



Leveraging GWAS for complex traits to detect signatures of natural selection in humans

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Natural selection can shape the genetic architecture of complex traits. In human populations, signals of positive selection at genetic loci have been detected through a variety of genome-wide scanning approaches without the knowledge of how genes affect traits or fitness. In the past decade, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have provided unprecedented insights into the genetic basis of quantitative variation in complex traits. Summary statistics generated from these GWAS have been shown to be an extraordinary data source that can be utilized to detect and quantify natural selection in the genetic architecture of complex traits. In this review, we focus on recent discoveries about selection on genetic variants associated with human complex traits based on GWAS-facilitated methods.

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Introduction

Quantitative genetics aims to understand trait variation within and between populations, including how genetic variation arises, is maintained and changes over generations. Genetic architecture of any complex trait can be defined as the number of loci affecting the trait and the joint distribution of allele frequency and effect size at the trait-associated loci [1]. The genetic architecture of a complex trait could be shaped by natural selection, since observations about the segregation of loci that are associated with a trait in the current population is a consequence of evolutionary forces in the past. For example, trait-associated variants that reduce fitness will be constrained in frequency and, conversely, variants

that confer increased adaptation will tend to increase in frequency [2].

In the past decade, the experimental design of genome-wide association studies (GWAS) has provided unprecedented insights into the genetic basis of complex trait variation in humans [3]. In addition to individual-level data (genome-wide genotypes and one or multiple phenotypes measured on the same individuals), there are now GWAS summary statistics available on hundreds of complex traits, each consisting of estimated effect sizes and sampling variance at millions of SNP variants. This extraordinary data source can be leveraged to detect signatures of natural selection in the genetic architecture of complex traits.

Here we review recent discoveries about selection on genetic variants associated with complex traits using GWAS data. We first briefly overview the essence of classical and their recently extended versions of genome-wide scanning approaches for locus-specific signatures of positive selection (natural selection favouring beneficial mutations) and then focus on summarizing GWAS-facilitated methods and their applications to identify signals of natural selection on alleles associated with complex traits.

Genome-wide scanning approaches for locus-specific signatures of selection

There are multiple empirical methods to detect evidence of selection without the knowledge of how individual loci or genes are associated with traits or fitness.

Signals of positive selection have been detected at more than 4000 gene loci through a variety of approaches such as the genome-wide scans using molecular polymorphism data within and between populations and comparative methods using sequence divergence between human and other primates and between modern and archaic humans (e.g. Neanderthals and Denisovans) [4]. Positive selection increases the frequency of the focal variant and reduces genetic variation at its linked neighbouring loci. Genome-wide scanning approaches detect such variation patterns and test against expectation under neutrality (refer to [4,5] for a comprehensive review of methods and [2] for exemplars of local adaptation in humans). Most methods of this kind utilize changes in allele frequency or linkage disequilibrium (LD) (Table 1). A strong selective sweep can push variants under selection to fixation, giving rise to increased homozygosity at nearby neutral loci due to LD.

Table 1

Methods to detect selection signals at individual locus and loci associated with human complex traits

	Genome-wide scans for locus-specific selection without trait information	GWAS-facilitated analysis for selection at trait-associated loci
Allele frequency-based	A surplus of rare alleles [56]	Singleton density score to infer allele frequency shifts associated with complex traits [55**]
	Distorted spectrum towards derived alleles [57]	Variation of allele frequencies among populations at trait-associated loci [22]
	Extreme differentiation between populations measuring by locus-specific F_{ST} [58]	Differentiation of genetic predictors (allele frequencies weighted by genetic effects) between populations [26]
	Correlation of differences in allele frequency to non-genetic factors (e.g. discrete population index, gradients of population ancestry, age groups and ecological conditions) [9,11,14,15]	Relationship between allele frequency and genetic effect [38**,41]
LD-based	Homozygosity of haplotypes [6]	Variation of LD scores among populations at trait-associated loci [23]
	LD decay of homozygous SNPs [59]	Levels of LD versus per-SNP heritability within population [39**]
	Identity-by-descent (IBD) analyses [60]	

The LD-based approaches essentially assess the excess of homozygosity around a locus to test whether the locus has been under selection. Such methods (e.g. integrated haplotype score (iHS) [[2*]]) have been shown to be more powerful than allele-frequency-based approaches in detecting signals of incomplete selective sweep, where the variants under selection are still segregating in the population.

Different alleles can be favoured in different populations due to varied environmental conditions, resulting in differentiation of allele frequency between populations (measured as Wright's fixation index (F_{ST}) [7]) [8]. Such differentiation can be implemented in the framework of regression to detect association with different environmental factors [9,10], age groups [11,12] and populations [13–15] (Table 1). For example, Yang *et al.* detected genome-wide signals of high-altitude adaptation in Tibetans by testing the difference in allele frequency of each SNP between Tibetan and Han Chinese populations, whilst conditioning on the background genetic differentiation between these populations by fitting a mixed linear model [15].

In GWAS, principal component analysis (PCA) on SNP data is routinely used to detect, quantify and adjust for population structure [16]. PCA can also be used to detect evidence of selection, by testing the association of individual loci with a principal component (PC). If specific genomic loci explain a disproportionate amount of variation in PCs then this is evidence for selection because under drift population differences are randomly spread among many loci. PC-based selection statistics are conceptually very close to the estimates of SNP-specific F_{ST} [17], but can provide meaningful genome-wide statistical inference and are more suitable when populations are admixed or when pre-specification of populations is not available [13,14,18].

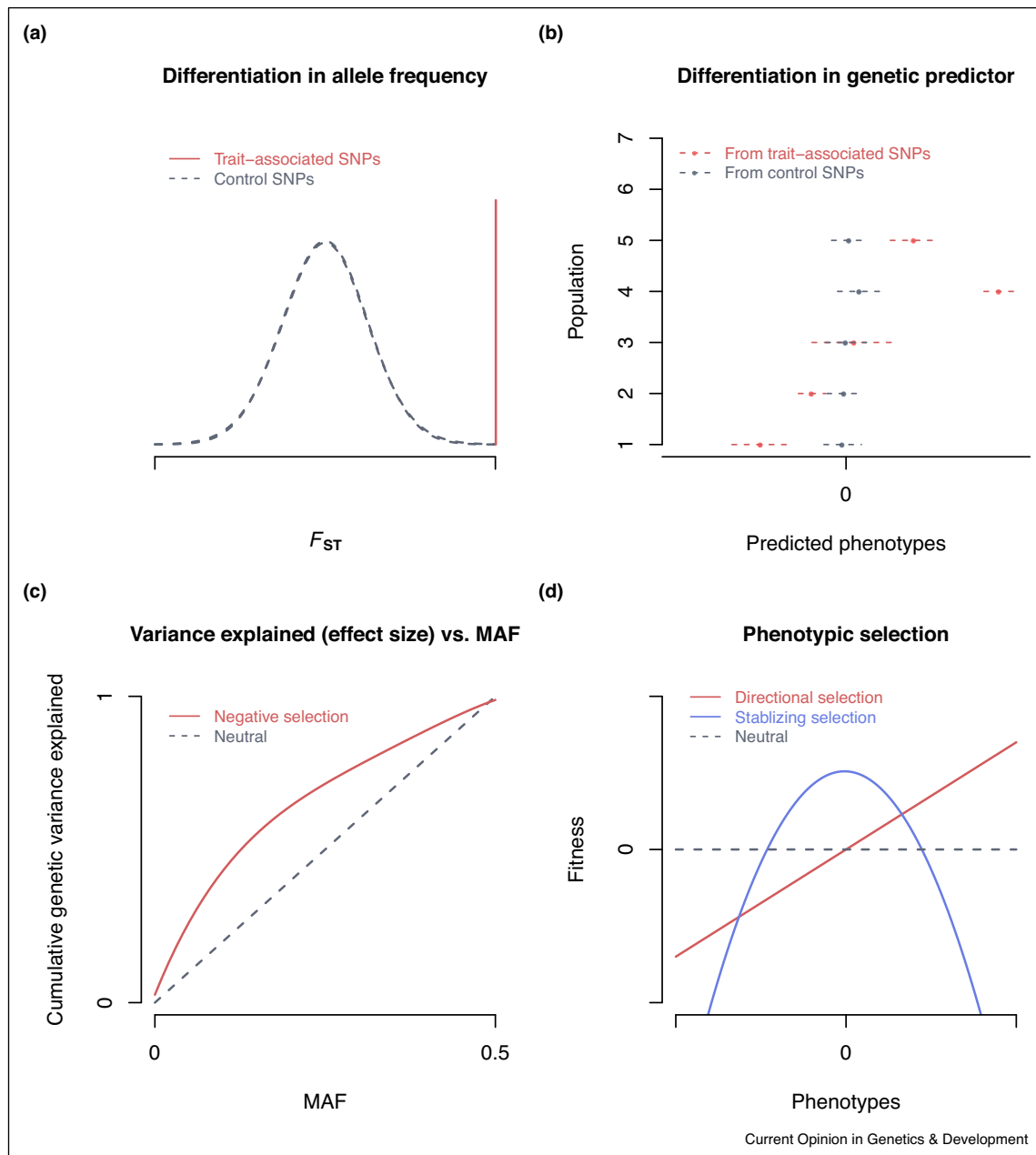
GWAS-based approaches for signatures of selection at trait-associated loci

It has been shown in GWAS that most human complex traits, including common diseases, are highly polygenic, that is, the genetic variation of a complex trait in a population is caused by a large number of genetic variants [3]. This means that the effect of an individual locus on the trait is, on average, small, which implies that the signatures of selection at trait-associated loci are also likely to be small. Therefore, methods that interrogate the genome for signatures of selection without the use of trait information are not powerful when selection and adaptation is polygenic [19]. GWAS data can be leveraged in a number of ways to detect and quantify selection, first, by contrasting differences in population frequencies of trait-associated variants to frequencies of the same number of variants chosen at random (with similar minor allele frequency (MAF) and LD features as the associated variants), second, by quantifying the variation in predicted genetic values between and within populations, and third, by quantifying the relationship between effect sizes and allele frequencies across loci. In this section, we discuss these methods to detect signatures of selection facilitated by GWAS data (Table 1).

Differentiation in allele frequency at trait-associated loci

There is substantial difference in phenotypic mean among human populations for many complex traits, for example height [20] and prevalence of common disease such as schizophrenia [21]. Such phenotypic differences have led researchers to investigate whether this is associated with genetic differentiation in allele frequency at trait-associated loci and whether the genetic differentiation is driven by natural selection. The first attempt traces back to Lohmueller *et al.* [22] at the early stage of GWAS, where the mean F_{ST} value of a set of 39 GWAS-identified SNPs associated with ~20 traits did not appear to show stronger differentiation than that of random SNPs in the

Figure 1



Detection and quantification of natural selection using GWAS data. The four schematic plots correspond to GWAS-based approaches to quantify differentiation in **(a)** allele frequencies and **(b)** genetic predictors, **(c)** to model the relationship between MAF and effect sizes of SNPs and **(d)** to estimate the strength of selection on phenotypes via fitness.

genome. A more recent study [23] detected signatures of natural selection at SNPs associated with three complex traits: height, schizophrenia and waist-hip-ratio adjusted to body-mass-index (Figure 1a). This study gained power from using summary-level data from published GWAS with very large sample sizes ($n = \text{up to } \sim 405\,000$). The direction of genetic differentiation (at least partly driven by natural selection) varied across traits and populations. For example, the trait-increasing loci were enriched in

Europeans for height but East Asians were enriched for alleles that were associated with increased waist-to-hip ratio. Such a systematic shift was first reported for height between Northern and Southern Europeans [24].

Differentiation in genetic predictors across populations and over time

We have mentioned above that systematic frequency shifts at many loci under polygenic selection will lead

to a difference in mean genetic values between populations. These can in principle be detected using genetic predictors. Genetic predictors of a trait (sometimes termed polygenic scores or polygenic risk scores) are the sum of alleles weighted by their corresponding genetic effects estimated in GWAS [25]. Berg *et al.* made use of genetic predictors to detect local adaptation by testing if the genetic predictors for a given trait are over-dispersed among populations against that expected under a neutral model [26]. Racimo *et al.* recently presented a novel method to detect which population is subject to natural selection and when the selection processes occurred [27]. However, caution is required when interpreting the detected signals given first, the existing debate of the portability of GWAS results (e.g. effect sizes of genetic variants) generated in European ancestry populations to non-European populations and second, a potential between-population difference in LD between GWAS tag variants and true causal variants [28–30]. Robinson *et al.* found selection signals based on the predicted height across fourteen European countries by focusing on trait-associated loci selected via meta-analysis in a European-ancestry sample but re-estimating the genetic effects in a within-family study design to avoid the confounding in estimated SNP effects due to population stratification [31] (Figure 1b).

Genetic predictors can also be used to investigate a shift in the mean genetic value for a trait in a population over time. Kong *et al.* applied a genetic predictor of educational attainment (a proxy for intelligence and other behavioural traits) to data spanning a 100-year period in Iceland and observed a decrease in the average value of the predictor, consistent with a reported negative genetic covariance between reproductive fitness and educational attainment [32].

Relationship between allele frequency and effect size

Mutations with large effects on traits might have been maintained at low frequencies due to their disadvantageous effects on fitness, by negative selection (selective removal of deleterious alleles) [33]. Such an inverse relationship between allele frequencies and effect sizes has been used to detect signatures of selection [34–36]. Speed and colleagues proposed to fit a parameter to model the association between effect size and allele frequency directly in the context of estimation genetic variation from individual-level GWAS data [37]. Zeng *et al.* recently used a Bayesian mixed linear model to estimate the relationship between MAF and effect size, the degree of polygenicity and SNP-based heritability simultaneously from GWAS data [38**] (Figure 1c). They found widespread signatures of negative selection across 23 traits including reproduction related traits such as age at menopause and waist-hip-ratio, anthropometric traits such as height and behaviour traits such as education attainment years, in line with previous reports [39**,40]. These findings appear to contradict the signals of local

positive selection detected for height as discussed above. However, the authors proposed that when the genetic variants of a trait are undergoing stronger negative selection than positive selection, a population as a whole evolves towards adaptation whilst stabilizing selection keeps deleterious alleles at low frequencies. Whereas Zeng *et al.* estimated the relationship between effect size and allele frequency from GWAS data directly and interpreted the estimated parameter in terms of selection, a different approach is to model the selection process explicitly by assuming an evolutionary model [34,41]. Simons and colleagues modelled the genetic architecture of a trait assuming stabilizing selection and pleiotropy, and estimated selection coefficients of ~ 0.001 at loci associated with height and BMI from GWAS summary statistics [41].

Detection of phenotypic selection in contemporary populations

GWAS data in the current population can be used to detect signals of natural selection in the past that have caused population frequency differences at trait-associated alleles, mean genetic differences between populations and an association between effect size and allele frequency. GWAS data can also be leveraged to quantify phenotypic selection in contemporary populations, by using a proxy trait for fitness. The most commonly used proxy trait of fitness is lifetime reproductive success (LRS; the number of children ever born for females or children fathered for males), reflecting the genetic contribution of an individual to the next generation [42]. Barban *et al.* leveraged GWAS in European samples to identify genetic loci influencing the traits age at first birth and/or number of children ever born, reproductive behavioural traits strongly related to fitness. They detected 12 independent SNP-based loci and one locus harbours SNPs with signals of positive selection detected by iHS [43]. On the phenotypic level, how strongly selection acts can be inferred from a linear regression of fitness (e.g. relative LRS, individual LRS divided by the population mean) on trait values (also known as selection gradient) [44] (Figure 1d). Accordingly, the effects of selection on the genetic level can be inferred by estimating the correlation coefficients between rLRS and genetic predictors built from external GWAS summary data [32,45**] or by estimating the genetic correlation between rLRS and a trait of interest (e.g. height), using a mixed linear model analysis of individual-level genotype data [46] or LD score regression analysis of summary data [47]. Previous studies found consistent evidence of directional selection on anthropometric traits (e.g. increased body-mass-index (BMI) and decreased height) at both the phenotypic and genetic level. In contrast, only partial agreement was found for phenotypically more complex traits, e.g. reproduction. For example, the correlation between age at menopause and rLRS is positive at a phenotypic level but appears to be negative at the genetic level [47]. The latter is inconsistent with a previous finding that selection tends to

increase reproductive lifespan (earlier age at first birth and later age at menopause) (see [48] and Discussion in [47]).

Future directions

We have reviewed how GWAS data and methods can be leveraged to detect and quantify selection for human complex traits. A few points of caveats and potential interests for future studies are worth to point out. First, widespread polygenicity [3,49] and pleiotropy [50,51] are the two primary characteristics of the genetic architecture of complex traits. Therefore, GWAS-based results of polygenic tests of selection need careful interpretation [30]. For example, the differentiation signals of allele frequency at trait-associated loci do not necessarily mean the traits themselves have been directly targeted by selection but probably through the genetic variants that have pleiotropic effects on fitness [52]. Studies making use of fitness-proxy traits or multiple traits in one context [53] are expected to illustrate this more directly. Second, whole-genome sequencing data will provide more accurate measures of selection for the genetic variants with low frequencies. Johnson and Voight recently used an extended version of the iHS method to detect positive selection signals within and shared between 20 populations using whole genome sequence (WGS) data from the 1000 Genomes Project [54]. Field *et al.* used WGS data leveraged by GWAS results to infer very recent (past ~80 to 120 generations) changes in allele frequencies at trait loci, consistent with polygenic sweeps for height and other traits [55].

In the future, there will be deeper coverage of genetic data (from SNP arrays to sequence data), results from ever-larger GWAS for more traits and across multiple populations. Such data will offer opportunities to better understand genetic differences in trait values between and within populations and should lead to the estimation of locus-specific selection coefficients.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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