Survival regression analysis: a powerful tool for evaluating fighting and assessment

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Theoretical models of animal contests frequently generate predictions about how asymmetries (e.g. differences in size, residence status) between contestants affect fight duration. Linear regression and nonparametric correlation analyses are commonly used to test the fit of data to such models. We show how survival regression analysis (SRA) is a powerful technique for studying the effect of asymmetries on the duration of contests. SRA, which is under-utilized by students of animal behaviour, offers several advantages over more frequently used procedures. It provides unbiased parameter estimates even when including censored data (i.e. results of contests that have not ended at the time when observations are stopped). The analysis of hazard functions, which is a component of SRA, is an easy way to test for consistency with predictions of the sequential assessment game model. These and other advantages of SRA are illustrated by using SRA and more conventional methods to analyse the effect of asymmetries on contest duration for encounters between female Mediterranean tarantulas, Lycosa tarentula (L.). It is hoped that this example of the advantages of SRA will encourage more widespread use of this powerful technique.

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SURVIVAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS

SRA has been widely used in the medical and social sciences (Allison 1995). Use of SRA in animal behavioural sciences has increased slightly in recent years (Haccou & Hemerik 1985; Muenchow 1986; Rhine et al. 1988; Haccou et al. 1991; van Alphen 1993; Eggert & Sakaluk 1994; van Roernund et al. 1994; Ormel et al. 1995; Moya-Laraño et al. 1996), but it is still under-utilized, perhaps due to its relative complexity. Although SRA was originally developed to analyse effects of different treatments on the time to death of patients, SRA can be used for studying 'the time to the occurrence of any event' (T) (Allison 1995). The 'time until the end of a contest' will be our focus. Our explanation of SRA is based on Allison (1984, 1995). Other general references on the technique are Cox (1972), Kalbfleish & Prentice (1980), Lawless (1982), Cox & Oakes (1984), SAS Institute (1990), Lee (1992), Kumar & Kefjsjo (1994) and Klein & Moeschberger (1997). A few examples related specifically to analysing animal behaviour are Haccou & Hemerik (1985), Muenchow (1986), Haccou et al. (1991), Haccou & Meelis (1992) and Fox (1993). Some statistical packages that include SRA procedures are BMDP, JMP, SAS, SPSS, STATATA, STATISTICA and SYSTAT. Analyses in this paper have been performed with SAS (SAS Institute 1990), except for hazard functions, which were estimated with STATISTICA (Statsoft 1995).

SRA can be performed with several models, which are defined by their ability to include 'censored data'. 'Right-censored' data includes cases in which the event under study has not occurred by the end of the observation period, which is often the case for studies reporting contest duration (e.g. Harvey & Corbet 1986; DiMarco & Hanlon 1997). In such situations the use of SRA is more accurate than linear regression (Allison 1995).

SRA can be accomplished using either parametric accelerated failure time models or the nonparametric Cox proportional hazards regression model (Cox 1972). As shown below, accelerated failure time models are very useful for studying contest duration because they allow analysis of the hazard function. For this reason, this paper focuses on accelerated failure time models only.

SRA AND MEDITERRANEAN TARANTULA FIGHTS

In a study of territoriality in the Mediterranean tarantula, Lycosa tarentula (L.) (J. Moya-Laraño, J. M. Orta-Ocaña, J. A. Barrientos, C. Bach & D. H. Wise, unpublished data), 45 encounters between adult females were staged in the field. A spider (the intruder) was introduced into the territory of another spider (the resident) and the contest duration, behavioural patterns and outcome were recorded. Each contest ended when the loser ran away or was killed by the winner. Observations stopped after 60 min, at which time two contests had not ended (censored data). The carapace width of each spider was measured at the end of the contest.

Below we use these data on L. tarentula contests to illustrate the advantages of using SRA in determining whether or not data on contest duration fit predictions of
all coefficients are zero is tested using the log-likelihood ratio test. The statistic calculated in this test approaches a chi-square distribution with as many degrees of freedom as the number of covariates included in the model. The maximum likelihood procedure generates estimates of the parameters in equation (1): \( \beta_0, \beta_1 x_1 + \ldots + \beta_k x_k \) and \( \sigma \). The significance of each parameter is usually tested with the Wald test, which approaches a chi-square distribution with one degree of freedom.

**Testing Predictions of the Sequential Assessment Game Model**

In this section we show the advantages of using SRA to examine the fit of the data to three predictions of the sequential assessment game model: (1) the smaller the relative fighting ability, the longer the duration of contests; (2) variability in contest duration increases as relative fighting ability decreases; and (3) contest duration will be longer when the owner of a territory loses a dispute.

**Prediction (1): regression approach**

Below we compare the output of different regression techniques in predicting the effect of relative fighting ability on contest duration, and show that as the number of censored data increases, this prediction is more accurate using SRA than conventional regression models. Because spider size is a good predictor of contest outcome in *L. tarentula* females (Fernández-Montraveta & Ortega 1990), we used the percentage difference in size as an index of relative fighting ability: percentage difference in size = [(carapace width of larger spider – carapace width of smaller spider) / (carapace width of smaller spider) \times 100].

Researchers usually test whether relative fighting ability and \( T \) are negatively related by calculating the Spearman correlation coefficient (e.g. Verrel 1986; Englund & Olsson 1990; Enquist et al. 1990; Leimar et al. 1991; Olsson 1992). This statistic revealed a negative relationship with the *L. tarentula* data (Spearman rank correlation: \( r_s = -0.4030, N=45, P=0.006 \); Fig. 1). Nevertheless, a regression technique is more potent, because, as we will show later, it reports the magnitude of the effect, which can be used to compare different groups and studies. Furthermore, a particular regression approach, SRA, is more robust with respect to censored data on contest duration.

Below we illustrate the higher robustness of SRA relative to other regression techniques when dealing with censored data. By ‘higher robustness’ we mean that as the number of censored data increases, parameter estimates, and therefore estimates of the magnitude of the effect, will remain more constant using SRA than conventional regression techniques. We ran a simulation in which the observed *L. tarentula* fights (Fig. 1) were artificially censored at successive intervals of 10% censored data. First we ran the simulation as if observations had been stopped when 90% of contests had ended (i.e. 10% of the data were censored). The time included in the censored data was the time of the last observation entering the 90% threshold. Then the simulation was run as if observations had been stopped when 80% of contests had ended, and so on until 90% of the data were censored. For each percentage of censored data, we ran a Weibull accelerated failure time model (SRA model) and, for comparison purposes, two conventional regression techniques: ordinary least-squares regression (time log-transformed) and nonlinear regression (SAS Institute 1990; Sibly et al. 1990). Because these conventional regression techniques do not allow specification of which data are censored, all contests that continued beyond the simulated observation period were entered as having ended when the observation period ended. The percentage of change in contest duration explained by an increase of one unit in a continuous independent variable, hereafter called ‘effect’, is calculated as \( 100(\theta – 1) \). Figure 2 shows the negative effect of the percentage difference in size on \( T \) for the different models and the percentage of censored data for each. The effect of the percentage difference in size on \( T \) was statistically significant for the Weibull accelerated failure time model for simulations ranging from 5 to 60% censored data (\( P \) value range 0.001–0.026). Over this range of simulated censored data, the calculated statistical significance of the negative effect of the percentage difference in size on \( T \) was generally an order of magnitude less for the two conventional regression techniques (\( P \) value range: ordinary least-squares regression: 0.022–0.212; nonlinear regression: 0.015–0.131). Without censored data, an ordinary least-squares regression calculates the best, unbiased estimators (Allison 1995). Therefore, with two censored observations, the true value must lie somewhere between the prediction by the least-squares regression and the Weibull accelerated failure time model. This estimate of the true value is represented in Fig. 2 by a horizontal dotted line. For almost all percentages of censored data, the SRA Weibull accelerated failure time model yielded parameter values that were closer to the estimated true value than the conventional regression...
ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR, 60, 3

Prediction (2): hazard function approach

The sequential assessment game model predicts that if animals are assessing their relative fighting ability during contests, variability in contest duration will increase as relative fighting ability decreases. In a graph of $T$ (vertical axis) versus percentage difference in size (horizontal axis) (Fig. 1), this pattern appears as a trend in which, as the percentage difference in size, and thus relative fighting ability, decreases, data points tend to be more separated along the vertical axis. A similar pattern occurs in several published graphs (Harvey & Corbet 1986; Wells 1988; Englund & Olsson 1990; Leimar et al. 1991; Olsson 1992; Jennions & Backwell 1996; DiMarco & Hanlon 1997). A quantitative test of how well such a pattern fits the prediction of the sequential assessment game is usually performed by pooling contests of similar relative fighting ability into groups (Englund & Olsson 1990; DiMarco & Hanlon 1997). Spearman rank correlation is then used to compare the standard deviation of $T$ for each group with its rank based upon relative fighting ability. We pooled $L. tarentula$ fights into nine groups of five fights each, and found that the standard deviation of contest duration was negatively correlated with the percentage difference in size (Spearman rank correlation: $r_s = -0.7333, N=9, P=0.025$), as predicted by the sequential assessment game model.

SRA permits a quantitative exploration of the same pattern simply by measuring the acceleration or deceleration of the hazard function, $h(t)$. An accelerating $h(t)$ means that the variability in time to the end of the contest is decreasing as time elapses, whereas a decelerating $h(t)$ means that such variability increases with time. After showing that contest duration increases as relative fighting ability decreases, one can next determine whether variability in $T$ increases with decreasing relative fighting ability by showing that $h(t)$ decreases with time. Therefore, if the percentage difference in size explains $h(t)$ and the latter decreases as time elapses, one can conclude that the smaller the percentage difference in size, the larger the variability in $T$, as predicted by the sequential assessment game model. The test of whether $h(t)$ accelerates or decelerates as time elapses is provided by the scale parameter, $\sigma$, in the Weibull accelerated failure time model.

Fitting the duration of $L. tarentula$ contests to the Weibull distribution resulted in a scale parameter that was significantly greater than 1 ($\sigma = 1.75$; Wald test $\chi^2 = 12.9, P=0.0003$), indicating that the hazard decreases with time (Fig. 3). Thus, the variance in $T$ increases over time, and because the percentage difference in size was negatively correlated with contest duration in $L. tarentula$, we can conclude that the pattern is consistent with the second prediction of the sequential assessment game model (i.e. variability in $T$ increases as fighting ability decreases).

Therefore, survival analysis provides a statistic to test objectively whether the variability in contest duration increases as fighting ability decreases. One could also use the more conventional non-SRA approaches. The two main advantages of using SRA versus comparing groups with Spearman correlation are that: (1) the researcher avoids the step of grouping data, which is subjected to a potential lack of objectivity; and (2) SRA models are designed to incorporate censored data, so $h(t)$ will be measured with less bias than calculating the standard deviation of $T$ with censored data included in arbitrarily grouped contests.
Figure 3. Decelerating hazard function of the time to the end of the contest. In combination with a negative relationship between contest duration and the percentage difference in size, PDS (Fig. 1), a decelerating hazard function means that variability in contest duration decreases as PDS increases, one of the predictions of the sequential assessment game model (see text for details).

### Table 1. Estimation of the effect of percentage difference in size (PDS) and residence asymmetries, and their interaction on contest duration (T) of Mediterranean tarantula females using a Weibull SRA model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>P (Wald)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept ($\beta_0$)</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>0.0158</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDS</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.0027</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.0436</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDS$x$residence</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.0236</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale ($\sigma$)</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only noncensored data were analysed (N=43) because the categorical variable ‘residence’ was defined only if the contest had ended and a winner could be identified.

**Prediction (3): interaction terms**

One goal in the study of animal fights is to separate effects of asymmetries that occur simultaneously (e.g. Waage 1988; Marden & Waage 1990). A powerful and efficient approach to this problem is to examine how asymmetries interact. Although most multivariate techniques allow the inclusion of interactions between variables, this is infrequently done when studying the effect of asymmetries on animal fights. SRA, like other statistical models, estimates parameters more accurately if interaction terms are included (Kumar & Klefsjö 1994). Below we illustrate this point with the L. tarentula data.

The sequential assessment game model predicts that fights in which the resident individual wins will be shorter than those in which the intruder wins. The residence asymmetry may interact with relative fighting ability in determining contest duration. In Table 1 we summarize the results of a complete analysis of the L. tarentula data in which we included, in a SRA Weibull accelerated failure time model, effects of the continuous independent variable, percentage difference in size, the categorical variable, residence, which took the value 1 when the resident spider won and 2 when the intruder won; and the interaction, percentage difference in size $\times$ residence. All three effects were significant. The effect of the percentage difference in size on $T$ was negative, as was shown earlier. The coefficient for residence was negative, indicating that when the intruder won (residence=2, the larger value), contest duration was shorter. This outcome is opposite to what the sequential assessment game model predicts. Because the interaction term was significant, we then ran two different models to reveal the nature of the interaction (Pedhazur 1973): one with the continuous independent variable (percentage difference in size) for only those contests in which the owner won, and another for those contests in which the intruder won. The percentage difference in size did not explain contest duration in those fights in which the resident won, but showed a highly significant and negative effect of relative fighting ability on contest duration when intruders won (J. Moya-Laraño et al., unpublished data).

**Comparing Coefficients Between Groups**

The $\beta$ coefficient for relative fighting ability can be a good measure of the value of the disputed resource if it accurately measures the relationship between relative fighting ability and $T$. The sequential assessment game model (Enquist & Leimar 1987; Leimar et al. 1991) predicts that animals will fight for a longer time when the value of the resource is higher. Therefore, we expect that the absolute value of $\beta$ will be larger when the resource is of higher value, because the slope relating relative fighting ability to $T$ should be steeper in fights for a more valuable resource. Reporting $\beta$ coefficients along with their standard errors allows statistical comparison of an index of resource quality between groups, and between results of different empirical studies (Allison 1995, page 199). Such analyses can be very useful in comparative studies. Although ordinary least-squares regression could also be used for such comparisons, the advantage of SRA is that groups with different amounts of censored data can be compared more accurately.

**Sequential Assessment Game Model and Spider Fights**

In our example using SRA to analyse contests between L. tarentula, we found clear agreement with two of the three predictions of the sequential assessment game model. The higher the relative fighting ability, the shorter the contest and the lower the variability in contest duration. The data were not consistent with the third prediction, that contests won by intruders should be longer. Never the less, the significant interaction between relative fighting ability and the residency asymmetries suggests that assessment of both asymmetries may occur. A more detailed discussion of this result can be found elsewhere (Moya-Laraño et al., unpublished data). These results are not conclusive proof that L. tarentula females...
are playing the sequential assessment game; our findings are merely consistent with major predictions of the sequential assessment game model. The same results could be also consistent with other games (e.g. Payne & Pagel 1997; Payne 1998). Additional research would be needed to more rigorously test the sequential assessment game model for the Mediterranean tarantula.

CONCLUSIONS

Since SRA has been specially designed for the study of ‘time-to-event’ data, it is more accurate than other regression techniques, primarily because SRA accommodates censored data, allowing the researcher to reduce sampling effort while maintaining accuracy. In addition, the shape of the hazard function can be used to test one of the predictions of the sequential assessment game model. Like other techniques, SRA also allows inclusion of interactions and provides standard errors of the parameter estimations, allowing comparisons between different groups.

We hope that our example of the use of SRA will encourage other behavioural biologists to employ this powerful technique. SRA statistical packages are becoming more friendly and the publication of Allison’s (1995) manual for the use of survival analysis in SAS has increased the accessibility of SRA to researchers.

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