**Intensity of infection with intracellular *Eimeria* spp. and pinworms is reduced in hybrid mice compared to parental subspecies**

**Abstract**

Animal systems offering a range of hybrid genomes between two parental species are scarce, and represent a great opportunity to study the control of parasite burden by their host (resistance). In the European House Mouse hybrid zone, the longstanding impression is that hybrid mice are more highly parasitized and less fit than parentals persists despite the findings of recent studies. Working across a novel transect we assessed infections by intracellular protozoans, *Eimeria spp.*, and infections by extracellular macroparasites, pinworms. For *Eimeria* we found lower intensities in hybrid hosts than in parental mice but no evidence of lowered probability of infection or increased mortality in the centre of the hybrid zone. This means ecological factors are very unlikely to be responsible for the reduced load of infected hybrids. Focusing on parasite intensity (load in infected hosts) we also corroborated reduced pinworm loads reported for hybrid mice in previous studies. We conclude that intensity of diverse parasites, including the previously unstudied *Eimeria*, is reduced in hybrid mice compared to parental subspecies. We suggest caution in extrapolating this to differences in hybrid host fitness in the absence of, for example, evidence for a link between parasitemia and health.

**Keywords: parasites, hybridization, resistance, eimeria**

**Introduction**

The relevance of hybridization, producing individuals admixed between genetically distinct populations, is increasingly recognized by biologists. Mallet (2005) suggested that hybridization occurs in more than 10% of animal species and 25% of vascular plant species. Recently, the realization that humans are also a product of hybridization has raised interest further (Green et al., 2010). In a conservation context hybridization with introduced species can threaten autochthonous endangered animals (Simberloff, 1996). Parasites are omnipresent in natural systems. They represent a major threat for human and animal health, especially protozoans and helminths (Schurer, Mosites, Li, Meschke, & Rabinowitz, 2016). It is therefore important for biologists to comprehend the interplay between parasites and hosts under hybridization.

The European house mouse hybrid zone (HMHZ), one of the first animal hybrid zones studied for differences in parasite loads (Sage, Heyneman, Lim, & Wilson, 1986), is a tension zone characterized by selection against hybrids replaced by immigrating less admixed mice (Barton & Hewitt, 1985). After ∼500 000 years of (mostly) allopatric divergence two house mouse subspecies, *Mus musculus domesticus* and *Mus musculus musculus* (hereafter Mmd and Mmm), have come into secondary contact in Europe as a result of different colonization routes south and north of the Black Sea, respectively (Boursot, Auffray, Britton-Davidian, & Bonhomme, 1993; Duvaux, Belkhir, Boulesteix, & Boursot, 2011). The HMHZ is about 20 km wide and more than 2500 km long, running from Scandinavia to the coast of the Black Sea (Baird & Macholán, 2012; Boursot, Auffray, Britton-Davidian, & Bonhomme, 1993; Jones, Kooij, Solheim, & Searle, 2010; Macholán, Kryštufek, & Vohralík, 2003). This zone represents a semi-permeable barrier to gene flow between the two taxa (Macholán et al., 2007; Macholán et al., 2011). The main selective forces acting against hybrids are thought to be endogenous rather than ecological (Baird & Macholán, 2012; Boursot, Auffray, Britton-Davidian, & Bonhomme, 1993), for example disruption of spermatogenesis in hybrids (Albrechtová et al., 2012; Turner, Schwahn, & Harr, 2012). The HMHZ was.

Parasites are traditionally seen as decreasing their hosts’ fitness, and differences in resistance to parasites between hybrid and pure hosts was suggested to affect the dynamics of hybrid zones (Fritz, Moulia, & Newcombe, 1999). This traditional framework postulates differences in parasite loads in hybrids vs. parental hosts to result in effects on the strength of host species barriers. Nevertheless, recent work in controlled condition have shown that resistance (host capacity to reduce parasite burden) and tolerance (reduced impact of a given parasite burden on host health) are not necessarily correlated (Råberg, Sim, & Read, 2007).

Initial results on parasites obtained in the HMHZ and experimental studies seemed to indicate elevated parasite loads in hybrids. This has been interpreted as potentially leading to fitness reductions in hybrids, hampering hybridization and thus reinforcing species barriers (Moulia et al., 1991; Moulia, Le Brun, Dallas, Orth, & Renaud, 1993; Sage et al., 1986). Infection experiments using the protozoan *Sarcocystis muris* led to a similar conclusion (Derothe, Le Brun, Loubes, Perriat-Sanguinet, & Moulia, 2001). Other laboratory experiments, however, showed either no effect of inter-subspecies F1 on helminth load or even reduced load in inter-subspecies F1 compared to pure mouse strains (Derothe, Porcherie, Perriat-Sanguinet, Loubès, & Moulia, 2004; Moulia, Le Brun, Loubes, Marin, & Renaud, 1995). The more recent field study, with a high statistical power, found reduced helminth loads (especially the pinworms *Aspiculuris tetraptera* and *Syphacia obvelata* and the whipworm *Trichuris muris*) in hybrid mice (Baird et al., 2012). It should also be noted that the design of the field studies preceding the Baird et al. (2012) reappraisal usually suffered from low sample sizes and/or maintenance of mice under laboratory conditions before assessment of parasite burden, which may have allowed spurious signal to dominate the results. Nevertheless, even the basic direction of parasite load differences in hybrid mice compared to parental genotypes seems still controversial to some researchers.

We now see that, despite working within the framework of the same hybrid zone, two different interpretations of parasite loads in hybrid mice have arisen. It should be noted that all the previous studies chose to focus on either helminthic or protozoan parasite model. Nevertheless, in vertebrates, the immune mechanisms under parasite control differs greatly between these two groups. Extracellular macroparasites like helminths trigger a T helper type 2 (Th2) -dominated response, and intracellular microparasites like protozoan trigger a T helper type 1 (Th1) -mediated response (Sher & Coffman, 1992). One way forward in such circumstances is to check over replicates, and to consider simultaneously helminths and protozoans to address the generality of hybrid response. To distinguish between the load interpretations we therefore, in a new transect replicate of the HMHZ, asked if (1) parasite loads are higher or lower in hybrids compared to parentals, and (2) if these loads are consistent, or differ, between prevalent representative helminths and protozoan.

Pinworms (oxyurids) have been detected in mice in numerous field studies (see for example Behnke, 1975; Behnke, 1976; Kriska, 1993; Ressouche et al., 1998). They have been shown to be the most prevalent helminths infecting house mice in the HMHZ (Goüy de Bellocq, Ribas, & Baird, 2012). They are often considered to provoke mild symptoms on their hosts, even if in some rare conditions (e.g. particularly high burden) they have been shown to affect the health of laboratory mice (Taffs, 1976). *Eimeria* spp. are often considered host-specific, with several thousand species parasitizing different vertebrates (Chapman et al., 2013; Haberkorn, 1970). These parasites infect the intestinal epithelial cells of vertebrates and induce symptoms such as weight loss and diarrhoea. For example, infecting the NMRI mouse laboratory strain with *Eimeria* oocysts isolated from mice captured in the HMHZ resulted in a weight loss up to 20% compared to control (Al-khlifeh et al., 2019). In the European HMHZ, three *Eimeria* species have been identified: *E. ferrisi*, *E. falciformis*, and *E. vermiformis* with prevalences of 16.1%, 4.2% and 1.1%, respectively (Jarquín-Díaz et al., 2019).

We assessed *Eimeria* infection in a novel transect of the HMHZ in Brandenburg, northeastern Germany, in which the hypothesis of hybrid resistance/susceptibility to parasite was never assessed. We tested the impact of host hybridization on intensity of this parasite. By focusing on parasite intensity (extent of parasite infection in only infected hosts; Bush et al. 1997), we arguably exclude ecological factors for differences in load. We show that (1) parasite loads are consistently lower in hybrids compared to parental genotypes in the HMHZ and (2) that this pattern is similar for our intracellular and extracellular parasite models.

**Material & Methods**

**Sampling**

Our sampled individuals consist of 660 house mice trapped using live traps placed in farms or houses between 2014 and 2017. The study area ranges from 51.68 to 53.29 degrees of latitude (200 km) and from 12.52 to 14.32 degrees of longitude (140 km). Each year mice were trapped in September when it is possible to capture a high number of mice in this region. In addition, sampling at the same season every year reduces potential seasonal variation (Abu-Madi, Behnke, Lewis, & Gilbert, 2000; Haukisalmi, Henttonen, & Tenora, 1988). The locations for trapping were selected in a geographical range allowing to capture both parental and hybrid/recombinant populations. Mice were individually isolated in cages and then euthanized by isoflurane inhalation followed by cervical dislocation and dissection within 24 hours after capture (animal experiment permit No. 2347/35/2014). Tissue samples (muscle and spleen) were put to liquid nitrogen and stored at -80°C for subsequent host genotyping. Digestive tracts were dissected and inspected for helminth parasites (see below). Ileum, caecum and colon tissues were frozen in liquid nitrogen and then stored separately at -80°C. Individual mice were measured (body length from nose to anus) and weighted.

**Host genotyping**

The admixture proportion of mouse genomes across the HMHZ was estimated for each mouse as a value of the hybrid index (HI) calculated as a proportion of Mmm alleles in a set of 4-14 diagnostic markers (at least 10 loci in 92% of the mice). This set consists of one mitochondrial marker (*Bam*HI, a restriction site in the *Nd1* gene; Božíková et al., 2005; Munclinger, Božíková, Šugerková, Piálek, & Macholán, 2002), one Y-linked marker (presence/absence of a short insertion in the *Zfy2* gene; Boissinot & Boursot, 1997; Nagamine et al., 1992), six X-linked markers (three B1 and B2 short interspersed nuclear elements in *Btk*, *Tsx* (Munclinger, Boursot, & Dod, 2003), and *Syap1* (Macholán et al., 2007), *X332*, *X347* and *X65* (Dufková, Macholán, & Piálek, 2011; Ďureje, Macholán, Baird, & Piálek, 2012)), and six autosomal markers (*Es1*, *H6pd*, *Idh1*, *Mpi*, *Np*, *Sod1*; Macholán et al., 2007). HIs ranged from 0 to 1, HI of 0 indicating a pure Mmd and HI of 1 a pure Mmm (Baird et al., 2012; Macholán et al., 2007). The histogram of distribution of markers, as well as the distribution along the hybrid index, are shown for each analysis in **Supplementary Figure S1**.

The expected centre of the HMHZ across the study area was estimated using the program Geneland v4.0.8 (graphical resolution increased over defaults, code available at https://github.com/alicebalard/Geneland) based on a subset of the six autosomal markers that were genotyped in all individuals with 6 diploid markers (N=598 mice). Geneland uses a Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) approach to combine both geographical and genetic information (Guillot, Mortier, & Estoup, 2005). The number of clusters was set to 2, 106 MCMC iterations were performed and saved every 100th iterations (104 iterations saved). The first 200 iterations were discarded as burn-in and the resolution of the map was set to 2000 pixels for the x axis and 1400 for the y axes corresponding roughly to 1 pixel for 100m (Macholán et al., 2011).

**Parasite load estimation**

Mouse digestive tracts were dissected and inspected for helminth presence with a binocular microscope. Helminths were counted and stored in 70% ethanol for later identification by molecular analysis and, when more than one worm per host was present, in 3.5% formalin for later morphological comparison with species descriptions. As in this study we need a high statistical power to test our hypothesis, we considered only the most prevalent helminths, the oxyurids *Syphacia obvelata* and *Aspiculuris tetraptera*. Histograms presenting the distribution of other helminths counts can be found in **Supplementary Figure S2.**

DNA was extracted from ileum and caecum tissues and quantitative PCR (qPCR) was used for estimation of *Eimeria* spp. load. DNA extraction was performed using the innuPREP DNA Mini Kit (Analytik Jena AG, Jena, Germany) following the instructions of the manufacturer with additional mechanical tissue disruption with liquid nitrogen in a mortar. Both quality and quantity of isolated DNA were measured by spectrophotometry in a NanoDrop 2000c (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, USA). The presence of *Eimeria* spp. was tested using qPCR to detect intracellular stages of the parasite as well as house mouse house keeping gene as internal reference. Primers used for *Eimeria* spp. detection targeted a short mitochondrial *COI* region that was shown to allow identification of *Eimeria* at the species level (Eim\_COI\_qX-F: TGTCTATTCACTTGGGCTATTGT; Eim\_COI\_qX-R: GGATCACCGTTAAATGAGGCA; Jarquín-Díaz et al., 2019), while *Mus musculus* primers targeted the *CDC42* nuclear gene (Ms\_gDNA\_CDC42\_F: CTCTCCTCCCCTCTGTCTTG; Ms\_gDNA\_CDC42\_R: TCCTTTTGGGTTGAGTTTCC; Al-khlifeh et al., 2019). Reactions were performed using 1X iTaqTM Universal SYBRⓇ Green Supermix (Bio-Rad Laboratories GmbH, München, Germany), 400 nM of each primer and 50 ng of DNA template in 20 µL final volume. Cycling amplification was carried out in a MastercyclerⓇ RealPlex 2 thermocycler (Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany) with the following amplification program: 95°C initial denaturation (2 min) followed by 40 cycles of 95°C denaturation (15 s), 55°C annealing (15 s) and 68°C extension (20 s). Melting curve analyses were performed in order to detect primer dimer formation and unspecific amplification. ΔCt was calculated as difference of the threshold cycle (Ct) between mouse and *Eimeria* spp. values (corresponding to a log2 ratio between parasite and mouse DNA). This method was validated in an infection experiment in NMRI mice (Al-khlifeh et al., 2019). We considered ΔCt = -5 our limit of detection (Ahmed et al., 2019; Jarquín-Díaz et al., 2019). Samples with a ΔCt lower than -5 were considered negative (unspecific signal due to amplification of non-target DNA). Samples with a ΔCt higher than -5 for at least one of the two intestinal tissues were considered positive, and in the case of detection in both tissues, the higher value was taken as a proxy of individual parasite load. This parasite load of the intestinal tissue stage is denoted as “ΔCtMouse*−*Eimeria” throughout this paper. *Eimeria* identification at the species level, when technically possible, was performed by means of two PCR markers (18S and COI) followed by a confirmation of morphological and tissue preference as described in Jarquín-Díaz et al., 2019. See column “eimeriaSpecies” of **Supplementary Tables S3**.

**General parasite assessment**

As the distributions of parasite loads are expected to be highly skewed (Bliss & Fisher, 1953), the median (as an estimator for the mode) is more informative than the mean (Rózsa, Reiczigel, & Majoros, 2000). We therefore report the median of parasite load across all hosts (median abundance) and of parasite load of infected host (median intensity) for pinworms, and only median intensity for *Eimeria* spp. Indeed, for this second parasite detection, negative samples possess a value which is technically noise due to unspecific amplification of non-target DNA. Calculating abundance would include ΔCtMouse*−*Eimeria of negative samples, which would be biologically meaningless. Prevalence (relative frequency of infected individuals amongst all tested individuals) confidence intervals were obtained with Sterne’s exact method (Reiczigel, Földi, & Ozsvári, 2010; Sterne, 1954). Calculations were performed using the epiR package (Nunes et al., 2018) running within the R statistical computing environment (R Development Core Team, 2008).

**Statistical design: testing hybrid resistance/susceptibility in a natural system**

According to the SIR model, individuals can be divided into susceptible (S), infected (I), and removed (R, dead or recovered). Animals captured in the field can show (1) absence, or (2) presence of a given parasite. Absence of parasite in a given host can result from absence of exposure to parasite, complete host resistance, recovery, or death (Krämer, Kretzschmar, & Krickeberg, 2010). On the other hand, quantitative parasite load depends on intrinsic host or parasite components or their interactions. When testing the hypotheses of hybrid resistance or susceptibility in a natural system, one should focus on the latter, and test potential increase or decrease of parasite load in infected animals (intensity) towards the centre of the zone compared to its sides. We performed this analysis for our parasites of interest, but first verified that we could exclude differences along hybrid scale in prevalence (probability of infection) of each parasite, and in overall mortality. The hybridization level on each individual was modelled as the degree to which new gene combinations are brought together compared to the pure subspecies. This was estimated from the hybrid index using the function for expected heterozygosity (Baird et al., 2012):

*He = 2 · HI · (1* − *HI) , (Eq. 1)*

**Statistical prediction of probability of infection by parasites along the hybrid zone**

Firstly, we considered the predicted probability of infection along the HI. We cannot assume equality of prevalence at both ends of the hybrid scale; we nevertheless need maximum power to reject the null hypothesis of equality of similar prevalence at the center and on the sides; hence, we used a proxy of “genetic distance to zone centre”: for individuals with HI between 0 and 0.5 the proxy is HI, for individuals with HI between 0.5 and 1 the proxy is 1 – HI. This was used to model a dichotomous response variable (uninfected = 0; infected = 1) by logistic regression, as a linear combination of the predictor variables “genetic distance to zone centre” and “Sex” (including interactions). We verified our results by running the same test on both half of the hybrid scale separately. Analyses were done in R with the function glm from the stats package (R Development Core Team, 2008).

**Statistical test of over- or under-mortality of hybrids**

Secondly, hyperparasitism morbidity in more admixed mice compared to less admixed mice (or the opposite) could confuse measure of parasite loads, as only the surviving, less parasitized mice can be captured. This would lead to a different age distribution of the mice along the hybrid index (tested with no rejection of constant age along the hybrid scale in a previous transect (Baird et al. 2012)). Age estimation based on weight (as in Behnke, 1976) can be used as a proxy to test if hybrid mice were younger or older than that expected for intermediate between pure hybridizing taxa (“additivity”). Values of body weight are well described by the Normal distribution, parameterized by its standard deviation (allowed to vary freely during maximum likelihood searches) and its mean defined as:

*ExpectedBodyWeight = (BW1 + (BW2* − *BW1) · HI) · (1* − *alpha · He) , (Eq. 2)*

where BW1 is the expected body weight of pure Mmd, BW2 the expected body weight of pure Mmm. Alpha represent the hybridization effect, or deviation from additivity between the two parental genomes. We allowed difference between sex and taxons, fit the models using maximum likelihood (using the R package mle2; Bolker, 2017), either including or excluding the hybridization effect parameter (by setting HI = 0 in *ExpectedBodyWeight*), and we compared these two models using the G-test.

**Statistical test of the host hybridization effect on parasite intensity**

Thirdly, it has been shown that macroparasites tend to aggregate within their hosts, the majority of host carrying no or a low burden, and a minority a high one (Shaw & Dobson, 1995). We modelled this distribution of parasite burden in infected hosts as negative binomial. Following the approach of Baird et al. (2012), we tested if hybrid mice had higher or lower parasite burdens than that expected in case of additivity (if the relationship between host parasite load and hybrid index was linear).

The parasite load for a given HI was then estimated as follows:

*ExpectedLoad = (L1 + (L2* − *L1) · HI) · (1* − *alpha · He) , (Eq. 3)*

where L1 is the parasite load of pure Mmd, L2 the parasite load of pure Mmm, and alpha the hybridization effect (deviation of parasite estimated load from the additive model). We considered four nested hypotheses increasing in complexity, and compared them with the G-test (likelihood ratio test) to consider a more complex hypothesis only when justified by a significant increase in likelihood. Expected parasite load is fixed to be identical for both subspecies and both host sexes in hypothesis H0. The more complex H1 allows load differences for the host sexes, H2 allows different loads between the subspecies at the extremes of the hybrid index, and H3 allows differences both between the subspecies and sexes.

Adequate distributions of values for each parasite and detection method considered were selected using log likelihood and AIC criteria and by comparing goodness-of-fits plots (density, CDF, Q-Q, P-P) (R packages MASS (Venables & Ripley, 2002) and fitdistrplus (Delignette-Muller & Dutang, 2015)(see **Supplementary Figure S4)**. The negative binomial distribution should perform well for macroparasite counts (Crofton, 1971; Shaw & Dobson, 1995), which was confirmed for helminths in a previous transect (Baird et al., 2012). Values of (ΔCtMouse*−*Eimeria) were found to be well described by the Weibull distribution after being positively shifted.

The Negative Binomial distribution is parameterized by two arguments: its expectation (Expected Load, Eq. 3), and the inverse of its aggregation defined, which is allowed to vary across HI as:

*Aggregation = (A1 + (A2 − A1) · HI) + Z · He ,*   *(Eq. 4)*

Z being the deviation from the additive model, in proportion to *He*, which is maximal in the zone centre (Baird et al., 2012). The Weibull distribution is parametrized by its shape and scale parameters (allowed to vary freely during maximum likelihood search) linked by the formula:

*Scale = ExpectedLoad / Ⲅ (1 + 1/ shape) , (Eq. 5)*

*Ⲅ* being the gamma function.

We fit the models using likelihood maximisation (using the R package mle2; Bolker, 2017). Parasite load was estimated either including or excluding the hybridization effect parameter (by setting HI = 0 in *ExpectedLoad*), and we compared these two models using the G-test. In the case of ΔCtMouse*−*Eimeria, the Weibull distribution requires positive values as input. Therefore, we estimated an extra “shift parameter” which was optimized by maximum likelihood.

**Test of body condition differences between infected and non-infected mice across the hybrid zone**

After the previous tests on hybrid resistance/susceptibility to parasites, we wanted to see if our field system could allow to test for differences in tolerance to parasites. As a first approach , we tested if we could detect different body condition between infected and non-infected mice along the hybrid index. Residuals from ordinary least squares regression of body weight by body length were estimated for each individual, separately for males and females. Pregnant females were excluded from the analysis. Individuals with a positive residual were considered in better condition than individuals with a negative one, as this index correlates with variation in fat, water, and lean dry mass (Schulte-Hostedde, Zinner, Millar, & Hickling, 2005). We tested if hybrid mice had higher or lower residuals than that expected for intermediate between pure hybridizing taxa (“additivity”), and if the potential hybridization effect was different between infected and not infected mice, for *Eimeria* spp. as well as for pinworm infections. Differences between the subspecies were allowed.

Values of residuals of body weight by body length regression are well described by the Normal distribution, parameterized by its standard deviation (allowed to vary freely during maximum likelihood searches) and its mean defined as:

*ExpectedResidual = (R1 + (R2* − *R1) · HI) · (1* − *alpha · He) , (Eq. 6)*

where R1 is the expected residual value of pure Mmd, R2 the expected residual value of pure Mmm, and alpha the hybridization effect. We fit the models using maximum likelihood (using the R package mle2; Bolker, 2017), either including or excluding the hybridization effect parameter (by setting HI = 0 in *ExpectedResiduals*), and we compared these two models using the G-test.

All graphics were produced using the R packages ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016) and ggmap (Kahle & Wickham, 2013), and compiled using the free software inkscape v.0.92 ([https://inkscape.org](https://inkscape.org/)). Full R code used for this article can be found at: https://github.com/alicebalard/Article\_IntensityEimeriaHMHZ/tree/master/code

**Results**

**Host genotyping and characterization of the HMHZ for a novel transect**

We caught and genotyped a total of 650 mice (359 females, 291 males) over four sampling seasons (2014: *N*=86; 2015: *N*=156; 2016: *N*=167; 2017: *N*=241) at 149 localities. A median of 2 mice per locality were captured. A list of individual mouse information including hybrid indices, georeferences and parasite loads is available in **Supplementary Table S3**. On the probability map of the hybrid zone centre, shown in **Figure 1**, we see that the HMHZ runs across the former East Germany, making a broad arc around the city of Berlin, approaching within ca. 20 km of the bordering Oder River near Eberswalde.

**Parasite prevalence and intensity**

To investigate *Eimeria* infections we checked 384 mice sampled in 2016 and 2017 for the presence and intensity of tissue stages (**Figure 2a**). The estimated parasite prevalence was 18.2% (70/384) (Sterne’s Exact method CI 95%: [14.5, 22.5]). To quantify the intensity of infection we determined the amount of *Eimeria* mitochondrial DNA per host nuclear DNA using ΔCtMouse*−*Eimeria. The median *Eimeria* intensity was -2.4 corresponding to 5.2 times less parasite mitochondrial DNA than host nuclear DNA.

Between 2014 and 2017, 585 mice were investigated for helminths (**Figure 3a**). Prevalence of pinworms in the transect was 52.5% (307/585) (Sterne’s Exact method CI 95%: [48.4, 56.5]) with a median abundance of 1 pinworm per mouse and median intensity of 13 pinworms per infected mouse (maximum number of pinworms in one host: 489).

Overall prevalence of pinworms and *Eimeria* in our samples did not significantly differ between approximated age category (using body weight as a proxy, as in Behnke, 1976) and between sex (Pearson's Chi-squared test, p-value > 0.05) (**Supplementary Table S4**)

**Similar prevalence of parasites across the zone**

In order to control for the simple case of a host density trough at the zone centre, we tested if the probability of being infected was significantly lower for individuals at the host zone centre. Logistic regression using a linear combination of the predictor variables “genetic distance to zone centre” and “Sex” (including interactions) didn’t show any statistically significant effect (p > 0.05) on the probability of infection, neither for *Eimeria* spp. (**Figure 2b**) nor for pinworms (**Figure 3b**). Results were identical for identified *Eimeria ferrisi* infected mice vs. non infected (see **Supplementary Figure S5a**)*.* Similarly, we could not reject the hypothesis of constant prevalence by running the analyses on both sides of the hybrid scale separately, for both parasites. We therefore could not find evidence of significantly more or less uninfected hosts in the centre hybrid zone, neither for *Eimeria* nor pinworms.

**No evidence of hyper- or under-mortality of hybrids compared to parents**

We tested the hybridization effect on body weight as proxy of age. Modelling the body weight along the hybrid zone showed an effect of taxon (G-test of model allowing taxon differences vs. no taxon differences (H1 vs. H0); p-value = 0.017, N = 456) and no effect of sex (G-test of models allowing sex differences vs. no sex differences (both H2 vs. H0 and H3 vs. H1); p-value > 0.05, N = 456). More notably, the model allowing taxon difference did not show a statistically significant hybridization effect (G-test; p-value > 0.05, N = 456; see **Supplementary Figure S6**). We therefore could not detect any decrease or increase of overall mortality in more admixed mice.

***Eimeria* spp. load is lower in infected hybrid vs pure Mmm and Mmd mice**

To test more specifically the intrinsic host-parasite interplay of hybrids compared to pure mice, we considered only individuals infected by *Eimeria* spp. tissue stages (*N* = 70). Complex models involving differences between sexes and parental taxa did not fit the data significantly better than the null model (**Supplementary Table S7**). The fit involving the hybridization effect, however, showed significantly higher likelihood than the model without it (G-test; p-value = 0.02). Infected hybrids had significantly lower load of *Eimeria* spp. tissue stages than expected if the load was linear along the hybrid index, with a hybridization effect parameter alpha of 0.74 (**Figure 2d**, values of parameters of the fitted model given in **Table 1**). Considering only the more prevalent and homogeneously spread across HI *Eimeria* species, *E. ferrisi,* infected mice (N=44), we found similar results (no significant improvement of the model when differences between sexes and parental taxa were included; significantly higher likelihood of the model with hybridization effect than the model without it (G-test; p-value = 0.02, hybridization parameter = 0.73; see **Supplementary Figure S5b)**.

**Pinworm load is lower in infected hybrid vs. pure Mmm and Mmd mice**

We tested pinworm intensity (*N* = 307) in infected hybrids comparing them to infected ‘pure parental’ mice in our Brandenburg transect, excluding potential ecological confounders in the same way. The model allowing differences between the parental taxa and sexes (H3) was found to fit our observations significantly better than the less complex models (**Supplementary Table S7**). For both sexes, the fit including the hybridization effect showed significantly higher likelihood than the model without it (G-test; p-value = 0.04 for females, p-value < 0.001 for males). Infected hybrids had significantly lower pinworm load than expected if the load was linear along the hybrid index, with the hybridization effect parameter alpha 0.91 (females) and 1.46 (males) (**Figure 3d**, values of parameters of the fitted model given in **Table 1**).

**Comparison of pinworms loads with previous reports**

To compare the strength of the hybridization effect between our Brandenburg transect and the Czech-Bavarian portion of the HMHZ we applied the H1 model (differences between the taxa but not between the host sexes) to our pinworm abundance data, once with freely varying alpha (fit 1), and once with alpha set to 1.39 as in Baird et al. (2012) (fit 2). Within fit 1, alpha was found significant (G-test; p-value < 0.001). The comparison between the model with freely varying alpha (fit 1) and that using fixed alpha (fit 2) showed no significant likelihood difference (G-test; p-value = 0.11). Therefore, we can conclude that pinworm load differences found in hybrids in this study are consistent with the results obtained in the previously studied Czech-Bavarian transect (Baird et al., 2012).

**No evidence of body condition differences between infected and non-infected mice along the hybrid zone**

To test whether infections have a different effect in hybrids vs. parental mice we assessed body condition, which could be a better proxy for host health than parasite load. Modelling of the residuals from ordinary least squares regression of body weight by body length along the hybrid zone (**Figure 4a**) did not show a statistically significant hybridization effect (G-test; p-value > 0.05 in both parasite datasets considered). When infected and non-infected individuals were considered separately, neither *Eimeria* spp. infected individuals (G-test; p-value = 0.58) nor *Eimeria* spp. non-infected individuals (G-test; p-value = 0.90) showed a hybridization effect in body condition index (**Figure 4b**). The same was true for pinworm infected individuals (G-test; p-value = 0.44) or pinworm non-infected individuals (G-test; p-value = 0.96; **Figure 4c**).

**Discussion**

We found lower intensities of the intracellular parasites *Eimeria* spp. and intestinal parasite pinworms in hybrid than in parental subspecies hosts in a previously unstudied transect of the European HMHZ. Lower intensity in hybrids is unlikely to be explained by ecological differences across the HMHZ, as we did not find the probability of infection to be similarly reduced in hybrid hosts, and no overall increase or decrease or mortality towards the zone centre.

House mouse hybrids in the European HMHZ are not first-generation crossings, but rather late generation. This means that each of their genomes presents a complex mixture of both Mmm and Mmd ones (Macholán et al., 2007). There is no clear-cut between hybrids and parental individuals. Therefore, they should not be considered in categories, but rather on a continuous scale when analyzing parasite infections or any other trait (Baird et al., 2012). We followed the statistical analysis of Baird et al. (2012) and explicitly modelled the effect of hybridization on parasite intensity by approximating the number of new combinations of genes brought together in a hybrid genotype by its expected heterozygosity (He). In other words we used He to derive non-linear predictions for hybridization effect based on the observed individual hybrid indices. To increase reproducibility, we make our analysis available in an R package (Balard & Heitlinger, 2019). The package allows statistical modelling with distributions additional to the original negative binomial distribution for (worm) count data (Baird et al., 2012). This allowed us to model the intensity of *Eimeria* infections as measured by a recently established quantitative PCR (Ahmed et al., 2019; Al-khlifeh et al., 2019; Jarquín-Díaz et al., 2019).

To our knowledge no studies have previously tested the effect of mouse hybridization on parasites other than helminths in a field setting of the HMHZ. To understand parasite processes in host hybrid zones, it is necessary to test different types for parasites. Our models present a range of differences that are likely to involve different resistance mechanisms in their hosts (different strength of impact on host health in normal conditions, intracellular triggering mainly Th1 immune response vs. extracellular triggering mainly Th2 one). Yet the pattern of reduced load in hybrid hosts is the same for the two parasites. These findings confirm that reduction in parasite intensity is either an effect intrinsic to the host individuals (e.g. enhanced immune reactions leading to increased resistance), or, if dependent on the parasite and/or parasite-host interplay, can be generalized over very different parasites.

Adding more evidence to the original observation of reduced parasite loads for previously investigated parasites, we also found reduced pinworms loads in hybrids of our novel transect of the HMHZ. We found differences between the Brandenburg and Czech-Bavarian transects in pinworm infection such as distinct loads between males and females and lower prevalence (52.5%) and abundance (18.7) in the former compared to the latter (no significant difference between sexes; prevalence 70.9%, abundance 39.18; Baird et al., 2012). Differences could be expected, as these two studies involved different number of mice and took place in distant portions of the HMHZ likely to present different ecological conditions. Nevertheless, the direction and strength of the hybridization effect were very similar in the two study areas. This similarity reinforces our confidence that reduced parasite load in hybrids is a general phenomenon, intrinsic to the individual host or host-parasite interplay rather than a by-product of ecology.

A novel aspect of our work compared to previous studies of parasitism in the HMHZ is the separate study of parasite prevalence and intensity. This approach should not only reduce problems in statistical inference caused by false negative measurements (so called zero-inflation) but also allows us to address two different questions separately: (i) Is the *probability* of infection different for hybrids and pure subspecies? and (ii): Is there a difference in parasite *intensity* between infected hybrid and infected pure individuals?

An illustrative example of an ecological factor that could potentially lead to parasite load differences is the density of hosts. Densities of mouse populations in the HMHZ centre may be lower than outside (either due to selection against hybrids or because the HMHZ as a tension zone tends to be trapped in “density troughs” sensu Hewitt 1975). Host density is expected to be positively correlated with pathogen transmission (Anderson & May, 1979) and as a result prevalence may be higher in more dense populations (Morand & Guégan, 2000; Hakkarainen et al., 2007). This is, however, not a general law as host density and *Eimeria* spp. prevalence are, for example, negatively correlated in bank voles (Winternitz, Yabsley, & Altizer, 2012). Independent of the direction of the effect, correlation between abundance and prevalence could be confounded with intrinsic effects of hybrid hosts.

Our analysis of prevalence (presence/absence in a logistic regression), did not however show any significant decrease of this probability of infection towards the centre of the zone, for neither *Eimeria* spp. nor pinworms. We argue here that, in conjunction with higher intensities, this distinguishes intrinsic hybrid effects from potential ecological confounders.

Animals tolerant of low-pathogenic parasites might not suffer fitness reduction during high parasitemia. This could be the case, for example, if the parasite is beneficial for the host’s interaction with other parasites (Heitlinger, Ferreira, Thierer, Hofer, & East, 2017) or if immune responses against the parasite are costly relative to the harm it causes (Råberg, Sim, & Read, 2007). In addition, according to the “Old Friend” (or “Hygiene”) hypothesis, the constant presence of helminths in natural populations has led to the evolution of a background basal release of regulatory cytokines (Rook, 2009) which might in turn impact the outcome of more pathogenic infections. Even for relatively pathogenic parasites, such as *Eimeria,* differences in resistance could be uncoupled from health effects by differences in tolerance (Råberg et al., 2007). For these reasons parasite load in itself should not be blindly considered as a proxy for host health and certainly not for host fitness comparisons across hybrid zones (Baird & Goüy de Bellocq, 2019). We here used body condition as a proxy for the health component of host fitness. We, however, did not find evidence for differences in body condition between hybrids and pure mice upon infection. We conclude that we do not have evidence that lower parasitemia in hybrids increases their health.

Intensity of a particular parasite infection is not necessarily correlated with reduced health and a fitness decrease. For example, the fitness of sterile hybrids (always zero) is invariant to infection intensity. Moreover a hybrid host could be robust due to heterosis (though it may still be sterile). Even if we had found increased health of hybrids, this would not be interpretable as leading to a higher total hybrid fitness, as the parasite mediated health fitness component is only one (likely minor) component of overall fitness. It has been shown for example that male mice in the HMHZ centre have reduced fertility compared to parental individuals (Albrechtová et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2012). If reduced parasite intensity is host driven (and not a result of host-parasite interactions) one could conclude that some physiological systems (e.g. reproductive) may be more dependent on “co-adapted complexes”, while others – such as the immune system – benefit from diversity. This latter would be hybrid vigour in the narrow sense (Baird et al., 2012), but would still not necessarily lead to any effects on host species barriers (Baird & Goüy de Bellocq, 2019).

We can in future ask whether host (immunity and resistance) parasite (infectivity and virulence) or their interactions are underlying reduced parasite intensity in hybrid house mice. *Eimeria* spp. are suitable pathogens to perform experiments and field studies in this endeavour. We are currently investigating jointly resistance and tolerance during the course of an infection in laboratory wild-derived mice presenting different levels of hybridization between Mmd and Mmm. Nevertheless, no laboratory experiment could ever reproduce the diversity of genome found in nature, and of gut biodiversity. For this reason our lab projects to compare the overall microbiome (from all domains of life) of mice collected in the present study, across the hybrid index.

A prime candidate locus for mediating a positive effect of hybridization on the immune system (hybrid vigour) is the major histocompatibility complex (MHC). In mice two genes of the MHC showed different levels of polymorphism as well as population structure with many alleles inferred to be shared between the subspecies by maintenance of ancestral polymorphism (Čížková, Goüy de Bellocq, Baird, Piálek, & Bryja, 2011). Additionally, the small demes of house mice can function as reservoirs of MHC alleles, contributing to the diversity of this system across demes and populations (Linnenbrink, Teschke, Montero, Vallier, & Tautz, 2018). The genetic structure of the MHC and especially polymorphism shared across subspecies should make these loci good candidates to investigate for mechanisms behind hybrid vigour, among a number of other loci including Toll-like receptors (Skevaki, Pararas, Kostelidou, Tsakris, & Routsias, 2015). Previous work on toll-like receptor 4 already suggests different evolutionary patterns between the house mouse subspecies (Fornuskova, Bryja, Vinkler, Macholán, & Piálek, 2014). For host parasite interactions major candidate loci are immunity related GTPases on the host side and rhoptry kinases in coccidia (Lilue, Müller, Steinfeldt, & Howard, 2013).

Hybridization has played a significant role during and after the divergence of house mouse subspecies as well as during the formation of “classical inbred strains” (Yang et al., 2011). Improving our understanding of parasite process across the HMHZ provides valuable information on the house mouse as the model species with the most thoroughly understood immune system. A transfer of knowledge from this model might further understanding of the interplay between parasites and hybridizing species, our own as well as species relevant for conservation.

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**Tables**

**Table 1. Parametrisation of fitted models.** Parameters estimated by maximum likelihood for each dataset. Alpha is the hybridization effect (deviation of parasite estimated load from the additive model) given with its significance p-value. If sexes are separated, corresponding parameters for each sex are given with symbols ♀ and ♂. Nested hypotheses are as follow. H0: same expected load for the subspecies and between sexes; H1: same expected load across sexes, but can differ across subspecies; H2: same expected load across subspecies, but can differ between the sexes; H3: expected load can differ both across subspecies and between sexes. *Mus musculus domesticus* and *Mus musculus musculus* are named hereafter Mmd and Mmm.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Eimeria* intensity** | Hyp. | Alpha (p-value) | Load in ΔCt for both parental subspecies | | Shape |  | |
| present study,  *Eimeria* sp. | H0 | 0.74 (0.02) | -0.70 | | 2.33 |
| present study,  *Eimeria ferrisi* | H0 | 0.74 (0.02) | -0.70 | | 2.33 |
| **Pinworm intensity** | Hyp. | Alpha (p-value) | Load in count Mmd | Load in count Mmm | Aggregation Mmd | Aggregation Mmm | Z parameter |
| present study | H3 | ♀ 0.91 (0.04)  ♂ 1.46 (<0.001) | ♀ 35.57  ♂ 30.38 | ♀ 68.67  ♂ 51.86 | ♀ 1.45  ♂ 2.10 | ♀ 2.00  ♂ 1.33 | ♀ -1.04  ♂ -1.23 |
| present study (data from Baird et al. 2012) | H1 | 1.21 (<0.001) | 94.37 | 46.81 | 1.88 | 1.34 | -0.13 |

**Figure legends**

**Figure 1. Geographic range of house mouse subspecies in the European house mouse hybrid zone.** Spatial organization of the HMHZ was inferred using all individuals with 6 autosomal markers (N=598 mice) (*Es1*, *H6pd*, *Idh1*, *Mpi*, *Np*, *Sod1*). *Mus musculus domesticus* is found west of the hybrid zone (blue), *Mus musculus musculus* east of it (red). The numbers at the level contours indicate posterior probabilities of population membership for each mouse subspecies. White dots represent each mouse included in the study.

**Figure 2. Probability of infection is constant and intensity of *Eimeria* infection is reduced in hybrids.** Individual mice tested for detection and quantification of *Eimeria* spp. tissue stages (a) and mice tested positive (c) are displayed on a map (points color indicate mice genotype, on a gradient ranging from blue (pure Mmd) to red (pure Mmm); increased number of mice sampled at one point displayed as decrease in transparency). The predicted probability of infection does not differ in more admixed mice (b) for males (green) and females (orange)(average overall observed probability of infection (prevalence) for males and females considered together: grey dotted line). *Eimeria* intensity (white dots = individual mice) is reduced at intermediate values of the hybrid index (d), represented as a gradient ranging from 0 (pure Mmd, in blue) to 1 (pure Mmm, in red). The optimized fit is represented by a solid line, the 95%CI of the fit as all parameters are allowed to vary in their 95%CI, is plotted as a grey ribbon. The 95%CI of the hybridization parameter alpha, as all parameters are fixed to their fitted value while alpha is allowed to vary in its 95%CI, is plotted as dashed lines.

**Figure 3. Probability of infection is constant and intensity of pinworm infection is reduced in hybrids.** Individual mice tested for detection and quantification of pinworms (a) and mice tested positive (c) are displayed on a map (points color indicate mice genotype, on a gradient ranging from blue (pure Mmd) to red (pure Mmm); increased number of mice sampled at one point displayed as decrease in transparency). The predicted probability of infection does not differ in more admixed mice (b) for males (green) and females (orange)(average overall observed probability of infection (prevalence) for males and females considered together: grey dotted line). Pinworm intensity (white dots = individual mice) is reduced at intermediate values of the hybrid index (d), represented as a gradient ranging from 0 (pure Mmd, in blue) to 1 (pure Mmm, in red), for males (green) and females (orange). The optimized fit is represented by a solid line, the 95%CI of the fit as all parameters are allowed to vary in their 95%CI, is plotted as a grey ribbon. The 95%CI of the hybridization parameter alpha, while all parameters are fixed to their fitted value and alpha is allowed to vary in its 95%CI, is plotted as dashed lines.

**Figure 4. Body condition does not significantly differ between hybrids and pure mice upon infection.** We modelled the residuals from ordinary least squares regression of body weight by body length along the hybrid zone. The fit and residuals for female and male mice is given in (a). The hybrid index is represented as a gradient ranging from 0 (pure Mmd, in blue) to 1 (pure Mmm, in red). ”Body condition” residuals along the hybrid index (for *Eimeria* spp. (b) and pinworms (c)) show no difference for infected mice (light green) and non-infected mice (grey). The optimized fit is represented by a solid line, the 95%CI of the fit as all parameters are allowed to vary in their 95%CI, is plotted as a grey ribbon. The 95%CI of the hybridization parameter alpha, as all parameters are fixed to their fitted value while alpha is allowed to vary in its 95%CI, is plotted as dashed lines.