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Perspective

Genetic Drift: Understanding Random Evolutionary Changes in Population Genetics

Erik Lundqvist*

Department of Clinical Genomics, Scandinavian University of Life Sciences, Stockholm, Sweden

DESCRIPTION

Genetic drift is an evolutionary mechanism that describes random fluctuations in allele frequencies within a population due to chance events. Unlike natural selection, which favors genetic variants that provide survival or reproductive advantages, genetic drift occurs independently of whether a genetic variant is beneficial, harmful, or neutral. The influence of genetic drift is particularly significant in small populations, where random changes can rapidly alter genetic composition. Current research in population genetics, evolutionary biology and conservation genomics continues to explore how genetic drift shapes biodiversity, population structure and the long-term survival of species.

Genetic drift occurs because reproductive success and survival are not completely determined by genetic traits alone. Random events, such as environmental changes, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, or variations in reproduction, can influence which individuals contribute genetic material to future generations. As a result, certain alleles may become more common or disappear entirely by chance. Over time, these random changes can reduce genetic variation within populations and increase genetic differences between isolated groups.

One of the most important examples of genetic drift is the founder effect. This occurs when a small group of individuals separates from a larger population and establishes a new population in a different location. Because the founding individuals represent only a limited portion of the original genetic diversity, the new population may have different allele frequencies compared with the source population. The founder effect has been observed in isolated human communities, island populations and animal species that colonize new habitats.

Genetic drift has played an important role in human population history. Migration, geographic isolation and population reductions have influenced patterns of human genetic variation. Certain genetic conditions may occur at higher frequencies in specific populations because of historical founder effects. For example, some inherited disorders associated with variants in genes such as *HEXA*, *CFTR*, or *GJB2* show different frequencies among populations due to historical demographic events. Understanding these patterns assists researchers in studying disease distribution and improving genetic counseling approaches.

The impact of genetic drift is strongly influenced by population size. Large populations generally experience weaker effects of genetic drift because random changes are less likely to significantly alter allele frequencies. In contrast, small populations are highly affected because each individual's genetic contribution represents a larger proportion of the population's gene pool. This principle is particularly important in conservation biology, where endangered species often face genetic challenges caused by reduced population sizes.

Genetic drift contributes to evolutionary divergence between populations. When populations become geographically separated and experience different patterns of random genetic change, they may gradually accumulate genetic differences. Over extended periods, these differences can contribute to the formation of new species. Research combining genomic data and evolutionary models has improved understanding of how genetic drift interacts with mutation, migration and natural selection during species evolution.

In conclusion, genetic drift is a powerful evolutionary force that influences genetic variation, population differentiation and species adaptation. Although driven by chance, its effects have profound consequences for biodiversity, conservation and human genetics. Continued research into genetic drift will improve understanding of population evolution and support strategies for maintaining genetic health in both natural and human populations.

Correspondence to: Erik Lundqvist, Department of Clinical Genomics, Scandinavian University of Life Sciences, Stockholm, Sweden, E-mail: erik.lundqvist@suls.edu

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