

1 PHENOTYPIC PLASTICITY MADE SIMPLE, BUT NOT TOO SIMPLE

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20 Phenotypic plasticity refers to environment-dependent trait expression (Dewitt and  
21 Scheiner 2004).<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of phenotypic plasticity is important in virtually all areas of  
22 basic and applied biology. Researchers in applied fields (such as agriculture, medicine,  
23 public health, wildlife management, and conservation biology) have a vested interest in  
24 knowing how traits are or will be expressed under specific conditions. Ecologists are  
25 interested in how the expression of traits in different environmental conditions and  
26 habitats might affect population and community dynamics. And evolutionary biologists  
27 are interested in how traits with environmentally-conditional expression have and will  
28 evolve. The widespread interest in phenotypic plasticity has made it a prominent focus of  
29 biological research.

30 Phenotypic plasticity is an especially active research area in ecology and evolution  
31 with a brimming literature that has advanced our understanding of organismal variation,  
32 adaptation, and speciation (Sarkar 2004, Pfennig 2021). Most advances, especially  
33 recently, are based on highly simplified biological scenarios such as dichotomous  
34 environments or linear environmental gradients. Here we advocate a path for taking  
35 modern plasticity research in a far more biologically relevant direction.

36 Phenotypic plasticity, like any trait, can be heritable and respond to any evolutionary  
37 force. What makes plasticity unique is that it manifests *only* in a variable environment  
38 and is thus automatically complex. The key to addressing plasticity's ineluctable  
39 complexity, we contend, is a simple but *comprehensive* conceptual framework that can be  
40 used to address questions about phenotypic plasticity (including connections among areas

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<sup>1</sup> Plasticity typically refers to the *consistent* expression of phenotypes in different environments. Traits that change unpredictably in different environments are usually said to be 'noisy' rather than plastic. Various terms are used to describe traits with the same phenotype in all environments, including 'aplastic', 'non-plastic', 'fixed', 'constant', 'canalized', and 'environmentally insensitive'.

41 of development, behavior, genetics, ecology, and evolution) with far more depth and  
42 realism than current literature.

43 The framework (Fig. 1) involves four independent components: patterns of plasticity;  
44 environment encounters; fitness consequences; and inheritance. The first two components  
45 are needed to predict realized patterns of expression, the first three determine population  
46 dynamics, and all four contribute to evolution. Below, we describe each component in  
47 turn, highlighting key concepts and practices that enable researchers to enrich our  
48 understanding of phenotypic plasticity and its evolution in nature. While none of these  
49 four components is new, we have not seen them presented together in a systematic way,  
50 as here. We contend that widespread use of this structured quartet of concepts would  
51 drive modern studies of phenotypic plasticity in a much more productive, profound,  
52 connected, and comprehensible direction.

53

54 **Patterns of Plasticity** The most complete and universal description of environment-  
55 dependent phenotypic expression, i.e., phenotypic plasticity, is the *reaction norm*  
56 (Woltereck 1909, Johannsen 1911, Schmalhausen 1949), which refers to the set of  
57 phenotypes a genotype expresses in different environments. “Environments” can be  
58 quantitative or qualitative, simple or multicomponent, discrete or continuous, physical or  
59 biotic (including social), external or internal to an organism. They can encompass  
60 ancestral environments if phenotypic expression is impacted by trans-generational  
61 (epigenetic) effects (Bonduriansky 2021) or internal environments, (e.g., age, metabolic  
62 rate, body condition).

63 All reaction norms can be described as either a multivariate trait—an ordered list or  
64 vector—over discrete environments (Via and Lande 1985) or as a function-valued trait—  
65 a curve or surface—over continuous environments (Stinchcombe et al. 2012, Kingsolver  
66 et al. 2015). Standard multivariate methods can be used for estimation, modeling, and  
67 inference; unobserved components of reaction norms can be imputed or interpolated;  
68 Gomulkiewicz et al. (2018) describes a number of function-valued methods, most of  
69 which require no information about genetics or relatedness.

70 Why do we encourage use of reaction norms to describe environment-dependent  
71 phenotypic expression over metrics expressly designed to quantify plasticity, especially  
72 given the simplicity and intuitive appeal of the latter? Though plasticity measures are  
73 easy to conjure, no single quantity pertains to all situations, particularly when there are  
74 more than two environments. Consequently, no scale exists to compare the plasticities of  
75 different genotypes, not even one that preserves rank orders. For example, Figure 2  
76 depicts the reaction norms expressed by genotypes  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  over three environments  
77 ( $E_1, E_2, E_3$ ). Were plasticity measured as phenotypic variance over environments, as is  
78 common, genotype  $G_1$  would rank as more plastic than genotype  $G_2$ . However, were  
79 plasticity measured by the range of phenotypic responses—also commonplace—the  
80 ranking would be reversed. Finally, measuring plasticity as a mean difference between  
81 environments—also very common—requires specifying one environment as the reference  
82 point, and results in at least as many plasticities as there are pairs of environments (e.g.,  
83  $E_1-E_2, E_1-E_3, E_2-E_3$ , and all the reverse orders). Absent an order-preserving scale,  
84 comparative statements like “this genotype is more plastic than that one” become  
85 effectively meaningless over realistically complex environments. Nonetheless, countless

86 studies (uncritically) assume plasticity can be rank ordered, likely because most consider  
87 just two environments or only linear reaction norms.

88 It can be highly tempting to fit reaction norms using linear functions (an approach  
89 that one of us has used ourselves): if there are two experimental environments, a  
90 plasticity metric such as a mean difference is mathematically equivalent to a slope, which  
91 seems like it would characterize a reaction norm. Likewise, if only linear functions are  
92 used, the slopes and intercepts appear to characterize the reaction norm. While intuitively  
93 and analytically appealing, these scenarios (two environments, linear reaction norms) are  
94 in fact special situations in which plasticities can be ordered consistently (by, say,  
95 variance or slope) but not always (e.g., when using nonlinear transformations of pairs of  
96 phenotypic values; Wang et al. 2022). Thus, one should be skeptical that conclusions  
97 from studies confined to two environments or linear reaction norms extend to more  
98 realistic scenarios. Focus on these special cases perpetuates a situation in which a *general*  
99 *understanding* and synthesis remains beyond our grasp despite an accumulation of  
100 plasticity studies. If organisms typically experience more than two types of environments  
101 or if it is common for reaction norms to be non-linear, studies ignoring these realities are  
102 analogous to taking out-of-focus pictures with a camera: simply snapping more out-of-  
103 focus photos is not going to improve the quality of the image just as doing more  
104 oversimplified studies will not sharpen our picture of plasticity.

105 Reaction norms encompassing multiple environments and potentially non-linear  
106 changes in phenotypes have, unlike plasticity metrics, a standard representation  
107 depending on the environment of interest (see above). Reaction norms can also be used to  
108 calculate any plasticity measure, which makes them superior for studying any aspect of

109 plasticity. The reverse is not true: a particular value of a plasticity metric such as a mean  
110 difference, range, or variance will almost always correspond to multiple reaction norms.  
111 In other words, the reaction norm, and not the (human-invented) metric, captures the  
112 biology. Importantly, even in the event that reaction norms are linear, nothing is lost by  
113 adopting the reaction norm framework to study plasticity over either discrete or  
114 continuous environments. When population variation is described in terms of reaction  
115 norms, those that lack plasticity are not unique, but instead are merely part of a  
116 (multivariate) distribution. Indeed, the evolution and consequences of aplastic reaction  
117 norms involve the exact same mechanisms as plastic ones (Sultan 2015).

118       Plasticity *per se* is too nonspecific of a concept and it lacks a universal measure to  
119 address anything but rudimentary questions about its evolution. In contrast, reaction  
120 norms have no such limitations. We thus recommend that plasticity be employed only as  
121 a category label and, in particular, it should not be quantified. Reaction norms are the  
122 proper quantitative platform to study environment-dependent phenotypic expression.

123

124       **Environmental encounters** Plasticity itself can only be expressed if genotypes are  
125 exposed to more than one environment, and realized patterns of plasticity in any setting,  
126 natural or not, depends as much on the reaction norm as the frequencies of environmental  
127 exposures. Indeed, the distribution of environmental encounters is as crucial to the  
128 evolutionary and ecological consequences of plasticity as the reaction norm itself  
129 (Gomulkiewicz and Kirkpatrick 1992). Yet studies rarely consider or attempt to measure  
130 environmental distributions that species encounter in nature (Arnold and Peterson 2002).

131       There are innumerable ways populations experience environmental variability. “Fine”  
132 and “coarse” grained scales of environmental variation can be encountered through time  
133 or across space. Different distributions of exposure generally lead to different realized  
134 patterns of phenotypic expression and fitnesses (see below), even for a genetically  
135 uniform population. To predict these realizations one needs both a description/estimate of  
136 reaction norms found in a population and a description/estimate of the distribution of  
137 environments encountered (Fig. 1).

138       Studies of phenotypic plasticity oftentimes assume—usually implicitly—that  
139 environments are encountered equally often. In an experimental context, the equal  
140 replication of different treatments differs—dramatically—from the natural distribution of  
141 these environments. If, say, an organism or genotype encounters an environment 50% of  
142 the time in an experiment (i.e., one with two treatments), but only 10% of the time in the  
143 wild, such a balanced design would disproportionately overweight that component of the  
144 reaction norm and underweight others compared to nature. Although using balanced  
145 experiments<sup>2</sup> or assuming a uniform distribution of environments in theoretical studies  
146 greatly simplifies comparisons of different patterns of plasticity, such comparisons will  
147 not represent nature if environments are encountered at all unevenly in the wild.

148 Empirical estimates of environmental encounter frequencies are the ultimate means to  
149 test this speculation, which suggests a straightforward research agenda: measure the  
150 frequencies of environments an organism actually encounters. Fortunately, many  
151 environmental variables (CO<sub>2</sub>, temperature, salinity, humidity, freezing days,  
152 precipitation, etc.) can be measured remotely with data loggers, ibuttons, and other

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<sup>2</sup> The issue of balance is additional to the artificiality of the experimentally-controlled environmental conditions themselves.

153 instruments. Other, more biotic environments (e.g., competitor or mutualist densities)  
154 will require old-fashioned ecological field work. Moreover, documented patterns of  
155 environmental encounters will enable researchers biologists to assess the proportionate  
156 importance of different environments for the evolutionary and ecological causes and  
157 consequences<sup>3</sup> of phenotypic plasticity (e.g., Kingsolver et al. 2001, Kingsolver and  
158 Buckley 2017).

159       A number of theories that invoke plasticity, such as plasticity-led evolution, genetic  
160 assimilation, the Baldwin effect, and “buying time” for persistence (Crispo 2007,  
161 Diamond & Martin 2021) imagine a single, abrupt change from an ancestral environment  
162 to a novel one. If the novel environment is constant, as is usually implied, the only  
163 possible role for plasticity is phenotypic expression in the novel condition. This is the  
164 only moment one reaction norm could be favored *directly* over another. Post-shift, the  
165 novel environment becomes the “new normal.” Consequently, any subsequent evolution  
166 of plasticity must be non-adaptive (see below). Were the novel environment truly  
167 unprecedented in the history of the species then, akin to a new mutation, the phenotype  
168 expressed could be adaptive or nonadaptive in the new setting (Ghalambor et al 2007).

169       Early models of phenotypic plasticity assumed passive environmental encounters  
170 (Via and Lande 1985, Gomulkiewicz and Kirkpatrick 1992, Gavrilets and Scheiner  
171 1993), but recent ones consider organisms that actively determine encounters either  
172 through habitat choice/preferences or by changing their local environment directly (niche

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<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to distinguish ecological from evolutionary effects since, for example, an extreme environment could easily cause all genotypes to have the same, albeit low absolute fitness. This would completely preclude natural selection (because of the lack of variation in relative fitness) but the prospect of extinction—an ecological outcome—could be catastrophically permanent even were the extreme condition rare.



173 construction; e.g., Sultan 2015, Scheiner et al. 2021). Yet other models consider  
174 “internal” environments like age or individual condition itself (e.g., Matthey-Doret et al.  
175 2020). With habitat-dependent dispersal (Edelaar & Bolnick 2012), migration itself is a  
176 plastic trait that determines environmental encounters, potentially resulting in different  
177 exposures for different genotypes. Clearly more work is needed to understand how  
178 dynamic distributions of encounters might influence the expression and evolution of  
179 reaction norms... and vice versa.

180

181 **Fitness consequences** Trait expression can affect an organism’s fitness in  
182 environments it encounters; individual fitnesses collectively determine population  
183 dynamics; and if the trait’s expression is heritable, evolution. These truisms apply to  
184 plastic and non-plastic traits alike. Since plasticity manifests only in a variable  
185 environment, this too is required for plasticity itself to evolve *adaptively*. While this is a  
186 seemingly obvious point, many studies that consider adaptive phenotypic plasticity refer  
187 only to its evolution in a single environment, such as a novel one (see above). Plasticity  
188 *can* evolve in a single environment but only non-adaptively via indirect selection due to  
189 associated “plasticity costs”, as a correlated response, or by random genetic drift.

190 Not only can expression of a phenotype change in response to a change in  
191 environment but the fitness consequences of a particular expressed phenotype may also  
192 vary from one environment to the next. The realized fitness of an individual in a given  
193 environment or set of environments must reflect both considerations (e.g., Chevin et al.  
194 2010) as well as any constitutive or environment-specific costs paid to enable plastic  
195 expression. In addition, the environment that determines trait expression during a

196 “sensitive period” can, because of developmental or other delays, differ from the  
197 environment that determines fitness.

198 The relevant measure of fitness will depend on an organism’s life history and how  
199 that relates to environmental variability. For example, an individual could experience  
200 multiple environments within its lifetime (e.g., daily thermal variation). Individual fitness  
201 would integrate over these fine-grained distributions (e.g., Kingsolver et al. 2007). At the  
202 other, coarse-grained extreme, an individual experiences a single environment in its  
203 lifetime but its descendants could develop in different environments because of *in situ*  
204 temporal change or dispersal. The fitness consequences of plasticity for both demography  
205 and adaptive evolution must then reflect these among-generational changes.

206 Many studies over continuous environments assume optimizing selection such that  
207 the optimum phenotype changes linearly (e.g., Chevin et al. 2010). This assumption is  
208 mathematically convenient with a bonus feature: the optimal reaction norm is necessarily  
209 linear. Consequently, studies often consider *only* linear reaction norms, which lends itself  
210 to the further, conceptual perk that slope directly reflects plasticity. In reality, neither  
211 linearity assumption is empirically justified. Future studies should consider nonlinear  
212 versions of optimizing selection and distributions that include nonlinear reaction norms.

213 Finally, plastic phenotypes may in fact have no differential effect on fitness, that is,  
214 different reaction norms may have equivalent consequences for total fitness. In these  
215 cases, phenotypic plasticity is a neutral trait and its evolution is best understood in terms  
216 of non-adaptive evolutionary processes including random genetic drift (Lande 1976,  
217 Kimura 1983).

218

219       **Inheritance** Like any trait, the heritable basis of a reaction norm could range from a  
220 major gene to many loci of individually small effect; it can be inherited in organisms that  
221 are asexual, sexual, self-fertile, self-incompatible, diploid, polyploid, or even via non-  
222 Mendelian mechanisms (extra-nuclear or transgenerational epigenetic; Auge et al. 2017).  
223 Any responses to selection (i.e., adaptation) can be described using standard population  
224 and quantitative genetics, as can other evolutionary processes that might affect their  
225 evolution such as mutation, recombination, and random genetic drift (e.g., Charlesworth  
226 and Charlesworth 2010) . Describing the spatial structure of genetic variation is of  
227 particular importance for species whose local populations encounter coarse-grained  
228 environmental variation via migration.

229       Many explicit multi-locus models of phenotypic plasticity posit the existence of  
230 “plastic” and “non-plastic” gene expression profiles across environments. While  
231 convenient, these gene classes are neither biologically necessary nor justified. Indeed,  
232 two genes with opposite reaction norms would additively produce an aplastic phenotype  
233 (Fig. 3). A better approach for future studies is to consider gene-level reaction norms—a  
234 generalization of “mutation reaction norm” (Ogbunugafor 2022)—that, when combined,  
235 produces overall reaction norms, whether plastic or not (Fig. 3). Conceivably, gene-level  
236 reaction norms could prove valuable for detailed prediction of evolutionary responses to  
237 selection (see previous subsection) or for describing the expected course of random  
238 genetic drift in study systems where reaction norm variation depends on just a few  
239 segregating genes or genotypes.

240       Studies often emphasize genotype-by-environment interaction (“GxE”), as it is  
241 necessary for plasticity to evolve (Saltz et al. 2018). The absence of GxE (parallel

242 reaction norms) implies absence of genetic variation in plasticity. However, the absence  
243 of GxE does not imply the absence of plasticity *per se*, nor does the presence of GxE  
244 ensure the evolution of plastic genotypes. Consequently, GxE is necessary but not  
245 sufficient for plasticity to evolve. Although estimates of GxE variances can sometimes  
246 reveal how much fitness variation across environments is maintained by rank changes  
247 versus changes in variance (Vaidya and Stinchcombe 2020) it is unknown if those  
248 inferences apply to other phenotypic measures of GxE variation. Regardless, one can  
249 always use a reaction norm approach to dissect root causes of GxE variation if not  
250 necessarily the reverse (Saltz et al. 2018).

251

252 **Conclusion** We urge that future studies of phenotypic plasticity organize around our  
253 four-component framework of reaction norms, environmental encounters, fitness  
254 consequences, and inheritance (Fig. 1). Box 1 lists some best practices and compelling  
255 future research directions suggested by our framework. A complete understanding of  
256 phenotypic plasticity requires all four components (Via et al. 1995, Sultan 2021) and,  
257 while we might pine for studies that consider the full foursome, this emphatically does  
258 not imply that studies must include all of the components to make valuable contributions.  
259 Rather, a key advantage of our framework is to provide a simple, but not too simple  
260 conceptual “wrapper” for investigations that address one or more of the components we  
261 describe, collectively providing a clear and consistent context for how each study  
262 contributes to our holistic understanding of phenotypic plasticity and its evolution.

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### Box 1: Future Advances and Best Practices

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378 We strongly encourage future studies of phenotypic plasticity to involve the following  
379 advances and best conceptual practices:

380 • Treat plasticity as a category, not a quantity; use reaction norms to study plasticity  
381 instead.

382 • Consider reaction norms over more than two environments.

383 • Don't limit studies of plasticity over continuous environments to linear reaction  
384 norms or linear gene expression profiles.

385 • Resist the temptation to fit reaction norms using only linear functions; embrace  
386 non-linearity.

387 • Non-plastic reaction norms are nothing special, biologically speaking. Though  
388 they are distinctly easy to describe, they are *a priori* no more important  
389 biologically than any other reaction norm shape.

390 • Give greater attention to the distribution of environmental encounters (including  
391 ancestral) and examine the implications of organism-mediated encounters (niche  
392 construction; habitat choice).

393 • Avoid automatically assuming that plasticity is adaptive, particularly in novel  
394 environments. Indeed, we need a “neutral theory” of plasticity evolution to enable  
395 more rigorous analyses and inferences of adaptive plasticity patterns in nature.

396 • Don't stop with detection of GxE interactions when studying the evolution of  
397 phenotypic plasticity. Use reaction norms to unpack causes of GxE variation.

398

## Figure Captions

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Figure 1. The four fundamental elements of phenotypic plasticity and their roles in determining patterns of phenotypic expression realized in nature, ecology (population or community dynamics), and evolution.

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Figure 2. Counterexample proving that there is no universal rank-preserving metric of phenotypic plasticity over more than two environments. Shown are hypothetical reaction norms for two genotypes ( $G_1$ ,  $G_2$ ) over three environments ( $E_1$ ,  $E_2$ ,  $E_3$ ). If plasticity is measured by overall variation, genotype  $G_1$  is more plastic than  $G_2$ . However, were plasticity measured by a genotype's maximal between-environment difference in expression, genotype  $G_2$  ranks above  $G_1$ .

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Figure 3. Gene expression profiles (allelic reaction norms) and resulting phenotypic reaction norms. Left panel: additive effects of four alleles (A, B, C, D) in each of three environments ( $E_1$ ,  $E_2$ ,  $E_3$ ). Note that allele D has the same effect in all environments, i.e., D is not plastic. Right panel: phenotypic reaction norms of three diploid genotypes with different combinations of alleles shown in the left panel. The phenotype expressed in each environment is determined by adding the allelic effects. Note that diploid genotype AC is not plastic even though both alleles are individually plastic whereas genotype AD is plastic despite allele D being a plastic.

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Figure 1

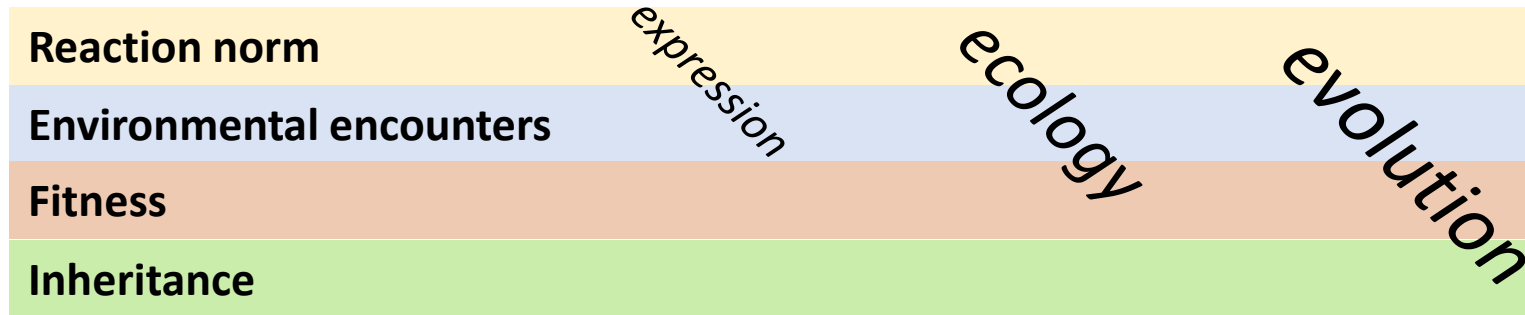


Figure 2

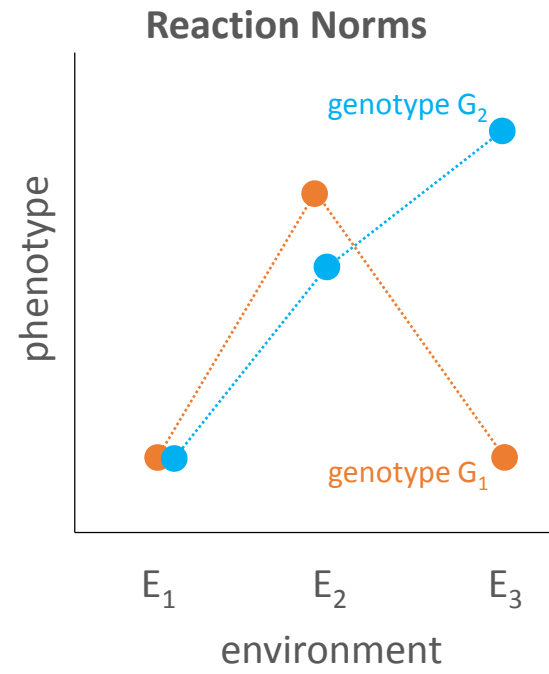


Figure 3

