# **Socially transferred materials: how and why to study them**

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### **Keywords**

Allohormones, evolutionary transitions, metabolomics, parental care, seminal fluid, microbiome

### **Abstract**

When biological material is transferred from one individual’s body to another – as in ejaculate, eggs, and milk – secondary donor-produced molecules are often transferred along with the main cargo, and influence the physiology and fitness of the receiver. Both social and solitary animals exhibit such social transfers at certain life stages. The secondary, bioactive and transfer-supporting components in socially transferred materials have evolved convergently to the point where they are used in applications across taxa and type of transfer. The composition of these materials is typically highly dynamic and context-dependent, and their components drive physiological and behavioral evolution of many taxa. Our establishment of the concept of socially transferred materials unifies this multidisciplinary topic and will benefit both theory and applications.

## **Molecules transferred between individuals are fundamental in evolution**

All animals interact with other individuals of their own species at least some point in life – even solitary species are strongly impacted by their conspecifics, i.e. their fitness depends on both positive and negative social effects caused by their relatives, competitors and mating partners. In addition to well-studied means of communication such as visual, chemical and auditory signals, animals have also evolved behaviors where biological material is passed from one individual’s body to another and directly affects the receiver’s physiology. The most notable examples are all highly fitness-relevant: internal insemination, deposition of nutrition to offspring in eggs, and various other nutrition and symbiont transfer behaviors evolved in the context of parental care (Box 1) [1–6].

We define these **socially transferred materials** (see Glossary) as materials that are transferred between conspecifics and i) include components metabolized by the donor, ii) which induce a direct physiological response in the receiver, bypassing sensory organs, and iii) benefitting the donor. Our definition is built on the definition of allohormones [7], and broadened to include the transfer of functional cells, and transfer to and from individuals that are not free-living, such as offspring developing inside the parent or anglerfish males living inside the females [8]. The only route to the evolution of non-free-living individuals is via **social transfers**. A key distinction to separate socially transferred materials from pheromones is that components of socially transferred materials directly interact with the receiver’s physiology, while pheromones are detected by the sensory organs of the receiver. In this context, we do not consider mere collection of food for other individuals as a social transfer, unless the donor adds metabolized substances that target recipients. For example, some **nuptial gifts** are socially transferred materials, but not all of them [9].

Socially transferred materials typically involve both specialized behaviors and adapted morphological features such as glands that produce and secrete the transmitted components, or even full organs such as penises, love darts, spermathecas, placentas and nipples. As the materials travel directly between individual bodies, they can have strong impacts on the physiology of the receivers. For example, when honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) larvae are fed with a specific type of food that the workers secrete, royal jelly, they develop into queens instead of workers [10]; royal jelly also has longevity-enhancing components that are functional in taxa other than honeybees [11]. Similarly, though less dramatically, human milk affects offspring’s long-term health by protecting against infection, obesity and diabetes [2,12]. Socially transferred materials have immediate impacts on behavior and physiology. For example in the fruit fly *Drosophila melanogaster*, a seminal fluid protein “sex peptide” reduces females’ mating willingness, alters their dietary and resting preferences and has major physiological effects from enhanced egg-production to immunological and metabolic changes [13]. Even though social transfers have been reported for hundreds of years across hundreds of taxa, only a few are well-studied, and many of the molecular mechanisms in even the flagship transfers of milk and ejaculate are still poorly understood. We argue that these materials are evolutionarily more important than currently appreciated.

With the help of emerging methodologies and theory, socially transferred materials fill an important gap in our understanding of evolution. The interacting phenotypes framework has proven useful for modeling and empirically studying the evolution and genetic architecture of traits involving interactions between conspecifics, which occur in all animals. This framework considers how an individual’s phenotype is directly affected by its own genotype (direct genetic effects) and indirectly affected by its interaction partners’ genotypes (indirect genetic effects) [14,15]. As such, it has been used to identify genes and alleles underlying variation and expression of socially-influenced traits [16,17]. However, apart from these few recent studies, this framework has mostly treated the mechanistic details by which genes influence traits as a black box. Socially transferred materials are likely to be central in these types of functional mechanisms, and approaches that explicitly study the materials can help bridge the gap between mechanistic understanding and eco-evolutionary dynamics of interacting traits and genes.

Socially transferred materials typically consist of different components that are governed by different selection pressures, some social and others biophysical. Despite the diversity of impacts they exert on receivers, there are clear and currently unexplained commonalities in their components. Social transfers require a **vehicle**, a physical substance that enables the transmission of the primary cargo, such as ejaculate to transmit genetic material [6]; egg [18,19], milk [2,20,21], or mucus [22,23] to transmit nutritious components; or adapted forms of feces to transmit symbionts [24]. The primary cargo or **primary component** that is transferred, such as nutrition, genetic material, or symbionts, is the evolutionary driver for the transfer (Box 1). Over evolutionary time, this primary component is supplemented with **secondary components** (Table 1), which either have stabilizing and preserving functions for the whole vehicle or for some of the components, or function as allohormones to manipulate receivers. The functions of the various secondary components are not necessarily related to the functions of the primary components, and can be either beneficial or harmful for both the donor and the receiver. Currently more and more detailed datasets on the components of socially transferred materials are produced, but there is no comprehensive, integrative effort toward studying their evolution and impact. Often, we have only a poor understanding of the various roles of secondary components or how they work in concert in these complex mixtures. Existing and emerging datasets must be connected with evolutionary theory to maximize the impact of research on socially transferred materials for multiple fields of biology.

The aim of this review is to establish socially transferred materials as an integrative topic in biology. After defining them and discussing what is known on their evolution and composition (Box 1, Table 1), we review theoretical frameworks and methodological directions to enable comprehensive future work (Figure 1). Understanding that social transfers are potent drivers of evolutionary change, and creating a common framework for studying these materials, will benefit each research domain from overarching theory down to molecular pathways.

## **BOX 1: Classification of socially transferred materials based on primary components**

Social transfers can be classified in many ways (Figure I), ranging from whether they disperse horizontally among individuals or vertically between parents and offspring, to whether they are synchronous or asynchronous in time, and whether they are more or less frequent or sustained**.** One of the most informative ways is to classify social transfers according to their primary components, with three main classes: the transfers of genetic material, nutrition, and symbionts.

Genetic Material Transfers of genetic material include vertical transfers from parents to offspring, and horizontal transfers between mating partners. In the vertical transfer, ovules and sperm carry non-coding components that can exert epigenetic control over the gene expression of the offspring [25,26]. The secondary components in vertical social transfers often act out the conflicts between parental genomes and conflicts between parents and offspring [27]. In the horizontal transfer between mating partners, many secondary components in ejaculate and female reproductive fluids play major roles in sexually antagonistic arms races [28,29], which is similarly likely in materials like mating plugs and nuptial gifts [9,30,31]. In some animals, mating involves the partners attaching to each other – even permanently e.g. anglerfish [8].

Nutrition Transfers of nutritionare usually related to parental care, which in its most ancient form is provisioning offspring with nutrition through the egg. Secondary components in eggs impact hatching order, physiology and success of offspring [18]. Care-associated materials can also be deposited outside eggs [25], or the parent or other relatives can lay trophic eggs for offspring to eat [32]. Many animals produce substances like yolk and mucus [4,23], and some have even evolved specialized feeding organs such as mammary glands [21] or larval tubercles [33]. All forms of viviparity include social transfers, from invertebrates like tsetse flies and aphids [34], to the 142 independently evolved vertebrate cases [35]. In addition to offspring, material can also be transferred horizontally to mating partners, as nuptial gifts [9], or to other members of social groups, even generating a shared physiology as in the case of many social insects [5,36].

Symbionts Transfers of symbionts are likely rarer, but accumulating evidence suggests that symbionts are of such importance to animal physiology that specific behaviors for transferring them must have a larger evolutionary role than historically considered. Thus far the secondary components in such transfers have received little to no study, apart from a few main examples such as the termite microbiome transfers [24]. It has been suggested that mammalian milk may have originally evolved to regulate bacterial communities [37]. Symbionts, and molecules supporting symbiotic relationships are also common secondary components in all socially transferred materials (Table 1).

**<Embed the classification Figure I in the box.>**

**END BOX**

## **Convergent evolution of secondary components can reveal shared selection pressures**

Socially transferred materials are generally composed of a slew of different molecular components that can have similar molecular functions, even in completely different socially transferred materials and across taxa (Table 1). We hypothesize that ultimately, this is because similar selection pressures – fitness costs, benefits, and fundamental physics and chemistry – shape the evolution of these transfers, regardless of their behavioral context. Here we highlight similarities already observable in existing datasets, and call for a full comparative study on this topic.

Among the most consistent selection pressures for the composition of socially transferred materials are the risks of opening a direct physiological channel between bodies (e.g. [38]). For example, opening such a channel introduces significant potential for infection – sexually transmitted diseases are emblematic of this risk. Thus, social transfers commonly elicit an immune response in the receiver, and similarly reflecting this risk, many secondary components are defense-related: antibodies, antioxidants, DNases, RNases, antimicrobial proteins and peptides, and even immune cells [2]. These can function to protect transferred materials (e.g. [39]) or to enhance the defense system of the recipient [20,40]. When the social transfer is recurrent or sustained, the overall level of risk is especially high (e.g. placental viviparity can bring about problems like gestational diabetes when physiological control mechanisms are compromised [41]), but it is typically balanced by high benefits and common interests between partners.

Orthologous genes are often co-opted across vastly different lineages for use in social transfers either to ensure chemical stability and preservation, to transfer components, or to alter recipient physiology. Many molecular parallels can be found between proteins in *D.* *melanogaster*’s seminal fluid and the regurgitate transmitted mouth-to-mouth in *Camponotus floridanus* ant colonies, including esterase-6/juvenile hormone esterase, serpins, serine proteases, regucalcin, transferrin, lectins and some uncharacterized but orthologous proteins [36,42]. Even across distant taxa, molecular commonalities can be observed – the nutritive fluid that ants feed to their colony members has molecular commonalities with mammalian milk, namely the abundant proliferation protein CREG1, lipoproteins or fatty-acid binding proteins, and antioxidant enzymes like xanthine dehydrogenase and superoxide dismutase [36,43].

An important class of secondary components in socially transferred materials are stabilizing molecules enabling the transfer of other molecules. Many of these may be convergently present in socially transferred materials across lineages, revealing that similar molecular pathways can be co-opted repeatedly during the course of evolution. For example, protein families involved in RNA or lipid transport, or antioxidant activity, have been found across many socially transferred materials. In honey bee royal jelly, MRJP-3 protein plays a key role in concentrating, stabilizing, and enhancing RNA bioavailability, facilitating social immunity and signaling among bees [44]. In an even more complex case, *Plataspidae* stinkbug females deliver essential symbionts to offspring via capsules laid simultaneously with the eggs, and a specific protein is responsible for stabilizing the symbiont in them [45]. Interestingly, the protein tetraspanin is found in most socially transferred materials studied so far. This protein is a marker of exosomes (extracellular vesicles) [46], a major mode of cargo transmission between the cells of a multicellular organisms. Tetraspanin’s presence across social transfers indicates that exosomes have likely been co-opted from use in within-individual physiological processes to be used in across-individual physiological processes.

Finally, although current studies mostly focus on the overall composition of socially transferred materials or the functions of specific components, it is likely that quantitative variability in composition is equally important and selected for. Many socially transferred materials seem to share similar response dynamics: their composition changes with the social and environmental context and individual condition (e.g. [47–49]). In addition to donor-induced plasticity in the socially transferred materials, it is likely that receivers’ responses are equally plastic– though so far, the receiver side of these transfers has received very little study. The constant evolutionary balance between cooperation and conflict between partners can push socially transferred materials to evolve to be increasingly complex, making them potent drivers of evolution (see Figure 2 for lactation as a major example of this).

### **Table 1 (next page): Molecular commonalities across socially transferred materials.**

*The composition of socially transferred material has evolved convergently in different socially transferred materials and across taxa. We cite selected examples from vertebrates and invertebrates emphasizing known commonalities, and we encourage researchers to fill the gaps for their own study systems. Abbreviations: Female reproductive fluids (FRF), xanthine dehydrogenase (XDH), superoxide dismutase (SOD), glucose dehydrogenase (GluDH), juvenile hormone (JH), heat shock protein (HSP).* \**Symbionts are special components, as they are organisms of their own, not produced by the donor’s metabolism. Although some social transfers have clearly evolved to accomplish the basal transfer of symbionts* [24]*, symbionts have likely entered other socially transferred materials as secondary components. As relatively little research has been done on them, they are not included as a main category here. However, symbionts are found in many socially transferred materials, and are thus mentioned as secondary components.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Genetic material** | | **Nutrition** | |
| **Vertebrates** | **Invertebrates** | **Vertebrates** | **Invertebrates** |
| Basic building blocks | **Sugars** | Ejaculate [50] | Ejaculate [51] | Milk [20,52] e.g. simple sugars, complex oligosaccharides Regurgitate [3] | Eggs [53] Regurgitate [54] |
| **Free amino acids** | Ejaculate [50] | Ejaculate [50] | Milk [52] | Regurgitate [5,54] Excreta [55] |
| **Lipids Fatty acids Triglycerides** | Ejaculate [56–58] e.g. cholesterol, glycosphingolipid, prostanoids | Ejaculate [59] | Saliva [60]  Milk [20,52] e.g. fatty acids, gangliosides, cholesterol Regurgitate [3] Eggs [19] e.g. yolk lecithin, alkaloids | Eggs [53] Regurgitate [5] e.g., cholesterol, fatty acids, long-chain hydrocarbons |
| **Vitamins & minerals** | Ejaculate [58,61] e.g. vitamin D |  | Milk [20,52] e.g. Magnesium, iron, calcium, Vitamins A, D, E and K Regurgitate [3] Mucus [23] e.g. calcium |  |
| Hormones | **Hormones** | Ejaculate [58] e.g. Steroids, cortisol, renin, angiotensin | Ejaculate [6] e.g. Lucibufagin, JH | Saliva [62] e.g. Ghrelin Eggs [63], e.g. Steroid & thyroid hormones, Cortisol Mucus [23] e.g. Cortisol | Regurgitate [5] e.g. JH, vitellogenin |
| RNA | **Small/non-coding RNA** | Ejaculate [64–66] | Ejaculate [66] | Milk [20] Saliva [65] | Eggs [53] Regurgitate [5] |
| **Nucleotides** | Ejaculate [50] | Ejaculate [50] | Milk [52] |  |
| Proteins |  | Ejaculate [58], e.g. immunoregulatory factors, cytokines FRF [67] | Ejaculate [59,68,69] Injection devices [39,70]  FRF [71] e.g. apolipophorins, transferrin, PPO, GluDH, HSPs, cathepsins, OBPs, est-6 | Milk [20] e.g. Casein, transferrin, a- γ- β-globulin, albumin, lysozyme, cathelicidins, XDH, CREG1, tetraspanin  Eggs [19] e.g. Ovoalbumin, ovotransferrin, ovoinhibitor, avidin, cystatin, vitellogenin, lysozyme Mucus [23,72] Regurgitate [3] Saliva [73] | Eggs [74] e.g. vitellogenin Regurgitate [36] e.g. GluDH, apolipophorins, hexamerins, cathepsin, vitellogenin, CREG1, amylase, major royal jelly proteins, JH esterases, transferrins, serine proteases, serpins, OBPs, cathepsins, HSPs, XDH, SOD |
| **Antibodies & Anti-microbials** | Ejaculate [50], FRF [72] | Ejaculate [39,72] | Eggs [19] e.g. IgY Saliva [75] [75] e.g. IgG, IgM, IgA Milk [20],  Mucus [23] Regurgitate [3] | Regurgitate [5] |
| Cells | **Symbionts\*** | Ejaculate [72]  FRF [72] | Ejaculate [76] | Mucus [22] Regurgitate [3] | Eggs [77]  Regurgitate [78], Excreta [45], |
| **Immunity cells** | Ejaculate [50] | Ejaculate [50] | Milk [20] e.g. Neutrophils, lymphocytes, macrophages |  |
| **Other cells** | Ejaculate [50] e.g. gland cells | Ejaculate [50] | Milk [20] e.g. stem cells |  |

## **Existing theoretical frameworks for understanding selection pressures acting on social transfers**

Socially transferred materials are currently mostly studied at the proximate molecular level, and in many cases, studies do not explicitly link to evolutionary biology. We argue that this is hindering our ability to reach the full potential of this field.

Proximately, the secondary components in socially transferred materials can have complex and dynamically changing compositions, often with ample functional redundancy. Previous studies on communication signals have shown similar evolutionary paths towards seemingly unnecessary complexity, and their insights are valuable for studying socially transferred materials [79]. Multiple ideas have been put forward on why such complexity evolves: to balance the costs and benefits of single signals, or their mixture, or to increase robustness and counter transmission difficulties with noisy signals, or the physiological constraints of production. Additionally, there can be multiple messages delivered, by multiple donors to multiple receivers. It is also possible that some parts of a transferred material exist to eliminate cheaters (e.g. parasites or conspecific competitors) and so are the product of a completely different co-evolutionary interaction beyond the donor and receiver. Redundancy may exist to allow maximal plasticity and robustness across different contexts, or as a legacy of past resistance in receivers. Overall, the history of research on animal signals highlights an important lesson: receiver fitness likely has a major role in shaping the components of socially transferred materials – just as it has in shaping communication signals.

Ultimately, costs and benefits for both donors and recipients drive the evolution of socially transferred materials. These can be measured as energetic costs, but more comprehensively in terms of direct and indirect fitness [80]. Thus, the inclusive fitness framework of kin selection theory is useful to understand the evolution of socially transferred materials across behavioral contexts, and helps in assessment of the inherent risks of opening a direct physiological channel between individuals. As kin selection is an intrinsic part of natural selection, this framework should be used for analyzing all intraspecific interactions, be they positive or negative, and with close relatives or not. The inclusive fitness framework best allows the formation of hypotheses for what kinds of socially transferred materials evolve under different levels of conflict. Secondary components can have both cooperative and competitive effects, and understanding their evolutionary role requires implementing an indirect fitness component in the analysis.

In theory, genes with social effects on fitness are expected to evolve more rapidly than genes that only influence an individual’s own fitness [15,81]. All-else-equal, these genes experience effectively relaxed selection, depending on the relatedness of interacting social partners. It has been shown empirically that evolution of socially transferred materials is indeed possible under relaxed selection [82]. On the other hand, traits associated with the production and transfer of socially transferred materials can strongly affect the fitness of interacting partners, in some cases in opposing ways, potentially leading to evolutionary arms races and rapid phenotypic evolution.

The game theory approach may be fruitful when the payoffs of material transfer depend not only on the interacting partners themselves, but on their previous interactions, and on the strategies that conspecifics have taken, making selection somewhat frequency dependent: For example, a female’s fecundity can be stimulated by male’s seminal fluid proteins at the first mating. Then, later mating males are selected to be sensitive to their position in the mating sequence [83,84], and to allocate resources accordingly, e.g. not investing in fecundity-stimulating proteins [84]. The same principle likely applies in other contexts, such as investment in defensive components [85]. Further, since socially transferred components can change an individual's physiology, they can influence that individual’s subsequent social interactions, long after the donor has left the scene. For example, fecundity stimulation by one male can be seen as a service to its rivals, fundamentally changing the value of the resource that is being contested, altering the evolutionary pathways in line with fighting theory [86]. Contrastingly, in a simultaneous hermaphrodite, certain seminal fluid secondary components lower the future fecundity of the mating partner in the male-role [87].

The above frameworks are ideal starting points for explaining the derived adaptations of socially transferred materials and also their potentially large role in driving evolution. With ecological and developmental feedback loops, these materials may provide positive feedback mechanisms and points of no return that create greater levels of cooperation, coordination and social control (e.g. evolution of group living from parental care [88] or the evolution of lactation in mammals (Figure 2)). In extreme cases, social transfers may evolve to integrate physiology across individuals, even leading to group-level metabolism as in social insect colonies [36]. Looking further back in evolutionary time, we suggest that social transfers may have been an important step toward the evolution of multicellularity: indeed, from what else could the molecular mechanisms for coordination among cells of a multicellular organisms have evolved than from social transfers among unicellular, cooperative organisms? If these same mechanisms are later co-opted from intra-individual control to inter-individual control, the convergence across these materials becomes obvious. Thus, for understanding the evolution of socially transferred materials, it may be fruitful to consider multiple levels of biological organization [89].

## **Complementary research directions and novel methodologies**

An integrative research program, pursued across taxa and for multiple social transfers, is needed to understand socially transferred materials and their role in evolution (Figure 1). First, before any of the complimentary directions mentioned below, recognizing a behavior that passes metabolized material between bodies relies on traditional natural history approaches. In many taxa, these behaviors have been described decades ago, but were never studied at the molecular level or in an evolutionary context.

Characterizing what is transmitted during the behavior is among the most common research approaches at the moment, and a good starting point before more functional molecular studies.Comparative sequencing and transcriptomics, as well as metabolomic and proteomic studies allow a view into the molecular content of transferred materials (for example [36,43]). Confirming which molecules originate in donors vs. receivers requires extra care in study design. To determine how donor-derived components arrive in receivers and achieve their impacts, it is necessary to establish origin, processing and degradation. Histological methods such as *in situ* hybridization are useful for characterizing tissue-specific expression and localization [68], as are tissue-specific gene expression measures (qPCR, single-cell RNAseq [69], transcriptomics [90]) and mass spectrometry imaging techniques for tissue-specific protein or metabolite presence [91]. Transfer of proteins can be further tracked by incorporating stable isotopes in essential amino acids into donors and monitoring proteins found in receivers [92]. Other metabolic labelling methods can incorporate nucleic acid derivates (e.g. thiouridine) to label RNA or click chemistry to label proteins, nucleic acids or metabolites and to detect their modifications [93]. Many of the newest techniques are only available in model organisms but recent innovations especially with CRISPR, sequencing technology, click chemistry and in the imaging and bioinformatic side of mass spectrometry, allow significant advances in non-model organisms too.

Current research regimes often do not inspect different environmental and physiological contexts to understand the dynamic nature of socially transferred materials and their effects, or inspect too variable contexts and end up diluting meaningful plasticity into noise around averages. Thus, for each social transfer, the effects of social and environmental contexts and individual conditions should be correlated with the topic of study – be it molecular composition of the material, responses of the receiver, or fitness. For example, developing assays that consistently show shifts in the composition of the transferred material with context, will help identifying the most interesting bioactive molecules for further investigation. Because donor and receiver condition can have independent effects, tools like cross fostering or artificial insemination can help disentangle impacts. For example, a secondary component in ejaculate could enhance female fecundity, but its effect might vary with male and female age, either additively or synergistically.

To understand the importance of social transfers in the physiology of animals, establishing molecular functions is necessary. The impacts of single molecules on receivers are often context dependent [94] and hard to detect without controlled experimental paradigms. Single molecules may require the presence of other molecules, and thus with the current single-molecule testing approach, some effects may be missed. Assessing transfer routes of molecules can also reveal functionality in receivers, but in many cases, it is necessary to directly manipulate the molecules or the composition of the social transfer [69,95], or if possible, the underlying genes or biosynthesis pathways in donors, or receptors in receivers. Studying the target receptors or uptake of molecules in receivers is necessary to understand intra-individual molecular pathways, but it is challenging; although *D. melanogaster* seminal fluid proteins are well studied and many functions have been established in females, only a single receptor has been characterized [96]. Finally, pairing the current revolution in automated deep-learning based behavioral tracking in behavioral ecology [97] with tracking of transmitted molecules will allow researchers to interpret the effects of social transfers, not only on physiology but also behavior, in a quantitative and high-throughput manner.

Once socially transferred molecules have been identified, analyzing the underlying genetic architecture of these molecules, genomes and behaviors becomes possible. Comparative genomics allows the study of socially transmitted molecules’ evolutionary trajectories and could identify genomic changes associated with the evolution of social transfers. Recent studies show that some of these materials are not conserved but instead show rapid expansions of key gene families [17,29,82,95]. Special care must be taken in assigning gene orthologs in such studies, as currently, annotation based on model organisms is the norm due to very sparse characterization of gene function in other taxa. This easily leaves the taxon-specific, fast evolving and novel genes unidentified, and creates a risk of misinterpreting their function. For example, M*egaponera analis* ants use the contents of their metapleural glands to disinfect the wounds of nestmates, and the most abundant protein in this socially transferred material has no orthology to any known protein, indicating a very young gene [98]. In addition to species-level comparisons, inspecting population-level genetic variation [69] would allow testing population genetic models of genes with indirect fitness effects [81].

Measuring fitness costs and benefits over socio-ecological contexts and evolutionary time will show how the dynamics of cooperation and conflict shape the evolutionary trajectories of socially transferred materials. This will help us understand the role of social transfers in the evolution of behavior and physiology – and such studies can be done even before the molecular composition of the material itself is known. In future work, when combined with detailed physiological and molecular data, understanding costs and benefits of these transfers may allow the manipulation of social transfers to develop practical applications (Box 2).

### **BOX 2: Potential applications**

Socially transferred materials can be used to screen for diagnostic biomarkers for diseases and conditions. This has already proven to be useful for monitoring fetus development with amniotic fluid biomarkers [99] or seminal fluid in connection to fertility [100]. Outside human medicine, similar applications are equally useful in agriculture and food science, as shown by the vast literature of bovine milk biomarkers [101].

Secondary components of socially transferred materials can function outside the context and species where they originally evolved. Egg yolk low-density lipoproteins or milk casein micelles protect sperm during preservation [102]. Royal jelly extends healthy aging and lifespan not only in honey bees but also in other organisms[11]. Because socially transferred components can be used across transfers and across taxa, secondary components may be used for future drug delivery given their functions in stabilization (e.g. RNA binding proteins [44]), or packaging and delivery (e.g. extra-cellular vesicles [103]). In addition to drugs, the delivery of probiotic bacteria may benefit from the study of socially transferred materials, as many social transfers have evolved components to stabilize the transfer of symbionts across individuals. Recently, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has resulted in a renewed interest in the ability of maternal milk to transfer antibodies and other immune components [104].

The performance of socially transferred materials can potentially be enhanced by altering their composition. Studies on such approaches have mostly focused on single functional molecules. For example, the agricultural industry benefits from understanding which molecules affect seminal fluid in *in vitro* fertilization [105] and sperm cryopreservation [106], which could be equally beneficial in conservation [107] or human medicine. In addition to improving the biological materials themselves, the composition of artificial substitutes such as infant formula can be altered. Understanding the context dependencies of natural milk could offer great improvements for more individually tailored formulas.

The above examples require mechanistic knowledge and proximate understanding of socially transferred materials. When this knowledge is placed in the evolutionary context, and especially when the underlying balance of benefits and costs is considered, different types of applications can be found. Understanding how sexual or parent-offspring conflict shapes the composition of eggs, sperm, seminal fluid or milk could help to push the conflict towards a desired outcome, for example in human fertility, animal breeding or research. Understanding how a social insect colony uses socially transferred materials to produce colony-level physiological outcomes would allow targeted colony manipulation in pest ants and termites, and pollinating bees. Pest species can potentially be controlled also using knowledge about how their mating partners manipulate their reproductive physiology. Applications for biocontrol may be possible even across species.

**END BOX**

## **Concluding remarks**

Socially transferred materials are an effective and taxonomically widespread means for one individual to impact another. The diverse molecular machineries of these materials show how evolution has brought about many fascinating solutions to direct and manipulate conspecifics, but also many commonalities across types of transfer and taxa. Several theoretical approaches can be used to study the evolution of these materials, and measuring and manipulating these materials provide new ways to test old evolutionary theories. Understanding the evolutionary role of socially transferred materials will benefit other research fields as well, from molecular medicine to behavioral ecology.

Using the rich emerging datasets of socially transferred materials’ composition to study problems like the ones we list in *Outstanding questions,* will allow researchers to bridge the gap between ultimate and proximate scales of selection that has so long defined evolutionary biology. Inspecting socially transferred materials integratively and in the light of evolutionary theory will give us better insights both into their proximate functions, and into the ultimate role of social transfers as drivers of evolution.

## **Acknowledgements**

We thank Franziska Brenninger for the figure art, and all participants of the workshop *Evolution and impact of socially exchanged materials* for discussions that shaped this work. ACL was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (PR00P3\_179776), SH by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, KG by an SNF Prima fellowship and SBFI funded ERC starting grant, JK by the Dutch Research Council, RK by the Leverhulme Trust RPG-2018-232, and SW by a BBSRC grant (BB/V015249/1).

### **Glossary**

**Allohormone:** substances that are transferred from one individual to another (free-living) member of the same species and that induce a direct physiological response, bypassing sensory organs.

**Nuptial gift**: Materials transferred from one sex to the other during mating, and that can have positive, negative of neutral effects on either sex. Some nuptial gifts fit our definition of socially transferred materials (if metabolized components are added by the donor), but all of them do not.

**Primary component**: the main material that a social transfer has evolved to transmit from donor to receiver: e.g. genetic material, nutrition or symbionts

**Secondary component**: molecular and cellular components of socially transferred materials that are not the primary cargo; allohormones, stabilizing or transport molecules, even functional cells

**Social transfer (as used here):** the behavior through which socially transferred materials are passed between individuals and which evolved for this purpose; e.g. lactation, copulation

**Socially transferred material**: materials transferred between conspecifics that i) include components metabolized by the donor, ii) which bring about a direct physiological response in the receiver, bypassing sensory organs, and iii) that benefit the donor.

**Trophallaxis:** direct ingestion by one individual of material excreted, secreted or regurgitated by another

**Vehicle**: the combination of materials that evolved to allow socially transferred materials to be passed from one individual to another; e.g. egg, milk, ejaculate, mucus, specialized symbiont capsules etc.

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### **Figure I in Box 1: Examples of socially transferred materials in animals**

*A: The three main classes of socially transferred materials based on the primary components transmitted: genetic material (Drosophila ejaculate,* [42,48]*), nutrition (mammalian milk,* [2,21]*), and symbionts (termite anal fluids,* [24,38,55]*). Note that although this review focuses on animals, the same principles and classifications can be applied for other organisms as well.*

*B: Examples of social transfers and modes of classification based on relatedness of partners, whether the material is deposited at the same moment as it is consumed (synchronous) or these are separated in time (asynchronous), and the rate and duration of the transfer. Examples shown from left to right, land snail love darts* [28]*, springtail spermatophores* [9]*, vertebrate eggs* [19,49]*, aphid viviparity* [34]*, ant trophallaxis* [36]*, Discus fish mucus* [23]*.*

### **Figure 1: Complimentary research directions for the study of socially transferred materials**

An integrative research program is needed to understand the evolution and functions of socially transferred materials. Employing complimentary research directions and theoretical frameworks shown here will aid in understanding these materials’ role as drivers of evolution, and lead to a better proximate understanding of their functions in the molecular, physiological and behavioral processes of organisms. Because traditional natural history studies regularly reported social transfers in various taxa, the study of socially transferred materials already has a strong foundation and rich literature to draw upon, even though many of the known transfers are yet to be inspected in detail. The concentric rings illustrate the first essential step (inner circle), the experimental approaches (middle ring) and theoretical approaches (outer ring).

### **Figure 2: Evolution of nutrition-related socially transferred materials in mammals**

*Socially transferred materials are key innovations and drivers of evolution. During the course of mammalian evolution, different types of vehicles, behaviors and genes have replaced each other under the selection for better nutrition, care and control over offspring. The amniotic egg was an evolutionary innovation that allowed for greater maternal nutrition provisioning. As critical pre-adaptations for the evolution of lactation, synapsids evolved glandular skin* [21,37]*, and therapsids provided parental care* [108]*. Since then, highly adapted cutaneous glands evolved to secrete milk – possibly for nutrition, or alternatively to regulate moisture, temperature and/or bacterial communities around the eggs and offspring* [37]*. Either way, all extant mammals rely on milk. This required the evolution of secretion pathways, glandular tissue and genes like the caseins that are the major nutrient transfer components of milk* [37]*. This decreased the need for egg-derived nutrition – the three vitellogenins, major nutrient transfer components of egg in both vertebrates and invertebrates, became pseudogenes in most modern mammals* [109]*. Milk in marsupials is extremely complex and variable over development, more so than the milk of eutherian mammals* [37]*. In eutherians, when the placenta evolved to allow extended viviparity, it took over many of milk’s functions, even co-opting many of the same genes* [110]*. In the figure, the decreasing importance of first egg-derived components and later milk-derived components in some of the lineages is represented by variable highlight colors.*