

Heterokairy: a significant form of developmental plasticity?

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Abstract

There is a current surge of research interest in the potential role of developmental plasticity in adaptation and evolution. Here we make a case that some of this research effort should explore the adaptive significance of heterokairy, a specific type of plasticity that describes environmentally-driven, altered timing of development within a species. This emphasis seems warranted given the pervasive occurrence of heterochrony, altered developmental timing between species, in evolution. We briefly review studies investigating heterochrony within an adaptive context across animal taxa, including examples that explore links between heterokairy and heterochrony. We then outline how sequence heterokairy could be included within the research agenda for developmental plasticity. We suggest that the study of heterokairy may be particularly pertinent in: i) determining the importance of non-adaptive plasticity; and ii) embedding concepts from comparative embryology such as developmental modularity and disassociation within a developmental plasticity framework.

1 **1. Introduction**

2 *“How common is evolution by heterochrony? We can be certain...its effects have been*
3 *catalogued thousands of times and it is the dominant mode of evolution in many important*
4 *lineages”* [1].

5 Heterochrony, the altered timing of development between ancestral and descendent taxa,
6 has been proposed to be one of the major drivers of evolution. Two main approaches have
7 been used to investigate heterochrony: growth heterochrony, focuses on shifts in growth
8 allometry, i.e. changes in the size and shape of organisms [1,2]; sequence heterochrony is a
9 more general measure of the time of onset and sequence of developmental events [3,4]
10 (Box 1). Growth heterochrony has contributed the majority of examples of heterochrony, but
11 its focus is somewhat restricted to morphological events late in ontogeny and, because of its
12 paleontological background [5], uses size as a surrogate for time. Sequence heterochrony
13 on the other hand, has been investigated more within an early (i.e. embryological)
14 developmental context and, most recently, uses computational approaches to map the
15 timing of developmental events onto phylogenies [6-8]. It can be applied in a more
16 integrative approach that allows the simultaneous investigation of morphological,
17 physiological and behavioural traits [9,10].

18
19 Despite this well documented occurrence of heterochrony as an evolutionary pattern,
20 exploring its mechanistic basis has not kept pace [but see 11]. The evolutionary potential of
21 intra-specific variation in the timing of key traits late in development has been discussed
22 peripherally within more general reviews of the evolutionary importance of heterochrony [1,
23 12, 13]. More recently, the term heterokairy has been proposed as an explicit descriptor for
24 the environmentally-sensitive, intra-specific variation in developmental event timing [14] (Box
25 1), but as yet, has only been applied as such by physiologists [9,15,16] and behavioural
26 ecologists [17] or within the context of hatching and diapause plasticity [18-20]. Given the
27 growing emphasis on phenotypic plasticity as a potential driver of evolutionary change [21-

28 25], there seems ample reason to include heterokairy, a potential driver of heterochrony,
29 within this research agenda.

30

31 Here we build a case for heterokairy as a key research focus within the field of
32 developmental plasticity and, in particular, the role that such plasticity during early
33 development may play in evolution. We first present the evolutionary context using key
34 examples where heterochrony and heterokairy have been attributed an explicit adaptive
35 basis. We then outline, with examples, how the adaptive significance of heterokairy could be
36 explored using a reaction norm approach, focusing on where heterokairy could contribute to
37 our understanding of the role of non-adaptive plasticity and the integration of concepts from
38 comparative embryology, such as developmental trait modularity, within a developmental
39 plasticity framework.

40

41 **2. Heterochrony and heterokairy in an adaptive context**

42 One approach to that has been taken to investigate the potential for plasticity to drive
43 evolutionary change is to establish whether there are links between plasticity and
44 evolutionary divergence. This approach could be used to address questions such as: i) does
45 plasticity bias phenotypic diversification by providing alternative phenotypes? [26]; ii) is
46 plasticity positively correlated with the degree of environmental variability experienced by
47 species across known phylogenies? [27]; and iii) do trait plasticities, or trait means, correlate
48 better with fitness optima in new habitats [28]? To date, however, despite several examples
49 where heterochrony has been attributed an adaptive basis [3, 10, 29-34] (see Table 1), there
50 have been few attempts at a correlative approach to linking heterokairy and heterochrony.

51

52 There are several examples of adaptive heterochrony in response to habitat shifts (Table 1).
53 In amphibians these shifts are associated with the exploitation of ephemeral habitats where
54 predation risk and competition are reduced; here altered developmental timing occurs
55 through selective pressures to reduce the larval period and hatch early. A phylogenetic basis

56 for such heterochronic shifts has been shown for spadefoot toads. Species associated with a
57 New World clade occupied ephemeral habitats and had shorter larval periods than those in
58 an Old World clade (sequence heterochrony) and there was also a positive correlation
59 between larval period and morphology (snout and leg length) (allometric heterochrony) [29].
60 These heterochronies were mirrored by intra-specific plastic responses to temperature; high
61 temperatures decreased larval periods (sequence heterochrony), snout and leg lengths
62 (allometric heterochrony). The reduced larval period in New World species inhabiting more
63 ephemeral sites was suggested to be driven by genetic accommodation from ancestral
64 plasticity. There is also evidence for a potential developmental heterochrony for such life
65 history shifts in anurans in the form of earlier notochord development relative to the time of
66 blastopore closure in fast, compared with slow, developing species [30].

67

68 A similar, correlative approach to explore the link between heterochrony and heterochrony has
69 been made with reference to the link between provisioning and life history strategies in
70 marine invertebrates. The evolution of lecithotrophic echinoderm larvae has been suggested
71 to have its origins in developmental plasticity of feeding structures within species driven by
72 different levels of maternal provisioning. A test of this hypothesis using the sea urchin,
73 *Paracentrotus lividus* showed that under high levels of food there was advanced
74 development of juvenile structures, which mirrored the heterochronic shift observed when
75 larvae received a high level of maternal provisioning [36]. Such plasticity has subsequently
76 been linked to increases in thyroid hormone, as a result of consuming algae that increases
77 development rate [37] and has also been shown in the filter feeding structures of planktonic
78 marine gastropod larvae [38].

79

80 Polyphenisms are an extreme form of phenotypic plasticity associated with evolutionary
81 diversification [23,25,39]. Under some circumstances, intraspecific variation in maternal
82 provisioning leads to polyphenisms within larvae. This form of heterochrony, termed
83 poecilogony, has been shown to occur relatively frequently in polychaetes and

84 opisthobranch molluscs [40,41]. The spionid polychaete *Boccardia proboscidea*, for example,
85 exhibited sequence heterokairy depending on whether or not they received provisioning [40].
86 Those, larvae that fed on nurse eggs (adelophagy) had advanced development of juvenile
87 (i.e. post larval) features compared with larvae that received no provisioning. There was also
88 another, more subtle, form of altered timing within larvae that had received provisioning.
89 Some of these larvae hatched as benthic juveniles, whereas the others, despite having
90 exhibited early development of some juvenile features hatched at an earlier developmental
91 stage as smaller planktotrophic larvae that were similar (but not identical) in form to the
92 planktotrophic larvae. Hence, as for spadefoot toads, this shows a combination of sequence
93 (hatching time, metamorphosis) and allometric heterokairy.

94

95 These examples provide evidence for potential links between heterokairy and heterochrony,
96 and together with the techniques now available for analysing sequence heterochronies
97 within phylogenies [6] pave the way for a more rigorous phylogenetic approach. The best
98 models for such research will be those where heterochronies occur in traits that are likely to
99 have adaptive significance and where experimental investigation of heterokairy early in
100 development is tractable [42,43].

101

102 **3. Heterokairy within a reaction norm context**

103 Whilst it is possible to use existing phylogenies onto which heterochronies have been
104 mapped as a starting point for exploring the link between heterokairy and heterochrony, this
105 approach is not without difficulties. For example, inferred adaptations for extinct species may
106 be spurious as selective pressures are likely to change through evolutionary time and a
107 restricted focus on macroevolutionary patterns (i.e. between lineages) may miss important
108 change at lower taxonomic levels. An alternative is to explore the adaptive potential of
109 heterokairy using the approaches currently employed to investigate the micro-evolutionary
110 potential of phenotypic plasticity.

111

112 Reaction norms are central to the study of the evolutionary potential of phenotypic and
113 developmental plasticity and allow for formal tests of the relative importance of the genotype,
114 environment and genotype-environment interaction for the expression of the phenotype [44-
115 47]. Such tests can be used to establish the relative importance of local adaptation and
116 plasticity and, hence, the importance of processes such as genetic accommodation and
117 genetic assimilation in natural populations [23,48], or laboratory selection trials [49]. There
118 has been no explicit use of reaction norms in exploring heterokairy, but the importance of
119 considering developmental time within a plasticity context has attracted some attention. An
120 early approach was to use developmental or ontogenetic reaction norms (ORNs) by adding
121 an additional time axis to the traditional reaction norm approach to detect significant
122 genotype*environment*time interactions [44, 50]. For example, response to nutrients in the
123 plant, *Lobelia siphilitica* varied through development and was population dependent [51]. For
124 the grass, *Ampibromus scabrivalvis*, the degree of plasticity and the genetic variation for
125 plasticity in ramet number to nutrient levels increased through ontogeny [52]. The ORN
126 approach has been extended to assess the plastic expression of different ecomorphs of fish
127 [53-55] and larval dragonflies [56].

128

129 Whilst ORNs enabled some investigation of the importance of variation in plasticity through
130 developmental time they have focused on growth heterochrony and changes in size and
131 shape through ontogeny. A focus on environment-driven changes in the timing of
132 developmental events aligned with the sequence heterochrony approach, would allow more
133 integrative studies of the role of developmental plasticity in evolution. This approach could
134 be extended to include links between sequence and allometric heterochrony.

135

136 **5. Heterokairy: future directions**

137 One of the key questions within the study of plasticity for which heterokairy could be
138 particularly pertinent is whether adaptive or non-adaptive plasticity (or both) are likely to
139 promote evolution [57]. It has been proposed that if adaptive plasticity produces a phenotype

140 that is close to the optimal for that habitat, it will be subject to stabilizing rather than
141 directional selection and so is unlikely to evolve. However, if the phenotype produced falls
142 short of the optimum for the new habitat, but the new phenotype survives, then it is likely to
143 be subject to directional selection and evolution is more likely [58], particularly if there are
144 costs associated with the plasticity [59]. Whilst adaptive plasticity could give rise to
145 evolutionary change, empirical evidence is also accumulating to suggest that non-adaptive
146 plasticity may also play a role in evolution, with recent evidence that it may be more likely to
147 give rise to evolutionary change than adaptive plasticity [60]. When a species population
148 experiences a stressful new environment (e.g. with a higher level of predation) the plastic
149 response it shows is, in many cases, likely to lead to a maladaptive phenotype that does not
150 persist in the new environment. However, if the response includes an increase in the
151 variation of phenotypes expressed revealed through cryptic genetic variation [61], some of
152 the phenotypic variants may be close to the optimum for the new environment and so may
153 be subject to selection [57] (see Box 2).

154

155 Some examples of heterokairy sit comfortably within the context of non-adaptive plasticity as
156 they have been observed as physiological stress responses in species exposed to altered
157 environmental conditions and have been shown to have associated costs [9]. For example,
158 the brine shrimp *Artemia franciscana* responded to hypoxia by bringing forward in
159 chronological and developmental time the adult ability to maintain aerobic metabolism over a
160 wide range of external oxygen tensions but this heterokairy was associated with reduced
161 reproductive output [62]. A recent study also showed that those individuals of the intertidal
162 gastropod, *Littorina obtusata* that survived under chronic hypoxia had an early time of onset
163 of their adult heart beat [63]. This example falls within the category of non-adaptive plasticity
164 that could have evolutionary potential (Box 2). Examples of where stress increases
165 phenotypic variance and where clear measures of fitness can be made could offer useful
166 models for exploring the role of non-adaptive plasticity in the form of heterokairy.

167

168 The study of heterokairy could provide an exciting opportunity to test theory from
169 comparative embryology within the developmental plasticity framework. For example, the
170 exploration of plasticity in timing of multiple traits in response to different environmental
171 stressors could be used to test for developmental modules (i.e., groups of traits that show
172 similar relative timing in different environments) and levels of dissociation in different
173 environments (i.e., environment-dependent shifts in timing of developmental modules) [64,
174 65]. Indeed, recent studies of sequence heterokairy in the pond snail, *Radix balthica* showed
175 that, under predation stress, both mantle muscle flexing and crawling had altered timing [42]
176 suggesting that these two developmental events might be part of the same developmental
177 module; under salinity stress, however, there was altered timing in different developmental
178 events, showing that the sensitivity of different developmental modules may be context-
179 dependent in this species. Selection pressures might also drive the dissociation of traits that
180 are part of the same developmental module if the optimum timing for each differed in a novel
181 environment (see Box 2). It would also be important to test how costs of plasticity [59] vary
182 through development and for trade-offs between traits with different timing. For example, it
183 might be predicted that the earlier expression of a 'costly' trait could affect traits occurring
184 later in development [66] with implications life history strategies. Here, the use of inbred lines
185 for developmental events that have been shown to be heritable [67] would be an effective
186 resource, as would species for which heterochronic genes have been identified [68]. Finally,
187 the approach of factoring sequence heterochrony into the study of developmental plasticity
188 could also be extended to include tests of quantitative genetic models for evolutionary
189 change during, including the potential role of epigenetic effects [69].

190

191 **6. Conclusions**

192 There is clear evidence that plasticity in the timing of development occurs, including in terms
193 of the sequence of developmental events – this evidence sits within a context of
194 heterochrony as a potential, key evolutionary pattern. In this brief review, we have proposed
195 that a specific strand of phenotypic plasticity research that focuses explicitly on heterokairy

196 could provide significant evidence in support of the idea of a role of plasticity in evolution.
197 This contribution would not only come from the fact that there is good reason to hypothesise
198 that a mechanism responsible for heterochrony should be an important evolutionary
199 mechanism, but also because the study of sequence heterokairy should also inform other
200 emerging ideas within the plasticity research agenda. This proposition will be extended in a
201 forthcoming, more substantial book chapter.

202

203 A key to adopting a sequence based approach to the study of heterokairy is having the
204 ability to measure, with high temporal resolution, the plasticity of events early during
205 development *in vivo*. Whilst this approach may be difficult for groups such as mammals
206 whose embryos undergo protected development, there are good models to be found
207 amongst other groups such as invertebrates and some fish whose embryonic development
208 occurs in external, transparent eggs. Recent technological developments have also allowed
209 the high resolution video imaging of such embryos that makes the measurement of
210 physiological events tractable [67].

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Box 1: Heterochrony and heterokairy

A) **Sequence heterochrony** is a change in developmental event timing between ancestral and descendent species. Unlike growth heterochrony, which tends to focus on differences in size and shape late in development, sequence heterochrony gives greater emphasis to the timing and sequence of developmental events during embryonic development and can be applied to morphological, physiological and behavioural traits. Here, the timing of event E occurs earlier in the developmental sequence in the descendent compared with the ancestral species.

B) **Heterokairy** is defined as environmentally sensitive differences in developmental event timing within a species – it is a form of developmental plasticity and differs from heterochrony in that it is an intra-specific phenomenon. Here, heterokairy is shown in the bottom plot, alongside heterochrony (top versus middle plot). In this case for simplicity, the time of onset of a single developmental event is shown for an individual ontogeny in each of two environments.

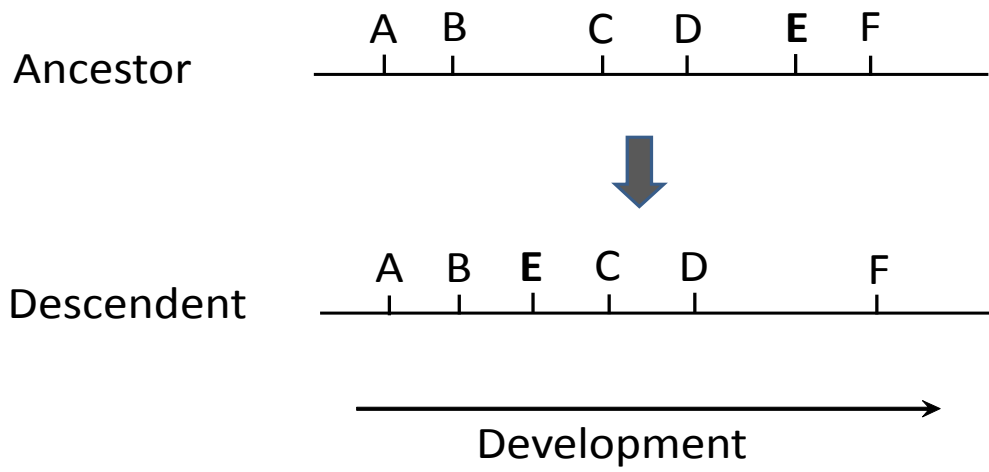
Box 2: Embedding Heterokairy within Developmental Plasticity

A) **Non-adaptive heterokairy.** The timing of a single developmental event is shown for ten individuals of a species, five in each of two different environments. These event timings are projected onto a reaction norm plot. The optimal timing for this event at each site is indicated by a black star – at site two, an earlier expression of the event is optimal. The reaction norm (dashed line), based on the mean event timing at each site, shows that the plasticity exhibited is non-adaptive as the mean falls short of the (earlier) optimal event timing value for site 2. However, the high phenotypic variation in site 2 means that one individual has an event timing that is close to the optimum. This could lead to directional selection in site 2.

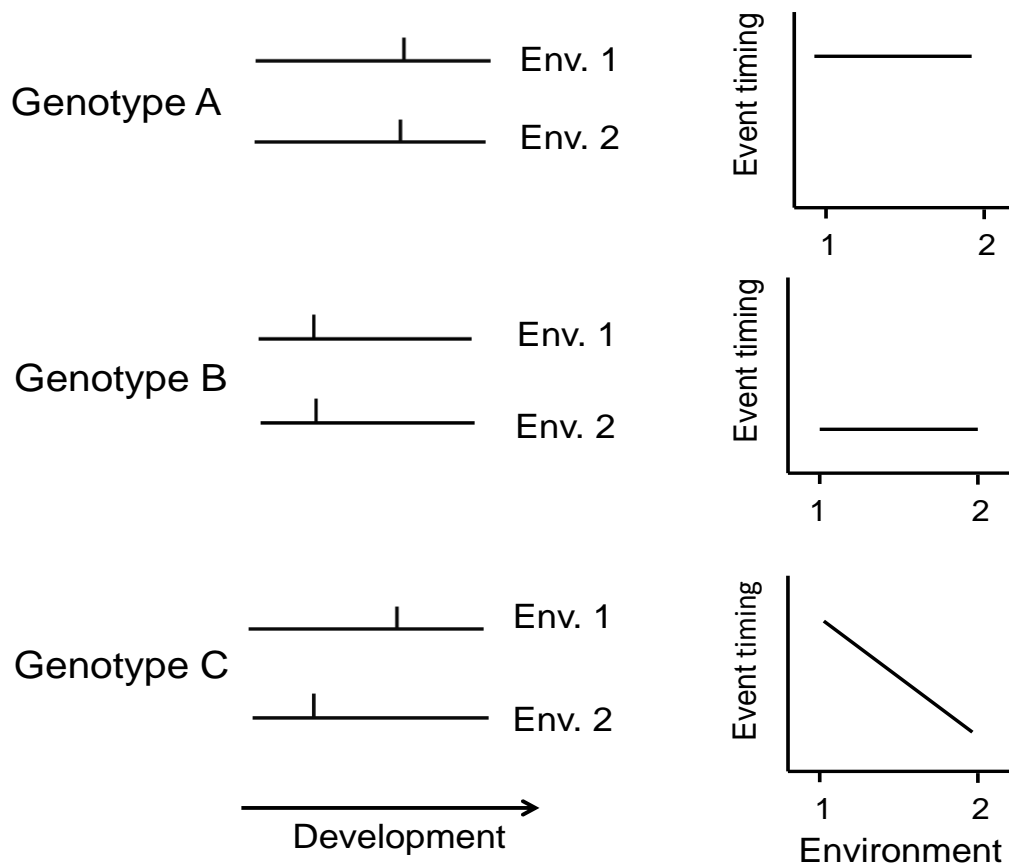
B) Heterokairy in multiple events. This plot depicts the timing of two developmental events (A and B) in an ancestral (Environment 1) and two descendent (Environments 2 and 3) environments. Four possible scenarios for the relative timing of two traits are shown for each descendent environment, with the optimal event timing for each trait in each environment indicated by a star and superscript. In Environment 2 the optimal timing has shifted early for event A but not event B; in Environment 3 the optimal timing has shifted earlier for both events. Note that where the timing of trait B is associated with trait A (suggesting they might be part of the same developmental module), the timing of trait B is suboptimal in environment 2 but optimal in environment 3, whereas dissociation between events A & B leads to optimal timing of event B in environment 2 but suboptimal timing in environment 3.

Box 1

A)

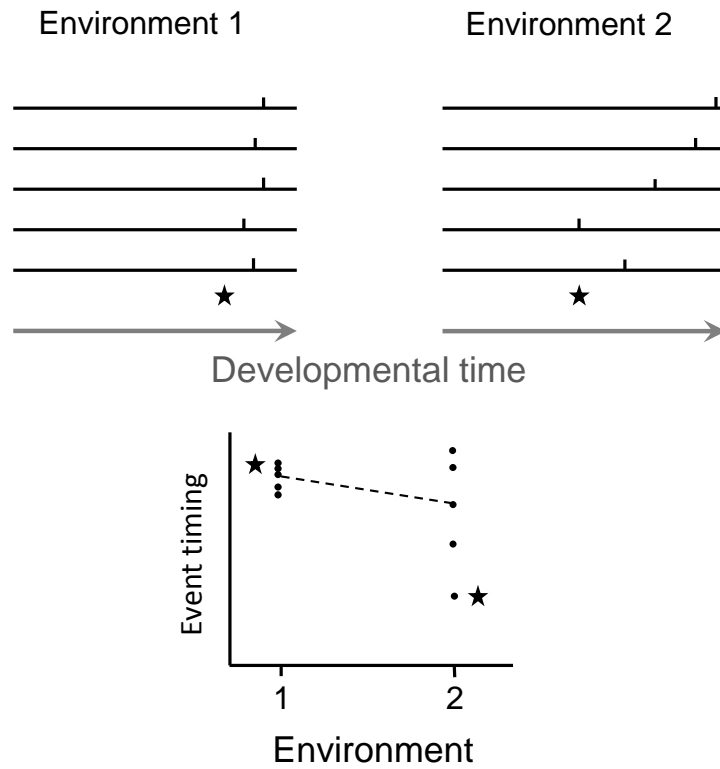


B)



Box 2

A)



B)

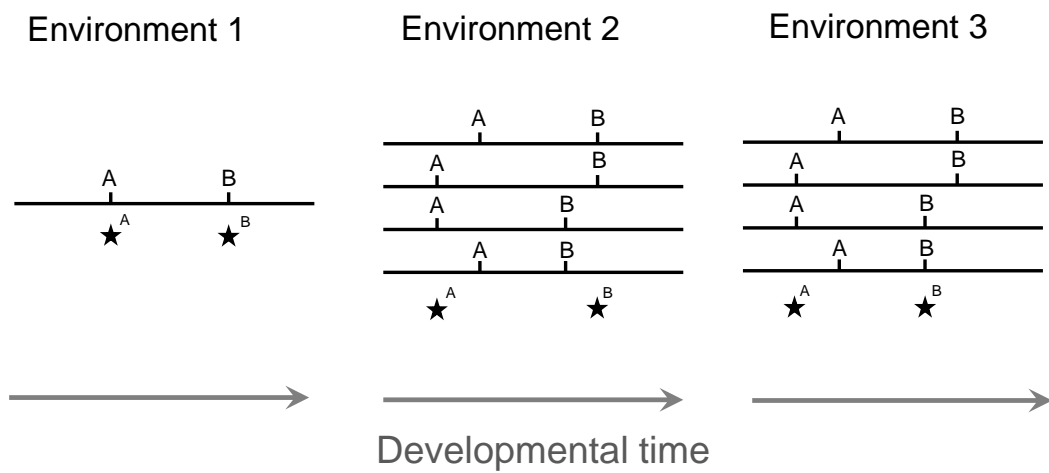


Table 1: Key examples of heterochrony attributed an explicit adaptive context.

Taxon	Driver	Trait	Inferred adaptive basis
Mammals [3]	Food resource	Cranofacial skeletal-muscular and central nervous system	Early development of skeletal-muscular facial features in marsupial comparative to placental mammals associated with feeding at an early stage.
Spadefoot toads [29]	Habitat shift	Hatching	Early hatching in New World, species inhabiting more ephemeral water bodies than Old World species.
Frogs [30]	Habitat shift	Notochord elongation	Early development of notochord in species with more rapid development.
Plethodontid salamanders [31]	Habitat shift	Timing of maturity	Paedomorphic loss of adult stage with animals becoming sexually mature as larvae – associated with the transition from running water to subterranean/terrestrial habitat.
Amphipod crustaceans (<i>Niphargus</i> spp.) [32]	Habitat shift	Antenna I and pereopod.	Increased size of 'troglomorphic' features through early onset/accelerated growth.
Gastropods (opisthobranch) [33]	Predation	Mantle glands (chemical defence), ciliary tufts, shell growth.	Early development of adult traits suggested increased protection earlier during development.
Gastropods (pulmonate) [10]	Predation	Crawling within the egg capsule	Advanced timing of crawling in the family Physidae related to comparatively fast crawling and predator avoidance behaviour in hatched snails.
Gastropods [34]	Food resource	Timing of developmental stages	Shorter trochophore and lengthened veliger (ie. feeding) stage during development, associated with an evolutionary increase in ocean productivity.
Echinoderms [35]	Food resource	Left coelem development	Acceleration of left coelem development leads to reduced development time and the evolution of lecithotrophic development (i.e. greater dependence on maternal provisioning)