and Verhulst, 2013).

The purpose of this chapter is to present the current knowledge of the role of olfaction in host selection amongst different vertebrate species by mosquitoes, with a focus on those species that are anthropophilic, i.e. prefer human hosts, and are thus potential vectors of transmissible diseases. This chapter will try to answer the following questions: How do mosquitoes recognise complex olfactory cues? What makes a host smell unique? How do specialist mosquitoes exploit this uniqueness? How have mosquitoes potentially evolved to do so? Not only are these questions academically intriguing, but they are also of significance to human health and vector control.

9.2 Methods to assess mosquito host choice and preference

Host choice of a female mosquito can readily be determined by analysing the blood meal in the midgut of engorged mosquitoes, either, historically, by precipitin test (Bruce-Chwatt *et al.*, 1966; Tempelis, 1975), or, more recently, by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA; Beier *et al.*, 1988; Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009b) or DNA-based methods (Molaei *et al.*, 2008; Thiemann *et al.*, 2012). Within a population of mosquitoes, different approximations for anthropophily and host choice can then be calculated. The human blood index (HBI), calculated as the proportion of blood meals obtained from humans, is widely used as a measure for anthropophily and is an important component for calculating vectorial capacity, and thus estimating the risk of, e.g. malaria transmission posed by *Anopheles* mosquitoes (Bruce-Chwatt *et al.*, 1966; Garrett-Jones, 1964). However, the HBI reflects host choice, which is not necessarily congruent with host preference, as the feeding choice of a female mosquito in nature is modulated by other factors, such as host availability (e.g. Boreham and Garrett-Jones, 1973; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2006). Related measures, such as the forage ratio (FR; Hess *et al.*, 1968), take the relative abundance of host species into account, but have been criticised for the difficulty of conducting an accurate host census and equating host abundance with availability (Kay *et al.*, 1979). The proposed alternative, the feeding index (FI; Kay *et al.*, 1979), relies on observed, in relation to expected, feeding proportions. Nonetheless, all of these measures deal with the difficulty of disentangling inherent host preference from a variety of external and internal factors, such as host density, accessibility, past foraging experience and physiological state, which demonstrate a certain degree of behavioural plasticity of mosquitoes to adapt to varying conditions (Lyimo

and Ferguson, 2009; Takken and Verhulst, 2013). As an example, the sibling species *Anopheles gambiae* and *Anopheles coluzzii* (formerly *An. gambiae* S and M form, respectively; Coetzee *et al.*, 2013), are generally characterised as highly anthropophilic in both laboratory and field experiments when testing for host preference (e.g. Costantini *et al.*, 1998; Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009b; Pates *et al.*, 2001), but feed readily on cattle when humans are not abundant or not accessible due to the use of bed nets (Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009b). The use of bed nets has, in addition, been suggested as a requirement for effective zooprophyllaxis, i.e. the reduced risk of human biting in the presence of non-human hosts, against highly anthropophilic mosquitoes, when humans are in close proximity to livestock (Donnelly *et al.*, 2015, but see Asale *et al.*, 2017). Another example includes *Culex pipiens*, a vector of West Nile virus, which prefers to feed on the American robin, but when birds migrate south in late summer and early fall, they switch to less preferred, but more available, mammalian hosts, including humans (Edman and Taylor, 1968; Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2006; Thiemann *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, host preference may be modulated by learning (for a general review, see Vinauger *et al.*, 2016); *Culex vishnui* females revisit select hosts after a positive feeding experience (Mwandawiro *et al.*, 2000) and *An. coluzzii* females avoid certain host species after a first negative feeding experience during which they initially did not exhibit a preference (Vantaux *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, *Aedes aegypti* females were shown to aversively learn the odour of humans and rats, but not chickens (Vinauger *et al.*, 2018).

Consequently, experiments testing for inherent host preference in both field and laboratory settings need to be designed carefully (for a review, see Fikrig and Harrington, 2021). Since host odours are the primary cues used by mosquitoes for host discrimination (Costantini *et al.*, 1998; DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; Lehane, 2005; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Rudolfs, 1922; Takken and Knols, 1999; Takken and Verhulst, 2013), preference should be tested in a setting that presents female mosquitoes simultaneously with two (or more) odour sources from among which to select. For this purpose, live hosts (DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; Gillies, 1964; Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009a; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Meza *et al.*, 2019; Rose *et al.*, 2020), odour samples such as worn sleeves, animal hair or feathers (Busula *et al.*, 2015; DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Verhulst *et al.*, 2018; Zhao *et al.*, 2022), headspace collections from hosts or host material (De Moraes *et al.*, 2014) or synthetic blends mimicking host odour (Busula *et al.*, 2015; Okumu *et al.*, 2010) can be used. For methods involving the presentation of host material or host-derived odours instead of live hosts, it is crucial to be aware of potential biases due to, e.g. host size, sorbent material and sampling method. In the field or semi-field, host preference assays include experimental huts with chambers containing hosts (Gillies, 1964), odour-baited traps (Busula *et al.*, 2015; Costantini *et al.*, 1999; Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009b; Okumu *et al.*, 2010), or traps using electrocuting grids surrounding host-odour sources (Meza *et al.*, 2019; Torr *et al.*, 2008). Host preference in the laboratory can be assessed using two-port olfactometers (DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; Gouck, 1972; Knols *et al.*, 1994; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Rose *et al.*, 2020), Y-tubes (Lefèvre *et al.*, 2009a; Omondi *et al.*, 2019) or continuous observation of mosquito behaviour in a wind tunnel (Lacey *et al.*, 2014). Alternatively, well-controlled one-choice assays may be used, in which the level of attractiveness is measured for several samples individually and subsequently compared (e.g. Majeed *et al.*, 2016; Spanoudis *et al.*, 2020). Resulting from these experiments, the odour-mediated host preferences of mosquitoes may be determined, revealing consistent patterns of preference ranging from generalist to specialist.

9.3 Mosquito olfaction, host odorants and blends

Mosquitoes are equipped with a highly sophisticated olfactory system, which detects, identifies and interprets volatile chemical cues in their environment (reviewed by, e.g. Konopka *et al.*, 2021; Ruel and Bohbot, 2022; Wheelwright *et al.*, 2021). Volatile cues are detected by olfactory sensory neurons (OSNs), whose dendrites are housed in specialised sensilla on the antennae, maxillary palps and labella (Pitts *et al.*, 2022; Suh *et al.*, 2014). Odorants diffuse through pores in the cuticle of these sensilla, where they encounter odorant binding proteins that are thought to act as an initial filter and to transport the typically hydrophobic molecules through the aqueous lymph to reach the chemosensory receptors on the OSN dendrites (e.g. Leal, 2013; Pelosi *et al.*, 2018; Wheelwright *et al.*, 2021). With exceptions (Ye *et al.*, 2021; Younger *et al.*, 2022), each OSN expresses a specific set of receptor(s) belonging to either the odorant receptor (OR), ionotropic receptor (IR) or gustatory receptor (GR) gene families (Karner *et al.*, 2015; Suh *et al.*, 2014 and references therein). Odorant receptors, as well as IRs, form multimeric ion channels with one (*orco*; Larsson *et al.*, 2004) or one or more of three (*Ir8a*, *Ir25a*, or *Ir76b*; Abuin *et al.*, 2011; Benton *et al.*, 2009) co-receptors, respectively. Neurons expressing receptors of the OR family recognise a diverse range of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), such as terpenes, aldehydes, esters, alcohols, aromatics and ketones (Carey *et al.*, 2010), whereas the more conserved IRs have currently been shown to respond to carboxylic acids and amines (Pitts *et al.*, 2017; Raji *et al.*, 2019). Several of these chemical classes have been identified in host emanates (Bernier *et al.*, 1999, 2000, 2008; Penn *et al.*, 2007; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Odour detection by the GR pathway is limited to carbon dioxide and acetone, key chemical cues present in exhaled breath, that are detected by a complex of two to three GRs (Ghaninia *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2007; McMeniman *et al.*, 2014; Younger *et al.*, 2022). Axons of OSNs from the antennae and maxillary palps converge onto organised neuropils, called glomeruli, in the antennal lobe (AL), whereas neurons from the labella converge onto the suboesophageal zone (Ghaninia *et al.*, 2007a,b; Riabinina *et al.*, 2016). Sensory input is subsequently relayed to higher brain centres, where information is processed, evaluated and translated into a behavioural response (e.g. Galizia and Rössler, 2010; Heisenberg, 2003; Strutz *et al.*, 2014).

Human, as well as non-human, host odour are complex blends of up to hundreds of individual VOCs (Bernier *et al.*, 1999, 2000, 2008; Birkett *et al.*, 2004; Jaleta *et al.* 2016; Penn *et al.*, 2007). Of the vast spectrum of VOCs present in host odour, mosquitoes detect only a fraction, as the odour space of a species is defined and limited by the selectivity and sensitivity of their chemosensory receptor repertoire (Carey *et al.*, 2010; Omondi *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2010). The tuning of this repertoire, while partly overlapping with that of distantly-related taxa, appears to have evolved to detect specific VOCs present in host emanates, and reflects the ecological adaptation of the mosquito taxa (Carey *et al.*, 2010; Chen *et al.*, 2019; de Fouchier *et al.*, 2017; Pitts *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2010). Available functional data on ORs and IRs, furthermore, suggest that a subset of the OR repertoire, and thus its described odour space, is sufficient to regulate host discrimination in mosquitoes (DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Omondi *et al.*, 2019; Pitts *et al.*, 2017).

Which are the VOCs used by mosquitoes to discriminate between host types? To address this, early studies focussed on individual compounds enriched in human sweat, but less present in the emanations of other animals, such as lactic acid and ammonia (Figure 9.1A; Braks *et al.*, 2001;

Dekker *et al.*, 2002; Smallegange *et al.*, 2005). Lactic acid is approximately 10-times more abundant in human skin emanates than in the emanates of other vertebrates tested, and, while not attractive on its own, attracts female *An. gambiae* and *Ae. aegypti* in combination with carbon dioxide, which is required for activating and gating host-seeking mosquitoes (Acree *et al.*, 1968; Dekker *et al.*, 2002, 2005; McMeniman *et al.*, 2014). Adding lactic acid to cattle odour increases the attraction of *An. gambiae* to a level similar to that to human odour (Dekker *et al.*, 2002), as previously demonstrated for non-attractive animal odours in *Ae. aegypti* (Steib *et al.*, 2001). Such context-dependent behavioural response of *Ae. aegypti* and *An. coluzzii* has also been shown for (*R*)-1-octen-3-ol, a salient mammalian-associated odorant, when added to a background of chicken odour (Majeed *et al.*, 2016). These and other examples, such as ammonia (Braks *et al.*, 2001; Geier *et al.*, 1999; Smallegange *et al.*, 2005), demonstrate that individual compounds do not elicit robust attraction mimicking the behavioural response to more complex host odours. The limitations of using individual or a subset of volatile compounds outside of their ecological context, and neglecting natural release rates, are evident by recent studies demonstrating that blends of salient odour cues, acting additively or synergistically, are consistently more attractive than individual compounds, often eliciting a behavioural response at natural release rates and lower thresholds (Bosch *et al.*, 2000; Mukabana *et al.*, 2012; Okumu *et al.*, 2010; Omondi *et al.*, 2019; Smallegange *et al.*, 2005, 2009; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). This is also true for lactic acid and ammonia when presented in more complex blends (Bosch *et al.*, 2000; Okumu *et al.*, 2010; Smallegange *et al.*, 2005, 2009). Increasing the release rate of individual compounds or of the blend beyond that found naturally in the environment often decreases attraction or elicits avoidance in host-seeking mosquitoes (Logan *et al.*, 2010; Majeed *et al.*, 2016; Menger *et al.*, 2014; Smallegange *et al.*, 2005), likely due to unspecific activation of chemosensory receptors, habituation or sensory adaptation (Andersson *et al.*, 2015; Carey *et al.*, 2010; Hallem and Carlson, 2006; Stengl *et al.*, 1992). Taken together, early studies indicated the differential presence of individual VOCs in host emanates, with more recent studies emphasising the importance of the blend context of these VOCs for robust attraction to potential hosts, and suggesting a role for individual VOCs in host discrimination (Figure 9.1A).

Combined chemical and electrophysiological analyses have enabled the identification of bioactive VOCs in the odour profile of different host species, identifying many compounds that are shared between host species (Figure 9.1B) and other fitness-related resources, such as nectar sources and oviposition sites (e.g. Ignell and Hill, 2020; Takken and Knols, 1999). This concept, termed chemical parsimony, describes that a VOC may occur in multiple contexts and serve different functions, reflecting conserved biosynthetic pathways (Blum, 1996). A ketone highly abundant in human odour, sulcatone, is a candidate odorant mediating host discrimination in *Ae. aegypti* (Figure 9.1A; McBride *et al.*, 2014), but is also common in floral emanates (Knudsen *et al.*, 2006), indicating an additional role outside the context of the animal host (Dekel *et al.*, 2019). Many aldehydes, for example nonanal and decanal, are likewise parsimonious compounds that are differentially abundant within and among host species (Figure 9.1A), nectar sources and oviposition sites (Bernier *et al.*, 2008; Curran *et al.*, 2005; Ignell and Hill, 2020; Omondi *et al.*, 2019; Syed and Leal, 2009; Wondwosen *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Increasing evidence suggests that parsimonious compounds make up the core of host odour blends, and that the differential abundance of these VOCs, in concert with other salient host compounds, create the odour signatures that are detected by the olfactory system of mosquitoes and used for host discrimination.

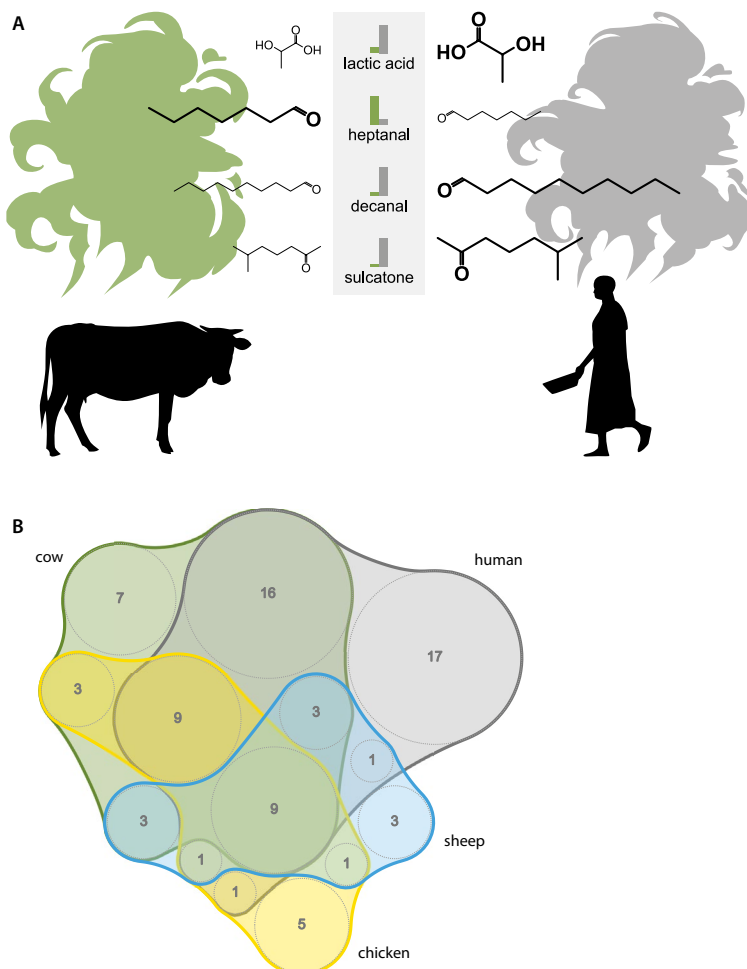


Figure 9.1. Volatile organic compounds are used by mosquitoes for host species discrimination. (A) Select generic volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released at different rates from cattle and human may be exploited by mosquitoes for discriminating among these potential hosts. (B) Quasi-proportional Venn diagram of VOCs emitted by different potential host species that have been shown to elicit a physiological response in female vector mosquitoes. Generic, often parsimonious, VOCs, along with VOCs tentatively identified as species-specific, provide the basis by which female mosquitoes may select and discriminate among potential hosts. Note that the diagram may be biased towards human VOCs and that further analysis will be required to define species-specific and generic VOCs. Data from Allan *et al.* (2006), Bernier *et al.* (2008), Birkett *et al.* (2004), Bosch *et al.* (2000), Bowen (1992), Cooperband *et al.* (2008), Cork and Park (1996), Costantini *et al.* (2001), Curran *et al.* (2005), Ghaninia *et al.* (2019), Gikonyo *et al.* (2002), Harraca *et al.* (2009), Healy *et al.* (2002), Isberg *et al.* (2016), Jaleta *et al.* (2016), Jhumur *et al.* (2007), Knols *et al.* (1997), Majeed *et al.* (2016), Meijerink *et al.* (2000), Mukabana *et al.* (2012), Nyasembe *et al.* (2018), Omondi *et al.* (2019), Owino *et al.* (2015), Peled *et al.* (2012), Penn *et al.* (2007), Qiu *et al.* (2006), Raji *et al.* (2019), Robinson *et al.* (2018), Seenivasagan *et al.* (2014), Smallegange *et al.* (2009), Tchouassi *et al.* (2013), Van den Broek and Den Otter (1999) and Zhao *et al.* (2022), supplemented with unpublished data from RI. Method for quasi-proportional Venn diagram visualisation: Pérez-Silva *et al.* (2018).

Using our current knowledge on the human odour signature detected by mosquitoes, we can start speculating on how female mosquitoes may discriminate among different host types. Sulcatone, geranylacetone and the long-chain aldehydes, decanal and undecanal, are considered human marker compounds, as they are consistently found in higher abundance in human than in non-human emanations (Figure 9.1A; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, these are breakdown products of human sebum (Wisthaler and Weschler, 2010). Human odour, on the other hand, contains a low proportion of short-chain aldehydes, such as hexanal and heptanal, which are more abundant in other animals (Figure 9.1A; Bernier *et al.*, 2008; Zhao *et al.*, 2022), including our closest living relatives, bonobos and chimpanzees (Verhulst *et al.*, 2018). The human odour signature, as defined by both quantitative and qualitative differences in salient and generic VOCs, elicits a unique response in the primary olfactory centre of *Ae. aegypti*, which differs from that elicited by other animal host odours (Zhao *et al.*, 2022). The relative activation of a glomerulus narrowly tuned to long-chain aldehydes and a broadly-receptive glomerulus tuned to generic compounds found in host emanates is sufficient to drive the host-seeking behaviour of this mosquito species. Such combinatorial coding likely allows mosquitoes to recognise and differentiate among different host species.

To further discern the mechanism underlying odour-mediated host discrimination by mosquitoes, it will be critical to expand the analysis to include a larger number of hosts, potential hosts and known non-hosts, as well as to create a platform for high resolution chemical analysis allowing for direct cross-comparison. Once the odour compositions of these species are available, it will be possible to deduce the salient characteristics, which make a host odour, be it human or other, unique and which features are exploited by specialist and generalist mosquitoes. Increasing the complexity of the system, individuals of the same host species show distinct variation within the host odour signature (Qiu *et al.*, 2006; Verhulst *et al.*, 2011, 2018; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Host odour coding thus needs to be flexible enough to account for intra-specific differences, while being stereotyped enough to discriminate between host and non-host odour.

9.4 Genes, receptors and neurons underlying host preference

The question of how mosquitoes evolved various host preferences by exploiting the uniqueness of host odours can be approached on several levels (Arguello and Benton, 2017; Cande *et al.*, 2013; Zhao and McBride, 2020). First, structural changes, or changes in the expression level of chemosensory and/or regulatory genes, may alter neural specificity and sensitivity to salient host VOCs. Second, changes in the number of neurons or neural connectivity in both the peripheral and central nervous systems may modulate the detection, coding and evaluation of odour stimuli. Fundamental to the exploration of these approaches is undoubtedly the heritability of host preference, which initially gained attention in the 1960s and 70s, when Gillies (1964) and Mukwaya (1977) performed selection and crossing experiments with mosquito populations of different host preferences. Gillies (1964) demonstrated that it is possible to alter the host preference of *An. gambiae* females, within a few generations of continued selection. A similar selection experiment with anthropophilic *Ae. aegypti* mosquitoes by Mukwaya (1977) was inconclusive, but crosses of anthropophilic and non-anthropophilic strains of *Ae. aegypti* and *Ae. simpsoni*, revealed an intermediate host preference of the offspring, respectively. Subsequent studies on

Anopheles identified specific chromosomal arrangements associated with feeding preference (Lulu *et al.*, 1998; Main *et al.*, 2016; Petrarca and Beier, 1992), although these results may be biased by sampling methodology, host availability and habitat preference (e.g. Main *et al.*, 2016; Meza *et al.*, 2019; Mlacha *et al.*, 2020; Tambwe *et al.*, 2021). Thus, while early studies did not have the means to identify underlying genes, chemosensory receptors or neuronal mechanisms, they clearly demonstrated a genetic component of host preference. With advancing molecular tools, the identification of the first insect odorant receptor genes in *Drosophila melanogaster* (Clyne *et al.*, 1999; Gao and Chess, 1999; Vosshall *et al.*, 1999) and the release of the genome of *An. gambiae* and other mosquito species (Arensburger *et al.*, 2010; Holt *et al.*, 2002; Neafsey *et al.*, 2015; Nene *et al.*, 2007), it is now feasible to correlate differences in gene and microsyntenic structure, as well as expression levels of chemosensory receptors, with anthropophily and host preference in general (DeGennaro *et al.*, 2013; Rinker *et al.*, 2013; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Main *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the molecular and neuronal mechanisms of host choice have received increased attention in the last few years, driven by technological advancements in, e.g. next generation sequencing and gene editing tools for mosquitoes (e.g. reviewed in Chen *et al.*, 2021; Reegan *et al.*, 2016; Riabinina *et al.*, 2016; Zhao *et al.*, 2021).

A major breakthrough for identifying the mechanism regulating host discrimination was the study by DeGennaro *et al.* (2013), which demonstrated that the OR pathway is crucial for *Ae. aegypti* to discriminate human from non-human hosts, by knock-out of the OR co-receptor, *orco*. While female *orco* mutants are still attracted to host odours, they no longer prefer human over non-human odour, suggesting that *Ae. aegypti*, and most likely mosquitoes in general, rely on ORs, IRs and GRs to convey signals regulating host attraction, with ORs, in addition, being crucial for host discrimination. In support of this hypothesis, McBride *et al.* (2014) compared the OR repertoire of two subspecies of *Ae. aegypti* with diverging host preferences, the anthropophilic 'domestic' form and the ancestral 'forest' form, which is zoophilic in its host preference. The study found a significant association between mosquito host preference, and both expression and ligand-sensitivity of *AaegOr4*, a receptor responding to sulcatone, a compound enriched in human body odour. In comparison to the zoophilic subspecies, the anthropophilic subspecies demonstrated a higher level of transcript abundance of *AaegOr4*, and expressed several allelic variants that had a higher binding affinity to its ligand sulcatone. Notably, adding sulcatone to the non-preferred guinea pig odour did not elicit a preference in anthropophilic mosquito strains, indicating that although *AaegOr4* expression and sensitivity is tightly associated with host preference, it is likely not the only olfactory pathway involved (McBride *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, while sensitivity to sulcatone may be important in host discrimination, the mechanism by which it is detected is not shared across mosquito species, as there is no orthologue for *AaegOr4* in *Anopheles* mosquitoes (Neafsey *et al.*, 2015), although several *Anopheles* ORs are responsive to sulcatone (Carey *et al.*, 2010; Omondi *et al.*, 2019). Other studies comparing the genome or transcriptome of closely-related species with diverging host preference support the hypothesis that host specialisation is not driven by the evolution of any single host-specific OR, but by several changes in OR abundance and function that resulted in a receptivity bias towards odours associated with specific hosts (Athrey *et al.*, 2017; Main *et al.*, 2016; Neafsey *et al.*, 2015; Rinker *et al.*, 2013). Differential antennal transcriptome analyses of the closely-related anthropophilic *An. coluzzii* (then named *An. gambiae* s.s., M form; Coetzee *et al.*, 2013) and the zoophilic *Anopheles quadriannulatus* identified several amino acid

changes between orthologous ORs in regions that may affect their function (Rinker *et al.*, 2013). To test this, Rinker *et al.* (2013) used *in silico* modelling, suggesting that the odour receptivity of the specialist *An. coluzzii* is a refinement of the broadly-receptive generalist sibling species *An. quadriannulatus*. Not only are these refinements found to be changes in sensitivity, but they can also reflect regulation of selectivity and pattern of expression, as demonstrated for the *Cx. quinquefasciatus* Or8 paralogous receptors, *CquiOr113*, *CquiOr114b* and *CquiOr118b* (Hill *et al.*, 2015; Xu *et al.*, 2015). While all current evidence support ORs as the regulators of host preference, at this point we cannot fully exclude the possibility that other chemosensory genes may play a role in host discrimination. The aforementioned studies identified additional significant and prominent differences in gene sequences and transcription levels of chemosensory genes outside the class of ORs (Athrey *et al.*, 2017; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Rinker *et al.*, 2013), specifically IRs. Further functional characterisation of ORs and the largely overlooked IRs is thus crucial to identify potential candidate receptors involved in mediating mosquito host preference.

Comparative *in vivo* single sensillum recordings, in which the response of single OSNs to synthetic host VOCs were assessed, further support the hypothesis that differences in host preference is reflected in the sensitivity and proportion of OSNs responding to host or non-host VOCs, and the complete loss or gain of OSN types (Ghaninia *et al.*, 2019; Majeed *et al.*, 2016, 2017; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Van den Broek and Den Otter, 1999; Zhao and McBride, 2020 and references therein). Support for this hypothesis is most evident in studies comparing the OSN repertoire of the closely related species within the *An. gambiae* complex that differ in host preference (Ghaninia and Ignell, unpublished data; Van den Broek and Den Otter, 1999). These studies demonstrate a correlation between host preference and the sensitivity and the number of functional classes of OSNs tuned to host VOCs, such as phenolic derivatives, geranylacetone, 1-octen-3-ol and fatty acids. This suggests that evolutionary adaptation for specific hosts or a host range is regulated by changes at the peripheral olfactory system, determined by the type and expression of endogenous chemosensory receptors on the OSN dendrites (Hallem *et al.*, 2004; McBride *et al.*, 2014; Rinker *et al.*, 2013).

At the level of the central olfactory circuitry, host preference may be regulated by differential weighing of the input from the peripheral olfactory system by second order neurons in the antennal lobe (AL), and further processing in higher brain centres (Zhao and McBride, 2020 and references therein). While there currently is no study targeting the central mechanisms of host preference directly, a recent study in *Ae. aegypti* by Zhao *et al.* (2022) proposed a coding mechanism by which human and non-human odours can be discriminated at the AL level. These authors demonstrated that human and non-human odours elicit activation of distinct combinations of glomeruli, and that human odour in particular elicits activity in a specialised glomerulus tuned to the long-chain aldehydes decanal and undecanal. Furthermore, the authors proposed a model in which human identity is encoded by the relative activation of the ‘human-specific’ and a broadly tuned glomerulus, and demonstrated that a synthetic binary blend mimicking the human ratio of glomerular activation was sufficient to elicit host-seeking behaviour. Whether the distinct activation of AL glomeruli by human and non-human odours is sufficient to convey odour valence to higher brain centres, as described in *D. melanogaster*, remains to be assessed (Knaden *et al.*, 2012; Mohamed *et al.*, 2019; Strutz *et al.*, 2014).

Future exploration, using state-of-the-art tools, e.g. gene editing, gene drive and inducible gene expression, will facilitate the identification and characterisation of the neural circuitry underlying host discrimination and choice in mosquitoes (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Riabinina *et al.*, 2016; Sorrells *et al.*, 2021; Zhao *et al.*, 2021). For this purpose, the study by Auer *et al.* (2020) in *Drosophila* may serve as a benchmark to demonstrate adaptations in receptor tuning and neuronal connectivity underlying behavioural divergence. Despite correlative links between olfactory gene expression, neural function and host preference, no causal evidence of such links has yet been provided. A compelling experiment would be to genetically knock out a candidate receptor and rescue that knockout with the ectopic expression of its orthologous receptor, mediating species-specific host preference endogenously or in a related mosquito species. While a knockdown study of two ORs in *Ae. albopictus* by Liu *et al.* (2016) did not find an effect on host discrimination, two studies in *Drosophila* were the first to establish a causal connection between genetic differences in OR gene sequence and resource preference (Auer *et al.*, 2020; Matsunaga *et al.*, 2022).

9.5 Evolution of host specialisation in mosquitoes

Based on the principles of natural selection, resource specialisation in any species evolves only if it is associated with benefits for the reproductive success of an animal (MacArthur and Pianka, 1966). Although females of most mosquito species are generalists or poly-specialists (Clements, 1999; Lehane, 2005), i.e. they feed randomly on hosts or a host range present in their habitat, there are intriguing examples of host specialists, such as *Uranotaenia rutherfordi*, which appears to feed exclusively on the Kandian shrub frog (de Silva *et al.*, 2020). Due to their involvement in disease transmission, most research has inevitably focused on the few mosquito species that have evolved a preference for humans, such as *Ae. aegypti*, *An. gambiae* and *An. coluzzii* that vector infection to more than 300 million people, resulting in 700,000 deaths annually (World Health Organization, 2020). However, while our understanding of the evolution of host specialisation is biased towards humans, the principles may be applicable to other species.

Anthropophily likely arose concomitantly with the increase in human population density, starting from circa 10,000 years ago during the course of the Neolithic revolution, in which many human societies transitioned from nomadic hunting and gathering to agriculture and settlements (Ayala and Coluzzi, 2005; Besansky *et al.*, 1994). At this time, humans became more numerous and sedentary, making this host resource increasingly predictable. Intense human land-use, accompanied by deforestation and irrigation, furthermore provided ample breeding sites for mosquitoes (Besansky *et al.*, 2004; Lyimo and Ferguson, 2009; Rose *et al.*, 2020). Genetic studies of both mosquito and human populations confirm that anthropophilic subpopulations of, e.g. *Ae. aegypti* and *Cx. pipiens* evolved within this time frame (Besansky *et al.*, 2004; Crawford *et al.*, 2017; Fonseca *et al.*, 2004), and select *An. gambiae s.l.* evolved a preference for human hosts (White *et al.*, 2011), as indicated by human adaptation to high malaria mortality occurring within the last 6,000 years (Flint *et al.*, 1993; Tishkoff *et al.*, 2001). Anthropophily in mosquitoes likely evolved several times independently, as major speciation events in mosquitoes occurred long before the emergence of hominins about 4.5 million years ago (Krzywinski *et al.*, 2006; Neafsey *et al.*, 2015; Prüfer *et al.*, 2012). The two genera of *Aedes* and *Anopheles* diverged about 145 to 226 million years ago (Krzywinski *et al.*, 2006; Reidenbach *et al.*, 2009), with several species-specific expansions of the chemosensory gene

repertoire observed to date (Arensburger *et al.*, 2010; Bohbot *et al.*, 2007; Neafsey *et al.*, 2015). As an example, the number of OR genes range from 77 in *An. gambiae s.s.* (Neafsey *et al.*, 2015) to 117 in *Ae. aegypti* (Matthews *et al.*, 2018) and 180 in *Cx. quinquefasciatus* (Arensburger *et al.*, 2010). From an evolutionary perspective, it is interesting how these anthropophilic mosquito species have resolved the same problem of differentiating human odour from that of other species by using an overlapping, yet divergent, chemosensory repertoire.

Two main hypotheses, while not mutually exclusive, have been proposed to explain the evolution of anthropophily in mosquitoes (Costantini *et al.*, 1999; Lyimo and Ferguson, 2009; Powell *et al.*, 2018; Rose *et al.*, 2020). First, anthropophily may have arisen as a result of direct fitness benefits from feeding on humans. Dietary speciation is predicted to evolve if there is a trade-off between using a limited versus a large variety of food resources (Egas *et al.*, 2004; Futuyama and Moreno, 1988; Jaenike, 1990; MacArthur and Pianka, 1966; Pyke *et al.*, 1997). In mosquito evolution, specialism may be advantageous when one host species is abundant and there are additional fitness advantages, such as high energetic gains of feeding on that host or low host defensive behaviour (Lyimo and Ferguson, 2009). Generalism, however, may be favoured when the chance of encountering a specific host species is low and/or there are limited fitness advantages from feeding on a restricted host range. Mosquito reproduction and survival does indeed vary with the host type on which they feed, but reports on the nutritional benefits of human blood for anthropophilic mosquitoes diverge in their conclusion (Harrington *et al.*, 2001; Lyimo *et al.*, 2012; Nayar and Sauerman Jr, 1977; Woke, 1937). Secondly, anthropophily might be a by-product of mosquitoes seeking and adapting to favourable microhabitats associated with human dwellings, with benefits either for individual survival and/or for breeding (Costantini *et al.*, 1999; Powell *et al.*, 2018; Rose *et al.*, 2020). Recent work by Rose *et al.* (2020) in *Ae. aegypti* found a strong association between human preference and dry season intensity, suggesting seasonal dependence on human-made breeding sites, such as stored water, as a key factor driving the evolution of anthropophily. Thus, human feeding preference may have evolved due to specialisation to the reliably high abundance of humans in close proximity. In the context of other, non-anthropophilic, specialist mosquito species, the evolution of host specialisation may have been driven by similar mechanisms. Whether the preference for a limited variety of host species is a cause or an outcome of specialisation remains open (Futuyama and Moreno, 1988).

9.6 Conclusion and future perspectives

While there has been significant progress in our understanding of the mechanisms regulating odour-mediated host discrimination in mosquitoes, there are still many open questions to address. The initial step would be to extend the analysis of the odour profiles of potential host species in order to pave the way for extensive comparative studies determining qualitative and quantitative differences in volatile composition. Second, chemosensory receptors mediating host preference require systematic deorphanisation and recharacterisation, using ecologically relevant odours and concentrations, including both ORs and IRs. Third, despite correlative evidence, experimental support is required to describe causative links among receptor expression, function and neural circuits with host discrimination, using the constantly improving and expanding tool set of genetic methods in mosquitoes. Ultimately, understanding the regulation of mosquito host preference

may aid in developing new tools and strategies to control mosquito populations and thus reduce disease transmission. Promising approaches are zooprophyllaxis, the development of novel lures for odour-baited traps (e.g. Homan *et al.*, 2016; Okumu *et al.*, 2010) and the identification of repellent compounds from non-hosts (e.g. Jaleta *et al.*, 2016). While further analysis is required for identifying and evaluating the active VOCs, the major constraints to overcome are the cost, time and corporate partners required for meeting regulations and subsequent registration of novel odour-based tools.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our two reviewers for their valuable comments.

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