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Effects of dry- and wet-sieving of soil on identification and interpretation of microbial community composition

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Abstract

Soil aggregates are microhabitats for microorganisms, and directly influence microorganisms that live within and are influenced by microorganisms in return. Two methods are used to isolate soil aggregates by their size: dry- (sieving air dried soil) or wet-sieving (sieving soil in water). Wet-sieving methods are generally considered to represent separation of aggregate classes that are stable to physical dis-aggregation in water, a condition considered favourable for protecting soil structure over time. However, little is known about the effect of sieving methods on microbial abundance, diversity and functions, hindering the understanding of the relationship between soil structure and soil aggregates as habitat and soil microorganisms. In this study, the effect of dry- and wet-sieving on bacterial diversity, and abundance of microorganisms involved in N fixation (nifH gene), nitrification (amoA bacteria and archaea) and denitrification (narG, nirS and nosZ genes), were determined for 4 sizes of soil aggregates from a cropland and grassland. Quantitative-PCR (Q-PCR) showed little differences in relative gene abundance between size fractions of soil aggregates, but wet-sieving method significantly increased gene abundance for amoA bacteria, nirS and nosZ genes. When the N functional genes were expressed as percentage of the bacterial 16S rRNA genes, the wet sieving resulted in significantly higher genes percentage for all the genes (except for narG gene), and significant differences between soil aggregate size fractions at the grassland site. The different sieving methods resulted in different bacterial community compositions, but only the wet-sieving method was able to reveal significant differences in bacterial community composition between soil fractions in grassland. The results demonstrate significantly different quantitative and qualitative interpretation of soil microbial community depending on whether aggregate samples were obtained from wet- or dry-sieving, highlighting the importance in the choice of the sieving method.

Keywords: Quantitative-PCR, Amplicon sequencing, nitrogen fixation, nitrification, denitrification, soil aggregates, grassland, cropland

1. Introduction

Soil is an extremely complex and heterogeneous environment, due to the complexity of its structure (i.e. 3-D architecture of pores and particles), the large vertical spatial heterogeneity across the different horizons of soil profiles, and a huge and largely unknown microbial genetic diversity. Soil aggregates, composed of soil mineral fragments, decaying biomass, gases, water and solutes, and living organisms bound together as porous particles, represent the complexity of the soil structure and also the microhabitats for the microorganisms. Both the soil structure and soil microorganisms are central soil features that determine many key functions such as soil water retention and transmission, C, N, P, K sequestration, and nutrient transformations that ultimately sustain soil fertility. Different sizes of soil aggregates was shown to harbour different bacterial community structure, (Blaud et al., 2012; Fall et al., 2004; Helgason et al., 2010; Kandeler et al., 2000; Sessitsch et al., 2001; Vaisanen et al., 2005), different bacterial diversity (Davinic et al., 2012; Kravchenko et al., 2014; Sessitsch et al., 2001), bacterial abundance and biomass (Helgason et al., 2010; Mendes et al., 1999; Sainju, 2006; Schutter and Dick, 2002) and microbial activity (Bach and Hofmockel, 2014; Lensi et al., 1995; Sey et al., 2008). These differences are linked to the specific environmental conditions which exert biological selection pressures and are highly variable within aggregates.

To study soil aggregates, sieving methods are used to isolate different size classes of soil aggregates. The separation of soil aggregates is mainly done by dry- or wet- sieving methods. The wet-sieving method, first described by Yoder (1936), is the most commonly

used method to study microbial communities in soil aggregates and involves immersing soil for several minutes in water to break down aggregates. This occurs by increasing the surrounding static water pressure on the air trapped inside immersed particle pores, followed by vertical strokes in water to create shear forces to separate the soil particles that are initially placed on the top of a nest of subsequently immersed sieves. Dry-sieving involves shaking usually air-dried soil, on top of a nest of sieves. Thus, the energy applied to the soil differs greatly between dry- and wet-sieving which affects directly the amount of stable soil aggregates that are obtained. Furthermore, wet-sieving affects the aqueous colloidal forces at particle surfaces that can enhance or diminish the cohesive forces between aggregated particles. Thus, these two methods are expected to have direct effect on microbial communities due to the different sizes of soil aggregates which are isolated, i.e. the "washing" effect during wet sieving coupled with potential cross contamination between soil fractions, the effect of drying soil before dry-sieving, and the different mechanical and physical-chemical forces applied on soil aggregates.

Only few studies have investigated the impact of dry- and wet-sieving to separate soil aggregates. Most of these studies focused on the effects of sieving methods on the physico-chemical characteristics of soil aggregates. Dry-sieving maintains large soil aggregates sizes (> 2 mm) but is usually limited to the size fractions > 250 µm. In contrast, wet-sieving can separate soil aggregates from various size classes and in particular smaller sizes (< 250 µm). The proportion of soil aggregates with size < 2 mm mainly increase with wet-sieving while soil aggregates > 2 mm decrease due to the breakdown of the macroaggregates into smaller aggregates, and inversely for dry-sieving (Beauchamp and Seech, 1990; Sainju, 2006; Bach and Hofmockel, 2014). Wet-sieving leads to a loss of total C or total N, especially for soil fractions < 250 µm, although no change or sometimes an increase in C content (for either > 250 and < 250 µm soil fractions) were found for wet-sieving in comparison to dry-sieving

(Sainju, 2006). Seech and Beauchamp (1988) concluded that wet-sieving methods result in underestimating C and N pools.

The impact of aggregate fractionation procedures on microbial communities is not well studied. Sainju et al. (2006) showed that the wet-sieving method decreases the nitrogen microbial biomass in comparison to dry-sieving. In contrast, the carbon microbial biomass can decrease or increase depending on the soil type (Sainju, 2006). However the C or N microbial biomass is a gross indicator of microbial biomass, and no study has investigated the effect of sieving methods on microbial abundance, community structure or diversity using DNA-based approaches (e.g. Q-PCR, next generation sequencing). A recent study comparing the effect of dry- and wet-sieving on microbial enzymatic activity showed that wet-sieving overestimated the potential microbial enzymatic activity in comparison to dry-sieving (Bach and Hofmockel, 2014). However, only the enzymatic activity differed between sizes of soil aggregates with wet-sieving and not with dry sieving. This study also showed that drying the samples at 4 °C to reach 10-20% of soil gravimetric water content did not affect the enzymatic activities before dry-sieving.

The effect of sieving methods on microbial communities and resulting microbial characterisation data and their interpretation remains largely unknown. This gap in understanding may represent a major factor influencing the results of any study investigating microbial communities in soil aggregates, and is limiting the understanding of the relationship between soil structure, soil functions and microbial diversity. Thus, the objective of this study was to determine the effect of dry- and wet-sieving on microbial community abundance and diversity within different size classes of soil aggregates. Four sizes of soil aggregates from a cropland and grassland were obtained by dry- and wet-sieving. Then, the abundance of bacteria, fungi and microbial communities involved in N fixation, nitrification

and denitrification, and bacterial diversity were determined by quantitative PCR and amplicon sequencing respectively, for each size class of soil aggregates and for the bulk soil.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Study sites and soil sampling

The study sites, a cropland and grassland are located east of Vienna, Austria, in the National Park ‘‘Donau-Auen’’ on a floodplain of the Danube River. The cropland site was a grassland since 1781 and was converted to intensive cropland in the first half of the 20th century. The grassland site was converted from forest to grassland (presently Onobrychido viciifoliae-Brometum) between 1809 and 1859 and is currently cut twice a year. The topsoil (0-10 cm) age is approx. 250-350 years since deposition of fluvial sediments as parent material forming a terrace above the down cutting river channel (Lair et al., 2009). The soils are classified as Mollic Fluvisols (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2014). The soil characteristics for cropland and grassland are shown in Table 1. Both sites were sampled on the 27th of September 2013. Three distinct soil samples (500 g) were sampled at each site (grassland and cropland sites) from 5-10 cm depth and store at 4 °C until soil fractionation.

2.2 Soil fractionation

The soil samples were sieved at 2 mm before dry- or wet-sieving to homogenise the samples and to remove large roots and stones. Dry- and wet- sieving were performed on all the replicate samples for each site. Twenty grams of soil were used for each soil fractionation by size, recovered from the sieves of specific screen sizes. Henceforth, the term “soil fraction” is preferred to “soil aggregates” because this study did not separate soil aggregates from mineral particles.

2.2.1 Dry-sieving

Prior to dry-sieving, the 2 mm sieved soils were air-dried at 4 °C for 7 days until they reached a gravimetric water content of ~80 g kg^{-1} (Sainju et al., 2003). The air-drying was required to obtain the soil fraction < 53 μm from grassland soil and any soil fractions < 250 μm from cropland soil. The dry sieving protocol consisted of shaking by hand the soil samples placed on top of a nest of sieves (1000, 250 and 53 μm; 10 cm Ø) for 3 min at ~200 rotation min^{-1} (Sainju et al., 2003; Sainju, 2006). Soil retained on the 1000, 250 and 53 μm sieves were considered as 1000-2000 μm, 250-1000 μm and 53-250 μm soil fractions, respectively. The soil collected in the cup under the 53 μm sieve was the < 53 μm soil fraction. Soil aliquots were taken directly from each sieve for DNA extraction and stored at -20 °C, and the rest of the soil fractions were dried at 55 °C and used to measure soil fractions' mass distributions.

2.2.2 Wet-sieving

The wet-sieving fractionation method was adapted from Yoder (1936) and Blaud et al., (2012). Fresh soil samples were place on top of a nest of sieves (1000, 250 and 53 μm; 10 cm Ø) and immersed in ~1.3 l ultra-pure sterile water (4 °C) tank for 5 min. Then, the sieves were raised and lowered during 10 min (stroke length ~30 mm, frequency 30 cycles min^{-1}). Soil retained on the 1000, 250 and 53 μm sieves were considered as 1000-2000 μm, 250-1000 μm and 53-250 μm soil fractions, respectively. The water and soil left in the tank were centrifuged at 4500 G for 10 min. The centrifugation was repeated to reduce the volume of water as much as possible and collect the soil particles, which represented the soil fraction < 53 μm. Two soil aliquots were taken directly in each sieve: one for DNA extraction placed at -20 °C, and one for soil water content measurement dried at 55 °C. The rest of the soil

fractions for each sieve were washed in tubes and dried at 55 °C and used to measure soil fractions' mass distributions.

The pore liquid collected after each round of centrifugation was filtered at 0.22 µm (47 mm Ø GTTP filter, Wathman) in order to collect and quantify the microorganisms washed from soil fractions during the sieving method. For each sample, 5 filters were required to filter the entire volume of water (due to clogging of the filter), except for two replicates of cropland that required 6 and 7 filters. The filters were kept at -20 °C before DNA extraction.

2.3 DNA extraction

DNA was extracted from 0.25 g of fresh soil for each soil fraction and bulk soil (i.e. 2 mm sieved soil) using the PowerSoil® DNA Isolation Kit (Mo-Bio laboratories, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to manufacturer's instruction, except for the final step where the nucleic acids were eluted in 100 µl of sterile nuclease-free water.

DNA was extracted from the water used for wet-sieving (after centrifugation to obtain < 53 µm soil fraction) to determine the relative abundance of microorganisms lost during wet sieving. The same amount of water without soil was also filtered and used as control to ensure that the result obtained came from the wet-sieving and not from contamination of the water or filter. The water for each sample was filtered and DNA was extracted from the filter using the PowerWater® DNA isolation kit (Mo-Bio laboratories, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to manufacturer's instruction, except for the final step where the nucleic acids were eluted in 100 µl of sterile nuclease free water. DNA was extracted for each filter (i.e. 33 filters in total) and the DNA extracts were pooled for each sample.

2.4 Quantitative-PCR

193 Variation in microbial gene abundance was determined by Quantitative-PCR (Q-
194 PCR) targeting specific genes or genetic regions. Bacterial community was targeted via the
195 16S rRNA gene while the fungal community abundance was investigated by targeting the
196 ITS region. The different communities involved in most steps of the N-cycle were
197 investigated: the nitrogen fixing microorganisms were quantified based on the nifH gene;
198 nitrification was investigated by targeting the ammonia oxidising bacteria (AOB) and archaea
199 (AOA) via the amoA gene, and denitrifiers were targeted via the narG gene coding for the
200 nitrate reductase, the nirS gene coding for the nitrite reductase and the nosZ gene coding for
201 the nitrous oxide reductase. The details of the primers used to amplify the different amplicons
202 are given in Table S1.
203 Q-PCR standards for each molecular target were obtained using a 10-fold serial
204 dilution of plasmids carrying a single cloned target gene, constructed by cloning PCR product
205 of environmental samples (pCR2.1 TOPO vector), isolating cloned inserts (Qiagen Plasmid
206 mini Kit), and checking for the presence of gene of interest by sequence-analysis. Standard
207 curves and the no template control were amplified in triplicate in the same plate as the
208 environmental samples. Q-PCR amplifications were performed in 25 µl volumes containing
209 12.5 µl of iQ™ SYBR® Green Supermix (Bio-Rad, Hemel Hempstead, UK), 8.5 µl of
210 nuclease-free water (Ambion, Warrington, UK), 1.25 µl of each primer (10 µM) and 1 µl of
211 template DNA using a CFX96™ Real-Time System (Bio-Rad, Hemel Hempstead, UK).
212 Standard amplification was used for all Q-PCR assays except AOA, starting with an initial
213 denaturation at 95 °C for 3 min, followed by 40 cycles of 30 s at 95 °C, 0.5 to 1 min of
214 annealing (annealing temperature and time for each primers pairs are given in Table S1), and
215 30 s at 72 °C (Tsiknia et al., 2013). The fluorescence was measured at the end of each
216 synthesis step (i.e. at 81 °C for AOA and at 72 °C for all other genes).

Threshold cycle (Ct) values and amplicon numbers were determined automatically using the Bio-Rad CFX Manager™ software. The efficiency of the Q-PCR assays varied between 70-98%. The r^2 were > 0.99 for all the genes, except for nifH gene (0.984). The presence of Q-PCR inhibitors was tested for bacterial 16S rRNA gene, by running a Q-PCR with DNA extracts 10 times diluted or mixed with a known amount of the standard. No inhibition was detected.

The specificity of the Q-PCR was assessed via a melting curve analysis (increase of temperature from annealing temperature to 95 °C by 0.5 °C per step of 0.05 s) at the end of each Q-PCR amplification (Ririe et al., 1997). The melting curves for the bacterial 16S rRNA, nifH, amoA, narG, nirS, and nosZ genes Q-PCR assays showed specificity for the amplified targeted genes (i.e. single peak). As expected, the melting curve of the Q-PCR for fungal ITS showed the amplification of products of different lengths, due to the variability in length of ITS regions between different fungal taxa (Manter and Vivanco, 2007).

2.5 Amplicon sequencing

The bacterial diversity of the different soil fractions obtained by dry- and wet-sieving, bulk soil and microbial suspension from water of the wet-sieving, for the cropland and grassland was determined using the Ion Torrent® platform. The bacterial 16S rRNA gene V4 variable region was amplified using the primers 515F (5′-GTGCCAGCMGCCGCGGTAA-3′) and 806R (5′-GGACTACHVG GGTWTCTAAT-3′) (Caporaso et al., 2011) in a single-step 30 cycle PCR using the HotStarTaq Plus Master Mix Kit (Qiagen, USA) and the following conditions: 94°C for 3 min, followed by 28 cycles (5 cycles used on PCR products) of 94°C for 30 s, 53°C for 40 s and 72°C for 1 min, followed by a final elongation step at 72°C for 5 min. Amplicon sequencing was performed at MR DNA (www.mrdnalab.com, Shallowater, TX, USA) on an Ion Torrent PGM following the manufacturer's guidelines.

The PGM data were analysed following the pipeline developed by Pylro et al (2014) that uses UPARSE (Edgar, 2013) and QIIME (Caporaso et al., 2010). Briefly, strip barcode, quality filtering, dereplication, abundance sort and discard singletons were done using USEARCH 1.8. Chimera filtering was done using the rdp_gold.fa dataset. Then, taxonomy was assigned to operational taxonomic unit (OTU) using uclust method on QIIME 1.8 and Greengenes data base (13_8) as a reference. The number of bacterial sequences per sample was on average 9183 ± 1443. Few archaeal sequences were found with on average 174 ± 99 per sample.

2.6 Statistical analysis

To determine differences in the means of aggregate distribution, microbial gene abundance or bacterial phylum relative abundance, ANOVA tests were performed with sites, sieving methods and soil fractions as factors. The normality of the model residuals and the homoscedasticity of the variances were checked before statistical analysis. Log transformations of the Q-PCR data were applied to meet these criteria, except for narG gene abundance. When significant differences were found by ANOVA, the post-hoc test of Newman-Keuls was performed to reveal the significance differences between class pairs. To test the differences between sites of the loss of genes in the wet-sieving water, the Student test was used.

The bacterial community composition was visualised by Principal Coordinate Analysis (PCoA) based on the relative abundance of the OTU and generated using Bray-Curtis distance. ANOSIM (Analysis of SIMilarity; 10,000 maximum permutations) was used to investigate potential differences between bacterial community composition due to sieving-method, site or soil fractions (Clarke and Green, 1988). Two-way ANOSIM was used to compare one factor against the other factors and one-way ANOSIM to investigate the

influence of an individual factor. ANOSIM analysis yields an R value, whereby ANOSIM values close to R = 1 indicate a high separation between groups (e.g. between soil fractions), whilst ANOSIM values close to R = 0 indicate a low group separation.

ANOVA and PCoA were performed using R v3.2.1 (R Development Core Team, 2015) and the package Phylosea for PCoA (McMurdie and Holmes, 2013), while the ANOSIM tests were performed using PRIMER software (v6, PRIMER-E Ltd, Plymouth, UK).

3. Results

3.1 Aggregates distribution

The soil fractionation procedure resulted in mean mass recovery ~100% of the original unfractionated soil. The aggregates mass distribution showed similar pattern within both sites. The soil fractions > 250 µm represented 35-50 % of the aggregate distribution, while the soil fractions < 250 µm were significantly lower and represented 2-20% (Fig 1; Table S2). In contrast, the aggregate distribution from the cropland obtained by wet sieving showed the opposite distribution compared to any other distribution, with an increase in the mass of soil fractions with decreasing size of soil factions. The soil fraction 1000-2000 µm was significantly lower than < 53 µm fraction (~16% and ~35% of the aggregate distribution, respectively). The mass distribution of each soil fraction for cropland was significantly different between sieving methods, except for the 250-1000 soil fraction. The aggregate distribution for cropland obtained by wet-sieving showed large standard errors in comparison to any other aggregate distribution. The sieving methods had also some effect for the grassland, with an increase by ~10% of the 250-1000 µm fraction with dry-sieving, and a significant increase by ~10% with wet-sieving to obtain the < 53 µm fraction.

3.2 Microbial gene abundance

Microbial gene abundance showed significant differences ($P < 0.01$) between sites for all the genes except for narG gene (Fig. 2, Table S3). The genes abundance were higher in the grassland site for bacterial 16S rRNA gene, fungal ITS amplicon, nifH, nirS and nosZ genes. In contrast, amoA bacteria (AOB) gene showed higher abundance in cropland, while amoA archaea (AOA) showed slightly higher abundance in grassland. Only the bacterial 16S rRNA gene showed significant differences ($P = 0.027$; Table S3) between soil fractions, and the Post-hoc test revealed significant differences in grassland and dry-sieving between 1000-2000 µm and the fractions 250-1000 and 53-250 µm (Fig. 2). A significant effect ($P < 0.001$) of the sieving methods was found for the relative abundance of AOB, nirS and nosZ, with higher relative genes abundance found in fractions obtained by wet-sieving in grassland (Fig. 2; Table S3). However, the Post-hoc test did not reveal significant pair-wise differences.

The proportion of microbial gene, expressed as percentage of bacterial 16S rRNA gene copies, was significantly ($P < 0.001$) different between sites, with higher nifH gene proportion found in grassland than cropland, while higher proportions for AOB and narG genes were found in cropland (Fig. 3; Table S4). Significant difference between soil fractions and sieving methods were found for all the genes except for narG gene. The Post-hoc test revealed a similar trend between soil fractions for grassland obtained by dry-sieving, with the 1000-2000 µm fraction showing significantly ($P < 0.05$) higher proportion of microbial genes in comparison to most soil fractions and bulk soil (Fig. 3). The soil fractions from grassland obtained by wet-sieving showed higher proportions of AOB, nirS and nosZ genes than bulk soil, but no significant differences between soil fractions were found. The effect of sieving methods, showed higher genes proportions with wet-sieving by ~0.5%, except for the 1000-2000 µm fraction for grassland that showed higher proportion of nifH, AOB, nirS and nosZ gene with dry-sieving by 0.5% to 2%. The Post-hoc test revealed significant ($P < 0.05$)

differences in gene proportions between sieving methods for nifH, nirS and nosZ genes for grassland, and nirS gene for cropland (Fig. 3).

The microbial genes abundance lost in the water during wet-sieving were expressed as percentage of the same gene present in 1 g of bulk soil. The proportion of microbial genes found in the sieving water varied between 0.3 to 2.3% (Table 2). Only narG gene showed ~7% of gene copies lost in sieving water for grassland, and was also the only gene with a significant ($P = 0.0075$) difference between sites. The microbial gene abundance in the sieving water was consistently higher in grassland than cropland and significant ($P < 0.05$) for bacteria, fungi, nifH, narG and nosZ, and marginally significant for AOA and AOB ($P = 0.06$ and 0.053, respectively; Fig. S1).

3.3 Bacterial diversity

The PCoA showed that the bacterial community composition from the water of wet-sieving differed greatly in comparison to any other samples (Fig. 4). The PCoA and ANOSIM also showed that the bacterial composition differed significantly ($R = 0.45$, $P = 0.0001$) between dry- and wet- sieving although some samples were mixed within each group. Then, significant differences between cropland and grassland were found, showing similar ANOSIM values compared to those reflecting the effect of the sieving methods ($R = 0.45$, $P = 0.0007$). The ANOSIM also revealed significant differences between soil fractions, bulk soil and water fractions but with a lower R value than those obtained for sieving methods and sites ($R = 0.32$, $P = 0.0001$).

The PCoA and ANOSIM were also performed on soil fractions and bulk soil for each site to reveal how the sieving methods affected the bacterial community composition between soil fractions at each site, which was not visible on the global analysis (Fig. 5). Significant differences between sieving methods and between soil fractions were found for grassland

(sieving: R = 0.82, P = 0.0001; fractions: R = 0.56, P = 0.0001) but not for cropland (P > 0.2). The ANOSIM analysis performed on grassland for each sieving-method revealed significant differences between soil fractions or bulk soil with both sieving methods (dry-sieving: R = 0.57, P = 0.0001; fractions: R = 0.58, P = 0.0001). The bulk soil showed clear differences with the soil fractions especially for dry-sieving. Interestingly, bulk soil from dry-sieving grouped closely to bulk soil from wet-sieving and soil fractions. However, the PCoA revealed differences between soil fractions with the wet-sieving method, and high variation between replicates with dry-sieving (Fig. 5). This was confirmed when the ANOSIM was performed without the bulk soil, showing only significant and relatively strong differences between soil fractions when obtained by wet-sieving (R = 0.44, P = 0.0001) and no difference with dry-sieving (R = 0.1, P = 0.108).

The relative abundances of most of the dominant phyla were strongly affected by the sieving methods with a decrease with wet-sieving for most of them except for Actinobacteria, Cyanobacteria and Verrucomicrobia that increased with wet-sieving (Fig. 6; Table S5). The different sizes of soil fractions also affected the relative abundance of most phyla. The differences between sieving methods and soil fractions size were more visible and statistically significant for the grassland than cropland. The differences between cropland and grassland were related to only few of the dominant phyla, with Chloroflexi, and Planctomycetes that were higher in cropland, while Nitrospirae, and Proteobacteria were higher in grassland (Fig. 6; Table S5). The water from wet-sieving in grassland showed a significant decrease in Actinobacteria and Planctomycetes in comparison to the soil fractions, while Proteobacteria increased.

PCoA were also performed on the archaeal community composition, showing strong differences between the water from wet-sieving and the rest of the samples although water samples from grassland grouped with the soil fractions (Fig. S2, S3). Then strong differences

366 in archaeal community composition were also found between sieving methods but not
367 between soil fractions.
368
369 **4. Discussion**
370 The study of the distribution of microbial communities diversity, abundance and
371 activities between different sizes of soil aggregates size classes started more than two decades
372 ago (Chotte et al., 1993; Gupta and Germida, 1988; Jocteur Monrozier et al., 1991; Kanazawa
373 and Filip, 1986; Lensi et al., 1995). The study of microbial distribution in soil aggregates
374 starts from the premise that the vast variation in the size of aggregates, as well as their
375 physico-chemical properties, provides a huge diversity of microhabitats for microorganisms
376 influencing carbon and nutrients dynamics within the soil. Subsequently, it implies that each
377 soil aggregate size class harbours specific microbial communities and activities. However,
378 little is known about the effects of size fractionation methods such as sieving on the isolation
379 and interpretation of microbial community data from soil aggregates. The current study
380 clearly shows that dry- or wet-sieving methods affect the acquisition and interpretation of
381 microbial data from different soil aggregates. Furthermore, the effects of sieving methods
382 vary with the site/soil studied, and also which component of the microbial community was
383 studied (i.e. diversity vs. abundance).
384 Differences in bacterial community composition between sizes of soil aggregates
385 were only revealed in grassland and only when using wet-sieving. Dry-sieving method
386 resulted in high variation between replicates, hindering potential differentiation between
387 sizes. The higher disruption energy and washing effect provided during wet-sieving in
388 comparison to dry-sieving are likely to be the main factors explaining such differences in the
389 results obtained by both sieving methods (Cambardella and Elliott, 1993; Chotte et al., 1993).
390 This result implies that the different spatial domains of microbial diversity within soil are

distinguished by patterns in the adhesive forces within soil that bind organisms, minerals and fluids together. This suggests that some factors that are important in the spatial variation in particle binding to form aggregates are also important as selective pressures to establish differences in microbial diversity. Similar results were found with the potential enzyme activity, with only the wet-sieving method that revealed significant differences between soil aggregate sizes in comparison to two dry-sieving methods (i.e. soil either air-dry or dry to 10-15% of soil gravimetric water content) (Bach and Hofmockel, 2014). These results highlight the fact that wet-sieving might be a better method over dry-sieving to isolate the different microbial communities within each size fraction, and is relevant for different microbial characteristics: diversity and activity. The bacterial gene abundances showed overall less clear variation between soil aggregates sizes regardless of the sieving methods, although wet-sieving resulted showed more variation in genes abundance between sizes than dry-sieving.

The washing of soil aggregates during wet-sieving did not result in significant cross contamination between aggregate sizes, at least for grassland where significant differences were found. In contrast, dry-sieving and its rubbing effect on the outer part of aggregates may result in stronger cross contamination due to the absence of water carrying the soil particles into the soil fraction > 53 µm, which represent a patchwork of the different soil fractions, and its mass is directly affected by the disruption strength energy (Chotte et al., 1993). This was supported by the high variation between soil fractions replicates for cropland. Relatively low percentages of bacterial genes, often below 1%, were lost in the wet-sieving water, although this percentage was likely to be underestimated. Interestingly, high narG gene percentage and relative abundance of Proteobacteria in water from grassland may indicate that this gene and phylum might be located in the outer part of the aggregates or inter-aggregates space, where the washing effect was higher. In contrast, Actinobacteria and Planctomycetes decreased in relative abundance, indicating a location within aggregates or high adhesion to soil particles.

Thus, water from wet-sieving might give some indication on the location of some bacterial community.

In cropland no differences in bacterial diversity between aggregate size fractions were found regardless of the sieving method, highlighting that differences between soil aggregates sizes are not always expected but clearly depend on the soil type and land use. Previous studies also showed no difference between microbial community in different size fractions from cropland, likely due to the high turnover of soil aggregates because of anthropogenic activities (e.g. soil tillage, plant harvest) leading to high physical instability of the microenvironment hindering the differentiation of the microhabitats and microbial communities (Blaud et al., 2014). Thus, the absence of difference in microbial diversity between aggregate sizes at a site could potentially be used as an indicator of the instability of the systems and soil health.

Wet-sieving extracted higher gene abundance than dry-sieving. Wetting dry soil was shown to increase the amount of DNA extracted from soil (Clark and Hirsch, 2008), and a physical effect rather than biological might explain the difference for wet-sieving within the ~30 min that the fractionation last. The same trend was found for potential enzyme activity, with four fold greater activity found with wet-sieving in comparison to dry-sieving (Bach and Hofmockel, 2014). This can either reflect an overestimation of the measured variable due to wetting effect (i.e. biological), or accessing a hidden microbial community protected within the pores of the aggregates. In contrast, dry-sieving could lead to under-estimating the microbial gene abundance. Bach and Hofmockel (2014) suggested that wetting the soil leads to over-estimation of potential enzyme activity due to contact between microorganisms and soluble C compounds and the potential short-term microbial metabolic changes. However, there is also a large number of slow growing microorganisms in soil, and most studies showing rapid response of microbial community to changes in moisture (< 30 min), were

441 done only on a few microbial strains in optimal laboratory conditions far from in situ
442 conditions (Halverson et al., 2000; Lamarre et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the biological effect
443 of wetting on microorganisms cannot be discarded.
444 Chotte et al. (2002) suggested that studying the microbial community within soil
445 aggregates gives access to changes in microbial community that would not be visible in the
446 bulk soil, and a greater diversity of Azospirillum. Most studies assessing microbial
447 community composition within soil aggregates found significant differences with the bulk
448 soil (Blaud et al., 2012; Chotte et al., 2002; Davinic et al., 2012; Ranjard et al., 2000).
449 Despite no higher bacterial diversity found in each soil aggregates size in comparison to the
450 bulk soil in the study using next generation sequencing (Davinic et al., 2012) and in the
451 current study, taken all together, the different soil aggregates harbour a greater bacterial
452 diversity than the bulk soil. It remains unclear if pooling the same number of DNA
453 extractions from bulk soil as the number of those from soil fractions plus replicates (e.g. 12
454 DNA extract in the current study) would lead to an increase in bacterial diversity harvested in
455 the bulk soil. This issue could be partly a methodological constraint, as DNA extraction
456 usually uses an extremely small amount of soil; 0.25 g is commonly used, which reduces the
457 representation of the different soil aggregate sizes within the extraction. The recent study
458 from Penton et al. (2016) showed that higher bacterial diversity was found when 10 g of soil
459 was used, which could be related to higher representation of the different soil aggregates
460 sizes and in general the heterogeneous structure of the soil. Similar issue could also be
461 relevant when studying microbial activity that uses often only 1 g of soil (Bach and
462 Hofmockel, 2014)
463 Overall, it should not be expected that the bulk soil provides a summary of the
464 different soil fractions when working on small amounts of soil. Furthermore, isolated soil
465 fractions are likely to behave in a different way to those in situ because of exposure for

example to oxygen and high concentration of soil fractions in comparison to their dispersion within a soil horizon. These characteristics could be major limitations when trying to link microbial diversity, abundance and activity between bulk soil and soil fractions, or to model these variables taking into consideration the soil structure.

5. Conclusions

Sieving methods clearly affect the resulting observed bacterial diversity and abundance found in soil aggregates, and there is a need to carefully choose the methods used prior to their study. Wet-sieving was potentially the most adapted method to study microbial community diversity and abundance in soil aggregates in comparison to dry-sieving, although it the most time consuming and difficult to perform. Further, studies are needed to assess if wet-sieving is the relevant method across a larger number of land use and soil types, and also to assess if is relevant for the measure of other microbial variables (e.g. RNA). Aggregates isolated with sieving methods are the products of sieving and it might be difficult to relate the microbial results to in situ reality. However, aggregates are real units of greater cohesion in the soil formed by biogeochemical processes. Overall, this study raises the question on how to consider soil structure in the study of soil microbial communities, in order to address important question such as the biological mechanisms controlling soil fertility.

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Table 1. Soil characteristics of bulk soil samples on a dry mass basis. Mean value ± one standard deviation (n = 3) are shown.

Location	Cropland 48°09'N, 16°41'E	Grassland 48°11'N, 16°44'E
Water content (%)	22.0 ± 2.9	15.8 ± 2.0
Soil pH (H_2O)	7.7 ± 0.14	7.4 ± 0.09
Organic C (%)	2.4 ± 0.36	5.0 ± 0.60
Total N (%)	0.13 ± 0.01	0.33 ± 0.04
C_{org}/N	18.1 ± 1.83	15.0 ± 0.52
$N\text{-}NH_4^+$ (mg kg^{-1})	1.59 ± 0.29	4.77 ± 0.98
$N\text{-}NO_3^-$ (mg kg^{-1})	20.3 ± 3.07	1.5 ± 0.66
$P\text{-}PO_4^{3-}$ (g kg^{-1})	0.35 ± 0.10	0.59 ± 0.04
$CaCO_3$ (%)	19.0 ± 1.90	21.1 ± 1.41
Sand, 63-2000 μm (%)	32.7	8.2
Silt, 2-63 μm (%)	43.8	63.0
Clay, < 2 μm (%)	23.5	28.8

649 **Table 2.** Proportion of genes (%) lost in the water during soil fractionation using wet-sieving.
650 The loss of gene number in the water is express as a percentage of the number of the same
651 gene present in 1 g of bulk soil. Mean value ± one standard error (n = 3) are shown. Different
652 letter indicate significant ($P < 0.01$) differences between cropland and grassland for a specific
653 gene.

Gene	Cropland	Grassland
Bacterial 16s rRNA	1.55 ± 0.43	0.75 ± 0.30
Fungal ITS	0.48 ± 0.11	0.71 ± 0.52
nifH	2.31 ± 0.84	1.90 ± 0.85
amoA bacteria	0.33 ± 0.12	2.14 ± 0.63
amoA archaea	0.83 ± 0.09	1.83 ± 0.60
narG	1.16 ± 0.41 A	6.97 ± 0.80 B
nirS	0.85 ± 0.31	0.57 ± 0.17
nosZ	0.45 ± 0.14	0.60 ± 0.18

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656 **Figures captions**
657
658 **Fig. 1.** Weight distribution of soil fractions (g 100 g^{-1} dry soil) obtained by dry- or wet-
659 sieving method of soils from cropland and grassland. Means values ± standard error (n = 3)
660 are shown. * indicates significant ($P < 0.05$) difference between dry- and wet-sieving for a
661 specific soil fraction and site. Different letters indicate significant ($P < 0.05$) difference
662 between soil fractions for a specific sieving method and site.
663
664 **Fig. 2.** Variation in gene abundance of bacteria (16S rRNA gene), fungi (ITS amplicon), N
665 fixating (nifH gene), ammonia oxidizing bacteria and archaea (amoA gene), nitrate reductase
666 (narG gene), nitrite reductase (nirS gene) and nitrous oxide reductase (nosZ gene) between

four soil fractions obtained by dry- or wet-sieving methods from cropland and grassland. All abundances are expressed on the basis of 1 g of dry mass of soil fraction or bulk soil. Means values ± standard error (n = 3) are shown. * indicates significant ($P < 0.05$) different between dry- and wet-sieving for a specific soil fraction and site. Different letters indicate significant ($P < 0.05$) difference between soil fractions for a specific sieving method and site.

Fig. 3. Variation in N functional gene/bacterial 16S rRNA (%), of the N fixating (nifH gene), ammonia oxidizing bacteria (amoA gene), nitrate reductase (narG gene), nitrite reductase (nirS gene) and nitrous oxide reductase (nosZ gene) between four soil fractions obtained by dry- or wet-sieving methods from cropland and grassland. Means values ± standard error (n = 3) are shown. * indicates significant ($P < 0.05$) different between dry- and wet-sieving for a specific soil fraction and site. Different letters indicate significant ($P < 0.05$) difference between soil fractions for a specific sieving method and site.

Fig. 4 PCoA of bacterial community of four soil fractions obtained by dry- or wet-sieving method and bulk soil from cropland and grassland. The PCoA was based on relative abundance of OTU and generated using Bray-Curtis distance. The six samples isolated from the rest of the samples correspond to water from the wet-sieving.

Fig. 5 PCoA of bacterial community of four soil fractions obtained by dry- or wet-sieving method and bulk soil from cropland (top) and grassland (bottom). The PCoA were based on relative abundance of OTU and generated using Bray-Curtis distance.

690 **Fig. 6.** Relative abundance (%) of bacterial phyla of four soil fractions obtained by dry- or
691 wet-sieving method, bulk soil and water from wet-sieving from cropland and grassland.
692 Means values (n = 3) are shown. Only the dominant phyla (~ > 0.2%) are shown.