

**Role of Bmi-1 in Epigenetic Regulation
During Early Neural Crest Development**

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ABSTRACT

The neural crest is a transient, multipotent cell population in the developing vertebrate embryo that migrates extensively and contributes to a staggering diversity of cell lineages. Neural crest progenitors are specified at the neural plate border during gastrulation; however, commitment to the neural crest lineage does not occur for some time. I find that the chick neural plate border is characterized by co-expression of several neural crest specifier genes, previously considered “late” signals, which often overlap with “early” neural plate border genes. This suggests that continuously expressed members of the neural crest gene regulatory network may be modulated or repressed for proper maintenance of the multipotent state. Consistent with this possibility, several members of the Polycomb Group of epigenetic repressors are expressed at these early stages. For example, the stem cell factor Bmi-1 is expressed in the neural plate border, dorsal neural folds, and migrating neural crest, but is extinguished in differentiated derivatives. Morpholino-mediated knock-down of Bmi-1 causes early upregulation of *Msx1*, *FoxD3*, and *Sox9* in the chick neurula without affecting cell proliferation. Conversely, Bmi-1 over-expression causes a downregulation of *Msx1*, suggesting that it negatively regulates neural crest network genes. I find that several alternatively spliced variants of Bmi-1 are expressed in the developing chick and that a truncated N-terminal variant, V4, acts as a dominant-negative regulator of the full-length protein by up-regulating *Msx1* expression. Taken together, these results suggest that neural crest progenitors are exposed to numerous signals during gastrulation, some of which are regulated by Polycomb Group factors such as Bmi-1. The activity of Bmi-1, in turn, is modulated by alternatively spliced variants, demonstrating an additional level of regulatory complexity acting during early neural crest development.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Molecular and Epigenetic Regulation of Development	1
Neural crest as a stem cell model	2
Establishment of the neural plate border	4
Gene regulatory interactions driving early neural crest development	7
Epigenetic regulation of embryonic development	11
The Polycomb Group of epigenetic repressors	13
Structure and function of Bmi-1 in stem cell development	15

Chapter 2:

Comprehensive Spatiotemporal Analysis of Early Chick Neural Crest Network Genes	23
ABSTRACT	24
INTRODUCTION	25
MATERIALS AND METHODS	29
Chick embryo incubation	29
Whole-mount <i>in situ</i> hybridization	29
Cryosectioning	29
<i>In situ</i> mRNA probes	30
RESULTS	31

HH4	31
HH5	33
HH6 and HH7	34
HH8	35
HH9	36
HH10	37
DISCUSSION	38
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	41

Chapter 3:

Regulation of Neural Crest Network Genes by Stem Cell Factor Bmi-1 During Early Chick Development	49
INTRODUCTION	50
MATERIALS AND METHODS	57
Chick embryo incubation	57
<i>In situ</i> hybridization	57
<i>In situ</i> mRNA probes	57
Cryosectioning	58
Antibodies and immunohistochemistry	58
Morpholino design and specificity assay	60
Electroporation	61
Over-expression constructs	61
RNA and cDNA preparation	62

QPCR	63
RESULTS	65
<i>Bmi-1</i> is expressed in neural crest progenitors during gastrulation	65
<i>Bmi-1</i> is maintained in undifferentiated neural crest progenitors ..	66
Multiple members of PRC1 and PRC2 are expressed in neural crest progenitors in overlapping domains	67
<i>Bmi-1</i> knock-down results in early upregulation of the neural crest network genes	68
<i>Msx1</i> is specifically upregulated as a result of <i>Bmi-1</i> MO electroporation	68
The effects of <i>Bmi-1</i> MO on neural crest specifiers are non-specific during late neurulation	70
<i>Msx1</i> , <i>FoxD3</i> , and <i>Sox9</i> transcripts are quantifiably increased by <i>Bmi-1</i> knock-down at HH6	71
Upregulation of neural crest genes due to <i>Bmi-1</i> MO occurs in the absence of changes in cell proliferation in the dorsal neural folds	73
Co-over-expression of <i>Bmi-1</i> and <i>Ring1B</i> causes a decrease in <i>Msx1</i> expression	74
DISCUSSION	76
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	82

Chapter 4:

Characterization of Alternatively Spliced Variants of Bmi-1 During Early Chick Development	96
INTRODUCTION	97
MATERIALS AND METHODS	103
Sequence analysis	103
Genomic analysis and intron sequencing	103
V6 protein translation assay	105
Chick embryo incubation	105
RT-PCR	106
QPCR	107
Over-expression constructs	108
Electroporation	109
<i>In situ</i> hybridization	109
RESULTS	111
Bmi-1 is characterized by five alternatively spliced isoforms.....	111
Bmi-1 variants are expressed in the chicken embryo during early development in a stage-specific manner	112
V4 over-expression causes upregulation of <i>Msx1</i> , mimicking a loss-of-function phenotype	115
DISCUSSION	117
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	119

Chapter 5:

Summary and Perspectives	127
Current molecular definition of the neural plate border progenitor population	128
Prospects for cellular resolution at the neural plate border	131
Discovery of epigenetic regulators in the developing chick embryo	131
<i>In vivo</i> functional analysis of the Polycomb Group factor Bmi-1	133
Optimizing Polycomb loss-of-function approaches	135
Strategies for large-scale analysis of polycomb function.....	136
Alternative splicing as an additional regulatory mechanism	139
Conclusions	142
<u>Cited Literature:</u>	146

LIST OF FIGURES**Chapter 1**

Figure 1.1	19
Figure 1.2	20
Figure 1.3	21

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1	42
Figure 2.2	44
Figure 2.3	46
Figure 2.4	47
Figure 2.5	48

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1	83
Figure 3.2	85
Figure 3.3	87
Figure 3.4	88
Figure 3.5	90

Figure 3.692
Figure 3.794

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1120
Figure 4.2122
Figure 4.3123
Figure 4.4125

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1144