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Aggressive Displays in Male Betta splendens Based on Color Patterns

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Abstract
The traits of an opponent can influence how an individual uses aggressive displays to dissuade the opponent from physical conflict. Whereas one previous study found that conspecific aggression was less intense between differently-colored Siamese fighting fish (Betta splendens), we felt that more evidence was needed to corroborate or dispute their findings. We hypothesized that B. splendens act less aggressively towards similarly-colored fish than to differently-colored fish, based on the notion that males would avoid conflict with a phenotypically similar opponent due to the costs of displaying. To test for differences in aggression due to coloration, we paired 10 fish in view of one another, as well as in view of a mirror reflection, and measured duration of gill flaring and the number of tail beats.

Methods and Materials

Introduction
Aggressive displays play a significant role in both intra- and interspecific interactions, such as territory defense, by conveying the displaying individual's fighting ability, which can dissuade an opponent from combat (Hess et al. 2016). These displays can also be metabolically costly (Arnott, 2016; Castro, et al., 2006), so the display may appear to the opponent to avoid exhaustion, physical harm, or death.

Siamese fighting fish (Betta splendens) use conspicuous aggressive displays (i.e., tail beating and flared gill covers), which makes them an ideal species for studying aggression (Abante, 2005). One study analyzed color bias in aggression between male B. splendens and found that males used more aggressive displays towards similarly-colored individuals than towards differently-colored males (Thompson & Sturm, 1965). Another study that looked at aggressive displays in B. splendens found that differences were not significant when directed at a reflection or at an opponent (Arnott et al., 2016). We wanted to conduct a experiment to corroborate or refute color bias in B. splendens aggression, so we tested whether coloration influences aggressive displays between male B. splendens.

Objective: To see if a difference in aggressive displays occurs between similarly-colored fish, differently-colored fish, and fish towards their reflection. A significant difference in aggressive displays between treatments may indicate a color bias in aggression.

Predictions: More tail beats and longer gill flaring will occur between differently-colored fish than between similarly-colored fish. Aggressive displays directed at a reflection will be as a similar rate as displays between similarly-colored fish. Our predictions are based on previous research which found no significant difference in displays directed at a reflection compared to those directed at an opponent (Arnott et al., 2016)

Results

There was a significant difference between treatments for both the duration of gill flaring (F = 6.36, df = 2, p = 0.002; Fig. 2) and the number of tail beats (F = 4.76, df = 2, p = 0.022; Fig. 3). The duration of gill flaring in the different color group was significantly lower than durations in both the same color and the reflection groups (p < 0.05). The difference between the same color and mirror groups was not significant (p > 0.05). The number of tail beats in the different color group was significantly lower than the number in the mirror group (p < 0.05). The differences between the same color group and both the different color and the reflection groups were not significant (p > 0.05).

Discussion

Gill flaring in the differently-colored male B. splendens was significantly shorter in duration than gill flaring in both the same color and mirror pairings, which refutes our initial predictions that gill flaring duration would be shorter in the same color pairs than in the different color pairs. While the number of tail beats was less in the different color pairs than the same color pairs, the difference was not statistically significant. The number of tail beats in the same color pairing was also non-significantly lower than displays between a fish and their reflection. The unusually low rate in the same color group may be due to early submissiveness in some of the same color pairings, so additional trials with a larger sample size could improve the results of tail beat number between groups.

B. splendens don’t recognize their reflection, at least in terms of displaying, as indicated by the non-significant difference between the mirror and same color pairs for both tail beats and gill flaring. The measured difference in both display types between the same color pairs and the mirror group could be due to heightened aggression in the mirror towards a more aggressive pseudo-opponent. Since the perceived opponent does not stop displaying until the displaying fish surrenders, the aggression between the displaser and its reflection could last far longer than aggression between two fish when either opponent can surrender before the other.

Our experiment indicates that male B. splendens use less aggressive displays towards differently-colored males than similarly-colored males, which supports previous research on aggression between different color types (Lehtonen, 2014; Pryke & Griffith, 2006; Thompson & Sturm, 1965). Researchers attributed these differences in aggression to underlying influences of phenotypic diversity in coloration in a population (Lehtonen, 2014). In some species, certain color types can assert dominance over some other color types more quickly than other color types by initiating aggression sooner or more often (Pryke & Griffith, 2006). This assertion of dominance may also apply to male B. splendens: one color type may be asserting dominance over the other color type more quickly, ending aggression sooner, or initiating aggression sooner in the different color pairing than in the same color pairing.

Due to the lower levels of aggression witnessed between B. splendens of different colors, the possibility that male B. splendens can share a tank with other males as long as they are of different colors may be present, though further research is needed to support or reject this notion.

Coloration in male B. splendens does appear to impact conspecific aggression, though the dynamics of color type influence in B. splendens is currently unclear. Our findings could open the door for further investigation into the significance of color type in B. splendens interactions and in the interactions of other species.

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References