Published in final edited form as:

Curr Opin Neurobiol. 2016 June ; 38: 74–79. doi:10.1016/j.conb.2016.04.001.

State-dependent responses to sex pheromones in mouse

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Abstract

A single sensory cue can evoke different behaviors that vary by recipient. Responses may be influenced by sex, internal state, experience, genotype, and coincident environmental stimuli. Pheromones are powerful inducers of mouse behavior, yet pheromone responses are not always stereotyped. For example, male and female mice respond differently to sex pheromones while mothers and virgin females respond differently to pup cues. Here, we review the origins of variability in responses to reproductive pheromones. Recent advances have indicated how response variability may arise through modulation at different levels of pheromone-processing circuitry, from sensory neurons in the periphery to central neurons in the vomeronasal amygdala. Understanding mechanisms underlying conditional pheromone responses should reveal how neural circuits can be flexibly sculpted to alter behavior.

Pheromones provide a way for animals to communicate socially, and can strongly induce or suppress sexual behavior [1·2]. Responses to pheromones occur in both the main olfactory epithelium (MOE) and vomeronasal organ (VNO), with downstream neural circuits providing streamlined connectivity to limbic system nuclei that orchestrate behavioral responses. Destroying MOE and/or VNO function through surgical ablation or genetic deletion of key signaling molecules impacts a variety of social behaviors, including mating [3·9], social attraction [8·10·13], territorial aggression [6·7·9·12·14·15], maternal aggression [6·14], dominance hierarchies [16], scent marking [6·16], parenting [17·19], suckling [20·21], and sick animal recognition [22]. Other sensory systems like vision and hearing remain intact in these models; therefore, olfaction features prominently in control of many social behaviors in mouse.

Although pheromones robustly promote innate behavior, the type of behavioral response can vary depending on the receiver's gender, reproductive physiology, and experience (Figure 1). Variable responses indicate that responsive neural circuits are flexibly molded to tailor behavioral outcome to the receiver's social needs. For example, male odors evoke scent-marking or aggressive behavior when detected by other males yet promote sexual receptivity

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Conflict of interest statement: Nothing declared

when detected by females. Pheromone responses in females can vary across the ovulation cycle, and in males, can depend on position in the social dominance hierarchy [16]. Furthermore parents and sexually naive mice display different responses to pup odors, and mothers display aggression rather than sexual attraction to foreign males [23-24]. Recent studies have begun to shed light on how changes in internal state modify both the dynamic production of pheromones, and recipient neural circuits that dictate behavioral outcomes.

Pheromone production varies with internal state

Mice emit odors and pheromones that broadcast their internal state. Some pheromones are produced at near-constant levels throughout life without influence of internal state, such as those that signal individual identity (genotype or kinship) [25]. Production of other pheromones is strikingly altered at puberty: for example, levels of male and female pheromones increase while levels of a juvenile pheromone decrease [23-26-29]. Yet others are rapidly induced, such as those indicating alarm or illness [22-30].

Sex pheromones are emitted as complex chemical blends that include volatile odors, steroids, and proteins (Table 1). Single pheromones have not been described to indicate 'maleness' or 'femaleness'; instead these perceptions are thought to arise from the gestalt of detected olfactory cues. Perhaps by emitting multiple cues, male mice maximize the chance that sensory receptors in a receptive female will be stimulated. Release of multiple cues may also allow for simultaneous evaluation of gender, genotype, species, and perhaps other aspects of internal state.

How does internal state influence pheromone production? Some pheromones are derived by direct chemical transformation of internal state-regulating hormones into externally broadcast pheromones. Circulating steroid and internal state hormones such as testosterone, estradiol, and pregnanolone can be directly transformed into externally emitted chemosensory ligands [27]. Some steroids are sulfated to promote excretion into the environment. Once emitted, sulfated steroids potently activate VNO sensory neurons of receiving individuals and serve as faithful indicators of the emitter's internal state [27-28-31-32]. For example, one sulfated estrogen is emitted by ovulating females as a byproduct of the reproductive cycle, and then functions secondarily as part of a pheromone blend that promotes male courtship behavior [28]. Other pheromones including lacrimal peptides and urinary proteins are more indirectly controlled by sex hormones [29-33]. Sexually dimorphic expression of major urinary proteins occurs in the liver, and is regulated by testosterone-dependent patterns of pulsatile growth hormone secretion [33]. Similar pathways control sexually dimorphic expression of a liver enzyme flavin monooxygenase 3 (FMO3), which catabolizes trimethylamine, a male mouse odor found in urine [11]. Male-specific *Fmo3* gene repression evolved recently in male mice, causing abundant, species-dependent, and sexually dimorphic emission of trimethylamine odor [11].

State-dependent responses in sensory neurons

Peripheral sensory neurons are thought to detect stimuli in the environment and faithfully transmit that information to the brain, while the brain is thought to make appropriate

behavioral decisions based on internal state and experience. However, contrary to this expected division of labor, some sensory information undergoes state-dependent filtering directly in peripheral sensory neurons. For example, females are attracted to males prior to ovulation, but are behaviorally indifferent during the opposing phase of the reproductive cycle [10]. This change in female attraction behavior occurs through sex hormone-mediated silencing of certain VNO sensory neurons responsive to male pheromones (Figure 2A) [10,34]. Silencing of sensory neurons does not enable the brain to receive maximal information from the external environment, but may provide a way to discard irrelevant signals.

Pheromone processing in higher order olfactory circuits

Inputs from the MOE and VNO diverge centrally, and variable responses to pheromones can involve neuromodulation within any of several downstream brain regions. MOE-derived signals access the main olfactory bulb and then third-order recipient nuclei that include the piriform cortex and cortical amygdala. Innate odor aversion and attraction responses involve the cortical amygdala [35], while the piriform cortex likely contributes to experience-dependent modulation of odor responses [36-37]. One example where experience guides a pheromone response is odor-driven suckling behavior in newborn mice, which involves learning of maternal cues through main olfactory pathways [20,21].

VNO-derived inputs instead target the accessory olfactory bulb, and then third-order limbic system nuclei including the medial amygdala and posteromedial cortical nucleus (which together comprise the vomeronasal amygdala). The medial amygdala is one major hub in pheromone-processing circuitry, and recent advances revealed it to be a key site for state-dependent modulation of vomeronasal inputs [38]. Sex hormone receptors and aromatase are abundant in the medial amygdala, which has striking sexual dimorphisms in anatomy, responses, and functions [38].

The medial amygdala receives direct excitatory input from accessory bulb mitral cells, and in turn routes information to several brain regions, with prominent connections to the ventromedial hypothalamus (VMH). The medial amygdala and VMH can be partitioned into discrete anatomical subnuclei, with discrete information processing streams distinguishable at a gross morphological level [39,40]. Defensive responses to predator odors primarily involve the ventral medial amygdala and the dorsomedial VMH, while reproductive and aggressive responses to pheromones instead primarily involve the posterior dorsal medial amygdala and ventrolateral VMH. Integration of VNO-derived information into a small number of behaviorally relevant channels would indicate different organizational principles from the main olfactory system, which instead is wired for diversity recognition. Interestingly, intermingled and perhaps identical VMH neurons respond to male and female odors and are relevant for mating and aggression [41,42], suggesting that a functional topography is not absolute.

Several classes of excitatory and inhibitory projection neurons in the medial amygdala have been defined by gene expression patterns and electrophysiological characteristics. Different VNO-activating stimuli from predators, competitors, mates, and juveniles activate subsets of

medial amygdala neurons [3·39·43·44]. *In vivo* electrophysiology revealed that medial amygdala neurons generally display enhanced selectivity related to the behavioral salience of odor mixtures than upstream accessory olfactory bulb mitral cells [43]. Moreover, responses in medial amygdala neurons are strikingly sexually dimorphic: most female neurons respond to male odors, and most male neurons respond to female odors [43]. Preferential responses to opposite-sex odors are maximal after puberty, and require sex hormone signaling during development [43].

Obtaining genetic control of molecularly distinct neuron types within the limbic system would provide an important foundation for understanding how pheromones control different behaviors. In the medial amygdala, selective stimulation of inhibitory GABAergic or excitatory glutamatergic neurons evokes antagonistic social (mating, fighting) or asocial (grooming) behaviors respectively [45]. Furthermore, genetic tools have enabled targeting of neurons in the medial amygdala and VMH that express key regulators of nervous system sexual differentiation [41·46·47]. About 10-20% of neurons in the medial amygdala contain aromatase, an enzyme that converts testosterone into estrogen and is essential for brain masculinization. Genetically guided ablation of medial amygdala aromatase neurons impairs aspects of aggression without impacting sexual behavior [46]. Moreover, some neurons in the ventrolateral VMH contain receptors for estrogen and progesterone, and these neurons regulate sexually dimorphic mating and aggression behaviors [41·47]. It is possible that limbic system neuron types can be further subdivided into discrete populations that specify behavioral outcomes related to reproduction, aggression, or predator defense. An alternative model intriguingly posits that the same population of VMH neurons can evoke mating and aggression depending on the scalable intensity of their activation [41]. Understanding the cellular logic of limbic system structures will provide a needed framework for understanding how inputs from pheromone-responsive sensory neurons are appropriately routed.

So how do male pheromones evoke sexually dimorphic responses? One possibility is that peripheral processing of male pheromones by males and females is similar. Once pheromonal inputs reach the limbic system, they are received by higher-order neurons whose connectivity and signaling properties have already been shaped during development by sex hormone signaling (Figure 2B). Perhaps at this point in the circuitry, signals in female and male mice diverge, differentially resulting in sex and aggression. Progesterone receptor-containing neurons in the VMH guide sexual behavior in females and aggression in males [47]- it would be exciting if these neurons are initially indistinguishable in both sexes, deriving from a common progenitor and being shaped by sex hormone signaling to alter behavioral outcomes. Future studies are needed to see if these or other sexually dimorphic neurons mediate pheromone responses, and if so, how sexual differentiation of the brain during the perinatal critical period and puberty mechanistically impacts their form and function.

The development of parental behavior and variable responses to young

Rodents display several stereotyped parental behaviors, such as building nests, nursing, and retrieving wayward pups [23]. The medial preoptic area (MPOA) of the hypothalamus and adjacent ventral regions of the bed nucleus of stria terminalis (vBST) form a brain region

critical for development of parental behavior [24]. Lesions of the MPOA/vBST impair parental behavior in rodents without impacting other survival functions of the hypothalamus, and electrical stimulation of the MPOA/vBST conversely promotes parental behavior [24]. Behavioral interaction with pups, or their odors alone, activates subsets of MPOA neurons [19,24], and genetic approaches revealed that galanin-containing MPOA neurons and other tyrosine hydroxylase-containing hypothalamic neurons govern parental behavior [19,48].

In rats, a complex re-wiring of the maternal brain occurs late in pregnancy to enable development of parental behavior [24]. Virgin female rats are not maternal, but can learn to care for foster pups. However, mothers display parental behavior due to a series of pregnancy-associated surges in levels of hormones such as prolactin, oxytocin, estrogen, and progesterone, and receptors for these hormones are expressed in the MPOA. Hormone-induced changes in neural circuitry can impact responses to pup pheromones, which are more attractive to lactating mothers [24]. Outputs from the medial amygdala are modified during pregnancy: in sexually naive females, pup pheromones stimulate the VMH and periaqueductal grey, while in mothers, pup pheromones stimulate the MPOA and ventral tegmental area (Figure 2C) [24]. Cellular mechanisms by which pregnancy hormones re-route olfactory circuits are unknown.

Rats and lab mice display several differences in maternal behavior [23,24]. First, sexually naive female mice display maternal behavior to foster pups, suggesting that pregnancy hormone-induced switches in amygdala outputs may be less pronounced. Second, rats use any of several senses to identify pups, with olfaction sufficient but not independently required. Lab mice instead rely heavily on olfactory cues, as impairment or silencing of main olfactory pathways in mice induces severe maternal behavior deficits [18,49,50]. Interestingly, male mice display a range of behaviors from infanticide to parental behavior that varies with personal experience [17,19]. Virgin males often kill foreign pups while recently mated males display parental behavior. Genetic or surgical removal of the vomeronasal organ disrupts infanticide in virgin males and promotes parental behavior [17,19]. Perhaps the choice between infanticide and parental behavior involves the relative strength of sensory signals from main and accessory olfactory pathways, with relative pathway weights shaped by mating experience in males.

Conclusions

Pheromone processing by the mouse brain is highly streamlined, providing a powerful opportunity to study how variable behaviors arise to controlled sensory stimuli. Responses to males and pups, and the odors they emit, vary by recipient. State-dependent odor processing is not restricted to social cues; for example, processing of food odors varies between hungry and sated individuals. Olfactory circuits are flexibly sculpted by hormone signaling and experience to cause different responses. Modulation occurs at multiple levels within responding neural circuits, including directly in peripheral sensory neurons and in higher order olfactory nuclei. Future research is needed to understand the essential cellular changes that occur in neurons to allow for conditional behavioral responses. Understanding mechanisms by which pheromone responses vary should help explain how behavioral diversity arises across animal populations.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants to SDL (NIH: RO1DC013289) and LS (NIH: RO1 DC006885 and Ellison Medical Foundation: NR-SS-0107-12).

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Highlights

The same pheromone can evoke different behaviors in different recipients.

State-dependent control of pheromone responses occurs in both the periphery and brain.

Hormones and experience sculpt pheromone responses in the limbic system.

Figure 1. State-dependent pheromone signaling

A) Individuals emit pheromones and odors that reflect their state of development, internal physiology, and experience. B) Given pheromones and odors can initiate a variety of responses (X, Y, & Z) depending on the receiver's state of development, internal physiology, and experience. The combination of state-dependent signals and state-dependent reception allows the receiver to tailor an appropriate behavioral response.

Figure 2. Different coding solutions to create accessory olfactory state-dependent circuits

A) Variable processing of male pheromones by females in estrus (red) or diestrus (blue). Silencing of specific male-pheromone responsive VNO sensory neurons can occur during diestrus, contributing to state-dependent responses. B) Variable processing of male odors by females (red) and males (blue) results in differential mating and aggression behaviors. While the overall circuit logic is similar, sexual dimorphisms within each nucleus or hormonal differences during development may account for behavioral differences. C) Variable processing of pup odors by virgins (red) and parents (blue). Experience and pregnancy hormones can gate changes in information flow, contributing to the development of parental behavior.

Table 1

Sexually dimorphic odors and pheromones of mice

Chemical	Biosynthesis	Behavior	Detection pathway
trimethylamine	Male urine	scent attraction	MOE; response lost in TAAR5 knockout mice
(methylthio)-methanethiol	Male urine	scent attraction	MOE
(Z)-5-tetradecen-1-ol	Male urine	scent attraction	MOE, includes Olfr288
2- <i>sec</i> -butyl-4,5-dihydrothiazole	Male urine	aggression	activates OE and VNO
2,3-dehydro- <i>exo</i> -brevicomin	Male urine	aggression	activates OE and VNO
Major Urinary Proteins	Male urine	aggression, scent countermarking, attraction	VNO neurons containing V2Rs
Exocrine-Gland Secreting peptides	Male tears (ESP1, ESP24)	lordosis behavior (ESP1)	VNO neurons containing V2Rs; ESP1 response lost in V2Rp5 knockout mice.
Modified steroids	Female urine (estrogen derivatives) Male urine (androgen derivatives)	courtship behavior	VNO neurons containing V1Rs