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diffEnrich: An R Package to Compare Functional Enrichment Between Two Experimentally-derived Groups of Genes by Connecting to the KEGG REST API

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Abstract

Motivation: To aid in the biological interpretation of a list of candidate genes and proteins generated as part of omics studies, researchers quantitate the enrichment of known pathways or biological functions among the genes of interest. With the advent of new technologies and new experimental designs, it is often of interest to compare enrichment of a particular pathway between two gene lists (i.e., differential enrichment). **Results:** This package provides a number of functions that are intended to be used in a pipeline. Briefly, a function within the package will map species-specific ENTREZ gene IDs to their respective Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) pathways by accessing the KEGG REST API. The KEGG API is used to guarantee the most up-to-date pathway data from KEGG. Next, another function will identify significantly enriched pathways in two gene sets independently. The user can then identify pathways that are differentially enriched between the two gene sets using a third function. This package also provides a plotting function. **Availability and implementation:** diffEnrich is freely available on the Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN). Issues and bug reports can be submitted to the GitHub page `https://github.com/SabaLab/diffEnrich/issues`. **Supplementary information:** A step-by-step tutorial is provided on the diffEnrich GitHub page `https://github.com/SabaLab/diffEnrich`, and example data are included in the package.

Keywords: differential enrichment, KEGG REST API, R.

1. Introduction

Often high throughput omics studies include a functional enrichment analysis to glean biological insight from a list of candidate genes, proteins, metabolites, etc. Functional enrichment examines whether the number of genes in the list associated with a biological function or particular pathway is more than would be expected by chance. As an example, enrichment of a particular pathway among a list of genes that are differentially expressed after an experimental manipulation may indicate that the pathway has been altered by that manipulation. This analysis is rather straight forward and many solutions have been offered (e.g., Huang *et al.* (2009); Kuleshov *et al.* (2016); Liao *et al.* (2019); Subramanian *et al.* (2005)). A wide variety of databases have also been used to define these pathways (e.g., Kanehisa and Goto (2000)) and ontologies (e.g., Ashburner *et al.* (2000)).

One key component of a statistically rigorous functional enrichment analysis is the definition of a background data set that can be used to estimate the number of candidate genes that are "expected" to be associated with the pathway by chance, e.g., if 5% of genes in the background data set are associated with a pathway then 5% of candidate gene are expected to be associated with the pathway by chance. For many study designs, the background data set is relatively simple to define (e.g., RNA-Seq analyses where the background data set includes genes expressed above background).

However, for some newer omics technologies, the background data set is hard to define. For example, LC-MS analysis can be used to identify carbonylated proteins (Petersen *et al.* (2018); Shearn *et al.* (2019); Shearn *et al.* (2018)). With this study design, carbonylated proteins are isolated using a BH-derivation and then LC-MS is used to identify peptides in this isolated sample. The most appropriate background data set would be proteins present in that tissue, but this would require a separate analytical analysis. Furthermore, most functional enrichment analyses involve a single gene list. However, in protein modification studies, the typical experimental design compares the presence or absence of particular modified proteins between multiple groups.

When there are two or more gene lists to compare and the background gene list is not clearly defined, as is often the case in protein modification experiments, we propose a differential enrichment analysis. In this analysis, we compare the proportion of genes/proteins from one gene list associated with a particular pathway to the proportion of genes/proteins from a second gene list that are associated with that pathway. To easily execute this analysis, we have designed an R package that uses the KEGG REST API to obtain the most recent version of the KEGG PATHWAY (Kanehisa and Goto (2000)) database to initially identify functional enrichment within a gene list using the entire KEGG transcriptome as the background data set and then to identify differentially enriched pathways between two gene lists. This R package includes a function to generate a "differential enrichment" graphic.

KEGG is a database resource for understanding high-level functions of a biological system, such as a cell, an organism and an ecosystem, from genomic and molecular-level information `https://www.kegg.jp/kegg/kegg1a.html`. KEGG is an integrated database resource consisting of eighteen databases that are clustered into 4 main categories: 1) systems information (e.g. hierarchies and maps), 2) genomic information (e.g. genes and proteins), 3) chemical information (e.g. biochemical reactions), and 4) health information (e.g. human disease and drugs) `https://www.kegg.jp/kegg/kegg1a.html`.

In 2012 KEGG released its first application programming interface (API), and has been adding

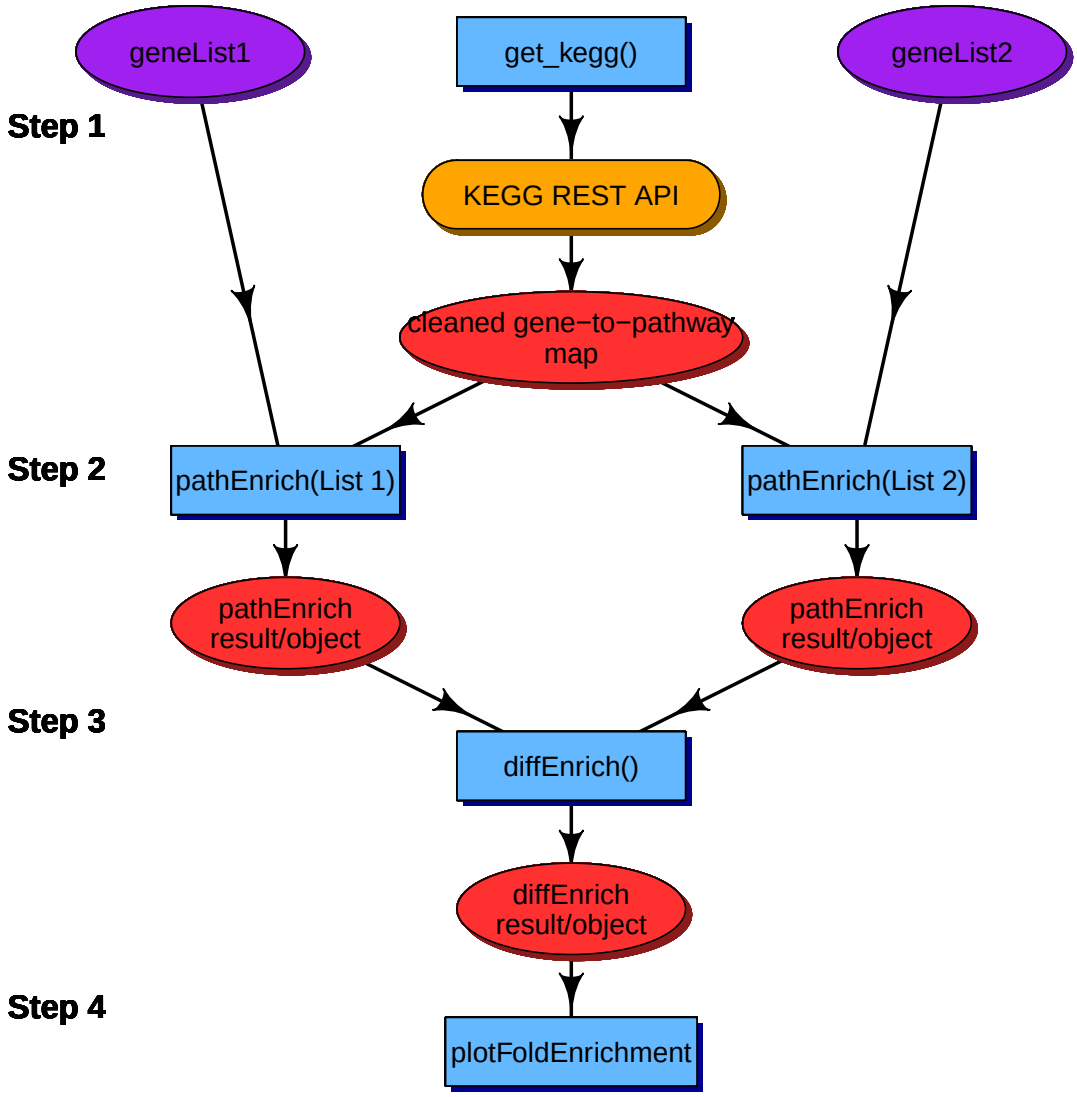

Figure 1: **diffEnrich Analysis pipeline.** Functions within the diffEnrich package are represented by blue rectangles. The data that must be provided by the user is represented by the purple ovals. Data objects generated by a function in diffEnrich are represented by red ovals. The external call of the `get_kegg` function to the KEGG REST API is represented in yellow.

features and functionality ever since. There are benefits to using an API. First, API's, like KEGG's, allow users to perform customized analyses with the most up-to-date versions of the data contained in the database. In addition, accessing the KEGG API is very easy using statistical programming tools like R or Python and integrating data retrieval into user's code makes the program reproducible. To further enforce reproducibilty diffEnrich adds a date and KEGG release tag to all data files it generates from accessing the API. For update histories and release notes for the KEGG REST API please visit https://www.kegg.jp/kegg/rest/.

The goal of the diffEnrich package is to compare functional enrichment between two experimentally-derived groups of genes or proteins. This package provides four functions that are intended to be used in an ordered pipeline (Figure 1).

2. Features

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