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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Haq, S., Chi, C., Bach, A., Dogan, J., Engström, Å. et al. (2012) Side-Chain Interactions Form Late and Cooperatively in the Binding Reaction between Disordered Peptides and PDZ Domains.

Journal of the American Chemical Society, 134(1): 599-605

http://dx.doi.org/10.1021/ja209341w

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Permanent link to this version:

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Side chain interactions form late and cooperatively in the binding reaction between disordered peptides and PDZ domains

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ABSTRACT

Intrinsically disordered proteins are very common and mediate numerous protein-protein and protein-DNA interactions. While it is clear that these interactions are instrumental for the life of the mammalian cell, there is a paucity of data regarding their molecular binding mechanisms. We have here used short peptides as a model system for intrinsically disordered proteins. Linear free-energy relationships based on rate and equilibrium constants for the binding of these peptides to ordered target proteins, PDZ domains, demonstrate that native side-chain interactions form mainly after the rate-limiting barrier for binding, in a cooperative fashion. This finding suggests that these disordered peptides first form a weak encounter complex with non-native interactions. The data do not support the recent notion that the affinities of intrinsically disordered proteins towards their targets are generally governed by their association rate constants. Instead, we observe the opposite for peptide-PDZ interactions, namely that changes in $K_{\rm d}$ correlate with changes in $k_{\rm off}$.

INTRODUCTION

The structure-function relationships of stably folded proteins have been studied for more than 50 years with great implications for the interpretation of biology on a molecular level as well as understanding drug action. It was long assumed that in order for a protein to function properly, it has to adopt a well-defined three-dimensional structure. It was not until the 1990's that an increasing amount of evidence suggested that many proteins in fact are intrinsically disordered or contain long disordered regions and at the same time are functional.^{1,2} Experimental mechanistic studies on disordered proteins have appeared only recently, for example refs. ³⁻¹⁰ Given the fact that they make up a large portion of the proteins encoded by the eukaryotic genome, as well as their frequent association with diseases, ^{11,12} understanding the role of disorder in protein-protein recognition is a key problem in modern structural biology. In particular, mechanistic data are scarce.

There are many hypotheses regarding why proteins are intrinsically disordered. ¹³ For example: *i*) it is a way of decoupling affinity and specificity; *ii*) it allows for increased plasticity with regard to the ligand; *iii*) a large interaction surface area is provided in a short amino acid sequence as the protein folds around its ligand. According to the so-called "fly-casting" scenario, disordered proteins may quickly form a high energy complex with the physiological partner, which would be locked in place by the subsequent folding reaction. ¹⁴ A potential advantage of the intrinsic disorder would then lie in the increased probability to capture a target ligand, ¹⁵ even with only moderate affinity. It is of critical importance to address these issues from a biophysical perspective

and clarify the role of disorder in protein-ligand recognition. Such information is important not only for a general molecular understanding of cellular events, but will be crucial for future drug design directed at intrinsically disordered proteins, which have shown to be frequently associated with different types of cancer and neurodegenerative diseases.^{11,12}

Detailed experimental studies, based on NMR,¹⁰ fluorescence-monitored temperature jump, ⁹ and mutagenesis/stopped flow fluorimetry^{3,5} together with computational methods¹⁴ suggest that binding of disordered proteins takes place via a weak precomplex, possibly involving non-native interactions,¹⁶ which then rearrange into the final complex.² But, there is also evidence for conformational selection from single molecule spectroscopy,⁴ NMR^{7,8,17} and computer simulations.¹⁸

Linear free energy relationships (LFERs) relate the activation free energy for a reaction (ΔG^{\ddagger}) with its equilibrium free energy (ΔG^{Eq}). LFERs were classically used for assessing the position of the transition state during formation of a covalent bond in physical organic chemistry. By changing the structures and thus reactivities of the substrates a linear relationship for ΔG^{\ddagger} versus ΔG^{Eq} may be obtained and its slope would reflect the position of the transition state. However, LFERs are frequently used for non-covalent interactions, in enzymology, on binding reactions involving allosteric regulation, as well as in protein folding studies. Such LFERs were recently employed to suggest that affinities $(K_d \text{ values})$ of intrinsically disordered proteins mainly correlate with their association rate constants k_{on} while K_d values of folded proteins mainly correlate with k_{off} .

The simplest model system to analyze the disorder-to-order transitions in proteins is represented by short peptides that interact with a well-defined target. For example, PDZ domains bind to the C-termini of target proteins. This interaction leads to the formation of an inter-molecular β -sheet, where the C-terminal ligand forms one β -strand. We have previously studied the interaction between peptide ligands and several PDZ domains. The PDZ-ligand interaction is a good model system to investigate the role of disorder quantitatively and mechanistically, since the peptide ligand undergoes a structural transition from a disordered (in its free state) to an ordered (in its bound state) conformation.

In this work, we use LFER analyses to study a large set of data for the PDZ ligand interaction from the perspective of the peptide as a model for an intrinsically disordered system. Our results clearly demonstrate that affinities for PDZ-peptide interactions are governed by $k_{\rm off}$ rather than $k_{\rm on}$, suggesting a late formation of native interactions along the reaction coordinate. The implication of this result is that the proposed correlation between association rate and affinity constants for binding reactions involving disordered proteins²⁴ is not general.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Binding experiments. Association and dissociation kinetics for SAP97 PDZ2 and peptides were measured as previously described for PSD-95 PDZ3 and PTP-BL PDZ2.²⁸ Briefly, SAP97 PDZ2 with a mutation, I342W, was expressed and purified as described.³¹ Binding of four different peptides (see legend to Fig. 2) to SAP97 PDZ2 was measured in an SX-20MV stopped flow spectrometer (Applied Photophysics, Leatherhead, UK) by monitoring the change in Trp fluorescence upon binding (excitation at 280 nm, emission at 330±25 nm using a cut-off filter). The major binding phase corresponding to the association reaction between peptide and SAP97 PDZ2^{25,31} was analyzed by a single exponential equation and observed rate constants were plotted versus peptide concentration to obtain the association rate constant k_{on} . Dissociation rate constants (k_{off}) were determined in displacement experiments. The PDZ-peptide complex was mixed with an excess of dansylated peptide, which traps any free PDZ domain and makes the dissociation from the unlabeled peptide irreversible. The $k_{\rm obs}$ will then be equal to $k_{\rm off}$. See refs. ^{25,28,31} for more details on the kinetic measurements. All kinetic measurements for SAP97 PDZ2 were performed in 50 mM potassium phosphate, pH 7.5 and at 10°C. Association and dissociation kinetics were also measured for 24 different site-directed mutants of SAP97 PDZ2 I342W in a similar fashion as for the pseudo wild type I342W and with the same four peptides.

NMR experiments. A double-labeled ¹⁵N ¹³C peptide corresponding to the eight last residues of CRIPT³² was expressed as a His-tagged lipoyl fusion protein in E. coli. The

fusion protein was bound onto a nickel column, washed with 50 mM Tris, pH 8.5, 400 mM NaCl and subsequently eluted with 250 mM imidazole. The peptide was cleaved off from the fusion protein with thrombin and then purified by reversed phase HPLC. The final peptide contained an extra GS at the N-terminus resulting from the thrombin cleavage site: GSKNYKQTSV. The PSD-95 PDZ3 protein was expressed and purified as previously described. The titration experiments were performed on a Varian INOVA 600 MHz spectrometer equipped with a cryogenically cooled probe, at 283K in 50 mM potassium phosphate pH 7.5. Peptide samples were dissolved in 10% D₂O and 1D 1 H spectra for peptide (290 μ M) were recorded in the absence and presence of PSD-95 PDZ3 (370 μ M). Data processing and analysis were done with the NMRPipe suite of software. The spectra of the period of the period of the NMRPipe suite of software.

RESULTS

We used stopped-flow fluorescence spectroscopy to obtain kinetic and equilibrium constants for interactions between peptides and PDZ domains. These constants were used to create LFERs to investigate the reaction mechanism for the binding of these disordered peptides (Fig. 1) to PDZ domains. Three different and well-studied PDZ domains were included in the study, SAP97 PDZ2, PTP-BL PDZ2 and PSD-95 PDZ3. For each of these PDZ domains, we selected a wild-type peptide, based on previous work^{32,34-38} (see legend to Fig. 2 for wild-type and mutant peptides). These peptides are disordered in their unbound state as shown by NMR (Fig. 1) for the peptide binding to PSD-95 PDZ3. For SAP97 PDZ2, a peptide corresponding to the disordered C-terminus of the E6 protein was used.³⁹ The peptide for PTP-BL PDZ2 was derived from the guanine nucleotide exchange factor RA-GEF-2. 36-38 The binding between peptides and PDZ domains involves backbone as well as side chain interactions. Upon binding, the peptide adopts a β-strand in an extended inter-molecular β-sheet⁴⁰ (Fig. 1). We are using short disordered peptides in the present work, which represent the smallest binding sites of intrinsically disordered proteins. 41 However, this size of the binding region is not uncommon among disordered proteins. 15,24 In this context, we note that regions outside of the binding surface of intrinsically disordered proteins might influence their association kinetics, either through attractive or repulsive electrostatic forces. We have not addressed this issue here, but the association rate constant for the C-terminal domain of the E6 protein (72 residues) is almost identical to that of its C-terminus used in the present study. 25,42

The effect of mutation in the peptide side chains was directly investigated by mutation in two or three positions (Fig. 2). For PTP-BL PDZ2 and PSD-95 PDZ3 the peptides were changed in the first (0) and third (-2) position, counting from the C-terminus (See Fig. 1). These two positions (0 and -2) are known to confer both stability and specificity to PDZ-peptide interactions. ^{28,43,44} For SAP97 PDZ2, an additional position was mutated, namely the fifth (-4) amino acid from the C-terminus, where the Arg(-4) residue was replaced by a 2-aminopentanoic acid (Ape). This mutation removes the guanidinium moiety of the Arg side chain but leaves its aliphatic chain. The mutations in the peptides resulted in lower affinity (4 to 18-fold) towards their respective PDZ domain, except for the Ser(-2)→Thr mutation in the peptide for PTP-BL PDZ2 where the affinity did not change.

The change in affinity allowed three or four point LFER (Brønsted/Leffler) plots to be constructed for wild-type and mutants of the disordered peptide by plotting $\log K_d$ versus $\log k_{\text{off}}$ or $\log k_{\text{on}}$, respectively, for the binding reaction between different peptides and their cognate PDZ binding domains (Fig. 2). The results of these analyses were clear; the effect of the peptide mutations is mainly in the dissociation rate constant k_{off} .

Each of the three PDZ domains was subjected to site-directed mutagenesis, mainly conservative deletion mutations⁴⁵ in the protein core (*e.g.*, Ala→Gly, Val→Ala, Ile→Val etc) but also a few mutations involving charged residues on the surface, *e.g.*, Lys or Glu→Ala. Association and dissociation rate constants were determined for the mutant proteins²⁸ and LFERs constructed for each PDZ with their respective wild type and

mutant peptides (Fig. 3). For PSD-95 PDZ3 the slope of log $k_{\rm off}$ versus log $K_{\rm d}$ is close to 1 for all three peptides (0.94-1.04). Both SAP97 PDZ2 and PTP-BL PDZ2 show slight changes in $k_{\rm on}$ on mutation in the PDZ domain, which is reflected in their plots, but the major effect is from $k_{\rm off}$ (slope = 0.65-0.9). We note that when all the data for each PDZ domain were combined into a single data set (*i.e.*, data in 3A, C and E, in analogy with some composite datasets reported by Prakash²⁴), the correlation between log $K_{\rm d}$ and log $k_{\rm off}$ becomes 0.74 (not shown). This shows that details in the analysis may be lost when data from different systems are combined into one LFER.

To further compare our analysis with that reported by Prakash²⁴, we then compiled data from 15 different peptide-PDZ interactions (including some of those in Fig. 2) (Fig. 4). A clear dependence of $\log k_{\rm off}$ versus $\log K_{\rm d}$ could be observed with a slope of 0.7. This value is similar to that for the combined mutant/peptide dataset and, similarly, hides the details of the individual peptide-PDZ interactions.

Finally, binding Φ values³ were calculated for mutations where $\Delta\Delta G$ for the change in $K_{\rm d}$ was >0.6 kcal/mol (Table 1). Φ values correlate the change in free energy of the transition state on binding ($\Delta\Delta G^{\ddagger}$) with that of the ground state ($\Delta\Delta G_{Kd}$). If the interaction(s) deleted by mutation is present in the transition state of the reaction as well as in the bimolecular complex the Φ value is one. On the other hand, if this native interaction has not begun to form in the transition state the Φ value is zero. Any intermediate values are usually interpreted as partial formation of the bond(s) broken by mutation. A sound interpretation of Φ values is to consider them as weak (0-0.3, the

transition state is similar to reactants), intermediate (0.3-0.7) or strong (0.7-1, the transition state is similar to the products). 46 Φ values were generally low but the Arg(-4) \rightarrow Ape mutation in the SAP97 PDZ2 peptide resulted in an intermediate Φ value (0.5) and the Thr(-2) \rightarrow Ser was low/intermediate (0.3) (Table 1). This suggests that the side chain interactions of Arg(-4) and possibly those of Thr(-2) are forming in the rate-limiting transition state for the binding reaction. Such detail is lost even in the 4-point LFER for this peptide (slope = 1.06).

DISCUSSION

Intrinsically disordered proteins play prominent roles in cell signaling. Such proteins may be either fully disordered or have disordered domains or even smaller unfolded regions. It has been estimated that up to 75% of mammalian signaling proteins have disordered regions longer than 30 amino acid residues and that 25% are fully disordered. The binding partner of a disordered protein may be a folded, ordered protein (*e.g.*, KIX binding to pKID¹⁰), but sometimes two unfolded proteins bind each other and fold up into a well-defined structure (*e.g.*, L27 domains⁴⁷ and ACTR/NCBD⁷). While it is well known that these disordered regions are functional as recognition motifs^{1,2,13,48,49} little is known about the mechanism of recognition of intrinsically disordered proteins, both in relation to folded and unfolded protein partners.

Small disordered peptides that become ordered upon binding are here used as a simple model system for intrinsically disordered proteins. These peptides bind to PDZ domains⁵⁰ and adopt a β -strand structure in an extended inter-molecular β -sheet in the bimolecular complex,⁴⁰ thus going from a disordered to an ordered state (Fig. 1). The advantage with this model system is that we can generate large data sets under well-defined conditions. The LFERs of the peptide-PDZ binding reactions (Fig. 2) suggest that mutational destabilization has a similar effect at different positions along the peptide. In other words, the native interactions made by the peptide side chains are formed cooperatively, in analogy with the nucleation-condensation model in protein folding.⁵¹ Further, the facts that k_{off} governs the affinity (K_{d}) and that the slope in a log-log plot is close to one (Figs.

2 and 3) show that the probed side chain interactions form after the rate-limiting step of the overall binding reaction, in agreement with the proposed induced fit binding model of peptide-PDZ interactions^{25,29} and also of disordered proteins.²

Mutation at a single position (Φ value) reports on the local energetics of mutation, whereas a LFER for all mutated positions (Leffler/Brønsted plot) reports on overall mechanism, for example nucleation-condensation or diffusion-collision in protein folding. 45,46 The binding Φ values are low for mutations at the C-terminal Val0 and Thr(-2)/Ser(-2) residues. However, the Φ value for the Arg(-4) \rightarrow Ape mutation in the SAP97 PDZ2 peptide displays an intermediate value of 0.5. This Arg(-4) residue forms hydrogen bond(s) and possibly a salt bridge according to NMR data of the complex.³⁵ It is likely that Arg(-4) is involved in an attractive long-range electrostatic interaction early on the reaction coordinate and that deletion of the positive charge therefore lowers the on-rate constant. The Thr(-2) \rightarrow Ser mutation also had a Φ value (0.3) different from 0 and the interactions made by the y-methyl group of Thr(-2) may thus be partially formed in the transition state. One possibility is thus that an encounter complex might involve a few native-like contacts along with several weak non-native side-chain interactions, and that their search for the most stable (native) conformations takes place as the reaction crosses the rate-limiting barrier.

It has been recently suggested that the affinity of protein-protein recognition for disordered systems is governed by the association rate constant $k_{\rm on}$, a feature that does not seem to hold for ordered proteins.²⁴ This notion is exciting because it suggests a very

basic biophysical property for intrinsically disordered proteins. But, the devil is in the details: for the Cdc42/WASp data set,⁵ where mutations were made only in the disordered WASp, there is indeed a strong correlation between k_{on} and K_d^{24} (Fig. 5). These mutations, however, involved charged groups, which are known to affect the association rate constant.⁵² This electrostatic steering probably involves residues that form long-range electrostatic interactions in the transition state, but not salt bridges in the product complex, according to the model of Hemsath et al.⁵ In fact, the same effect was observed by rational design of the TEM1-BLIP interaction, which is an interaction between two ordered proteins. The association rate constant was changed by mutation by more than two orders of magnitude by mutagenesis, while retaining k_{off} within a factor of three⁵³ (Fig. 5). Thus, the K_d values for both the Cdc42/WASp (ordered-disordered) and the TEM1-BLIP (ordered-ordered) reaction are governed by electrostatic steering in the association reaction.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe LFERs using data from different studies are too crude to distinguish binding of ordered and disordered proteins from each other. One reason is that differences in experimental conditions will skew analyses where different protein-protein interactions are plotted in the same graph, like in Fig. 4. For example, differences in ionic strengths in experimental buffers may have dramatic effects on rate constants if electrostatic steering modulates the interaction. 5,52,54 We suggest that the proposal that k_{on} governs K_{d} for the interactions of intrinsically disordered proteins is too simplistic, and that their mechanisms as well as those of ordered proteins, must be assessed from case to case.

The binding of disordered peptides in the current study follow a very clear LFER, which suggests that the native side-chain interactions in the bimolecular complex form simultaneously along the peptide, following formation of a "nucleus". For the peptide/SAP97 PDZ2 interaction, this nucleus may be found around Arg(-4), that is, in the N-terminal part of the region of approximately six residues considered most important for affinity and specificity in peptide-PDZ interactions. 43,44

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (grant 2009-5659 to PJ and grant 2008-4285 to PL), the Human Frontiers Science Program (PJ) and the Danish Research Council (AB).

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FIGURES

Fig. 1. Structural features of free and PDZ-bound peptide. (*A*) 1D ¹H NMR titrations of peptide (GSKNYKQTSV) in the free (upper panel) and in complex with PSD-95 PDZ3 (lower panel). The free peptide is clearly disordered since the peaks are all grouped together, a characteristic of disordered polypeptides. On addition of saturating amounts of PSD-95 PDZ3, the ¹H peaks become more dispersed and are uniformly distributed characterizing an ordered structure in agreement with the crystal structure shown in panel *B*. (*B*) Crystal structure of PSD-95 PDZ3 with the peptide KQTSV. The PSD-95 PDZ3 is shown as a surface and the peptide residues are colored red, Val0; green, Ser(-1); blue, Thr(-2); yellow, Gln(-3); magenta, Lys(-4), and shown as sticks. The peptide adopts an ordered β-strand conformation in the bimolecular complex. The side chain of the Lys(-4) residue is not visible in this crystal structure. The figure was drawn in Pymol. Section 1.

Fig. 2. Linear free energy relationships for wild-type and substituted peptides for three PDZ domains. (*A*) The dependence of off-rate constant k_{off} on the affinity constant K_{d} . (*B*) The dependence of the on-rate constant k_{on} on the affinity constant K_{d} . The peptides were the following: SAP97 PDZ2, LQRRRETQV, LQRRRETQ-Abu, LQRRRESQV and LQRR-Ape-ETQV; PTP-BL PDZ2, EQVSAV, EQVSA-Abu and EQVTAV; PSD-95 PDZ3, YKQTSV, YKQTS-Abu and YKQSSV. The peptides for PTP-BL PDZ2 and PSD-95 PDZ3 had an N-terminal dansyl group to facilitate the kinetic measurements.

Kinetics for SAP97 PDZ2 were monitored through Trp fluorescence.²⁵ Abu is 2-aminobutyric acid, *i.e.*, Val with one methyl group replaced by a hydrogen. Ape is 2-aminopentanoic acid, *i.e.*, Arg with its guanidinium group replaced by a hydrogen.

Fig. 3. Linear free energy relationships for substituted peptides and mutated PDZ domains. (*A* and *D*) SAP97 PDZ2, (*B* and *E*) PTP-BL PDZ2, (*C* and *F*) PSD-95 PDZ3. The upper three panels show log k_{off} versus log K_{d} and the lower three panels log k_{on} versus log K_{d} . The data sets for PTP-BL PDZ2 and PSD-95 PDZ3 were from ref.²⁸

Fig. 4. Linear free energy relationships for interactions between different pairs of (pseudo) wild type PDZ domains and peptide ligands. The following were included: PSD-95 PDZ1 I100W/IESDV, PSD-95 PDZ2 I195W/IESDV, ²⁶ PSD-95 PDZ3 F337W/D-YKQTSV, PSD-95 PDZ3 F337W/D-YQKSSV, PSD-95 PDZ3 F337W/D-YKQTSAbu, ²⁸ SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/D-RRETQV 25°C, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/D-RRETQV, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/D-RRETQV, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/RRETQV, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/RRETQV, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/RRETQV, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/RRETQL, SAP97 PDZ2 I354W/RRETQAbu, ²⁵ PTP-BL PDZ2/D-EQVSAV, PTP-BL PDZ2/D-EQVTAV, PTP-BL PDZ2/D-EQVSAAbu. ²⁸ D stands for dansyl and Abu is 2-aminobutyric acid.

Fig. 5. Linear free energy relationships for the interactions between (*A*) Cdc42 and WASp⁵ and (*B*) TEM1-BLIP.⁵³ In both cases the changes in K_d on mutation are due to changes in k_{on} .

Table 1. Binding Φ values for mutations in the disordered peptide.

| Peptide | SAP97 PDZ2 | | PTP-BL PDZ2 | | PSD-95 PDZ3 | |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|-----------|
| mutation | | | | | | |
| | $\Delta\Delta G_{Kd}$ | Φ | $\Delta\Delta G_{Kd}$ | Ф | $\Delta\Delta G_{Kd}$ | Φ |
| | (kcalmol ⁻¹) | | (kcalmol ⁻¹) | | (kcalmol ⁻¹) | |
| Val to Abu | 1.4±0.1 | -0.15±0.14 | 0.86±0.26 | 0.1±0.3 | 0.82±0.11 | 0.04±0.12 |
| (C-terminal | | | | | | |
| position) | | | | | | |
| Thr to | 0.95±0.08 | 0.31±0.09 | -0.04±0.2 | _a | 1.0±0.1 | 0.03±0.10 |
| Ser/Ser to | | | | | | |
| Thr | | | | | | |
| Arg to Ape | 0.82±0.11 | 0.51±0.14 | - | - | - | - |
| | | | | | | |

 $^{^{}a}\Delta\Delta G_{Kd}$ is too low to calculate an accurate Φ value.

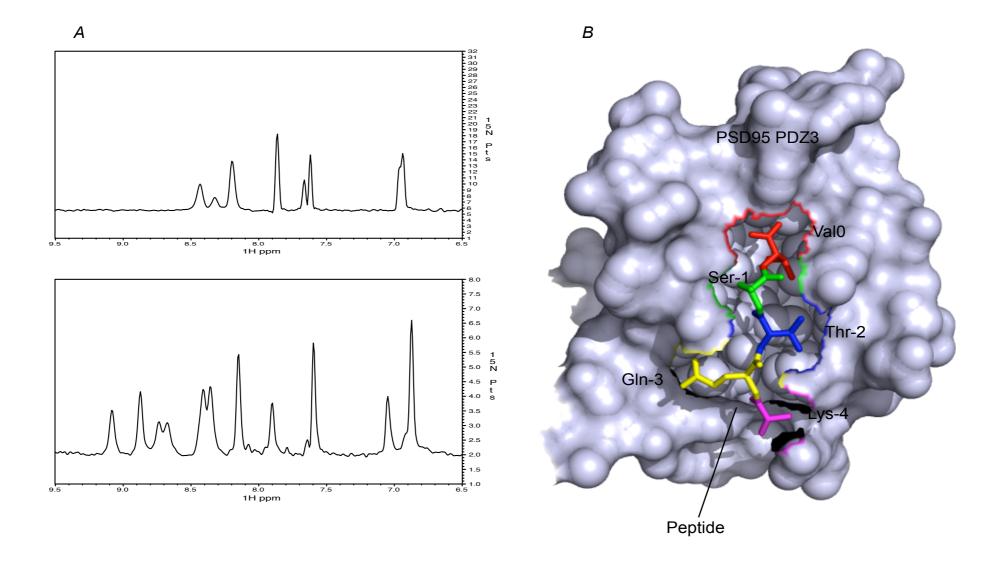


Fig. 1

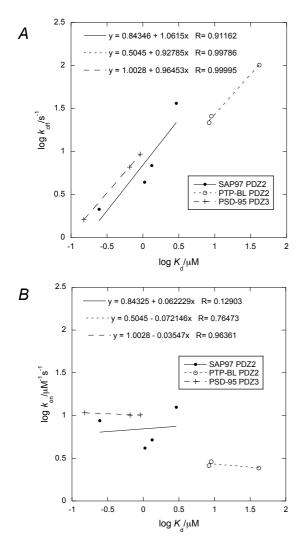


Fig. 2

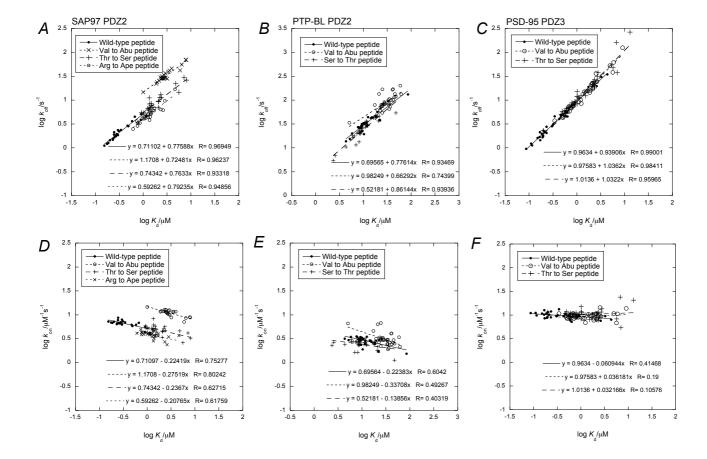


Fig. 3

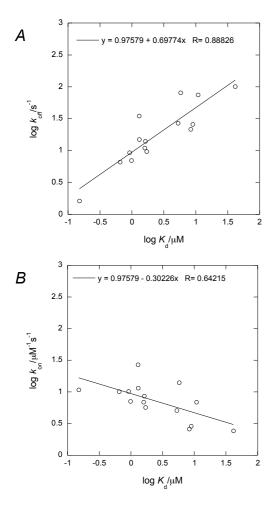


Fig. 4

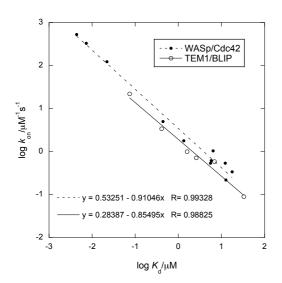


Fig. 5

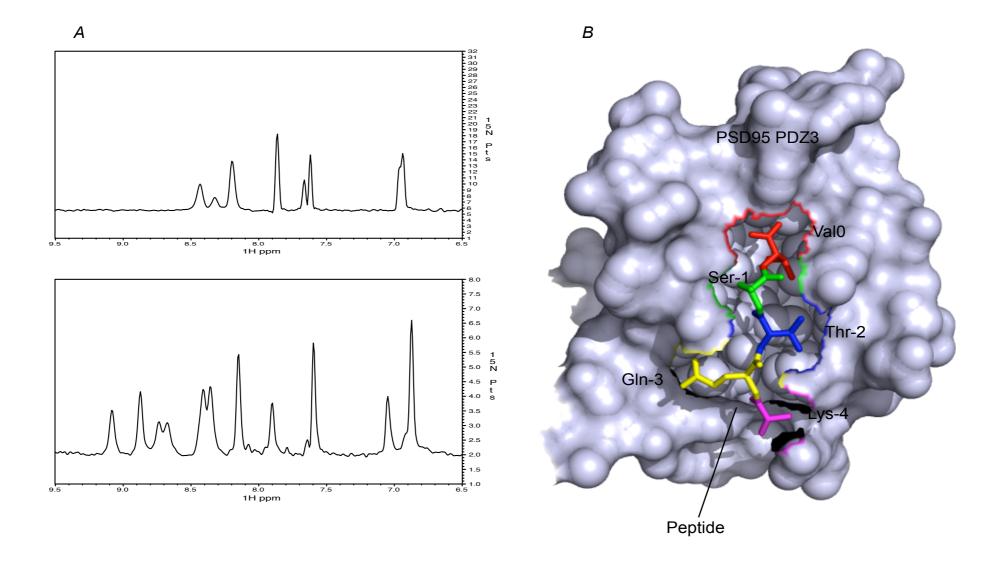


Fig. 1

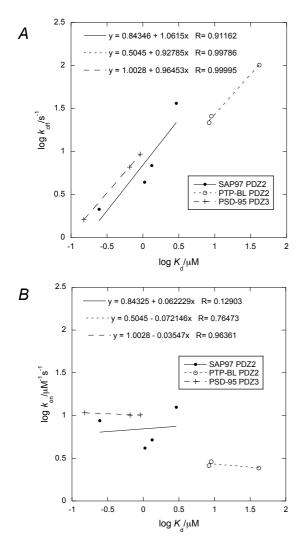


Fig. 2

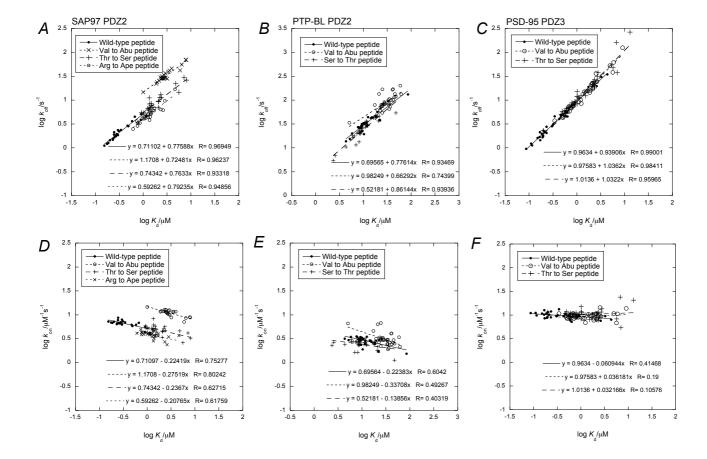


Fig. 3

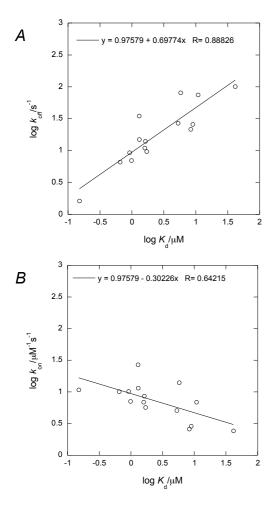


Fig. 4

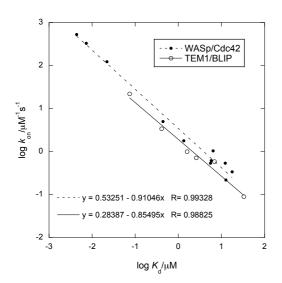


Fig. 5