

1 Molecular signatures of transgenerational response to ocean
2 acidification in a reef fish

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5
6 The impact of ocean acidification on marine ecosystems will depend on species capacity
7 to adapt^{1,2}. Recent studies show that the behaviour of reef fishes is impaired at projected
8 CO₂ levels^{3,4}; however, individual variation exists that might promote adaptation. Here
9 we show a clear signature of parental sensitivity to high CO₂ in the brain molecular
10 phenotype of juvenile spiny damselfish, *Acanthochromis polyacanthus*, primarily driven
11 by circadian rhythm genes. Offspring of CO₂ tolerant and CO₂ sensitive parents were
12 reared at near-future CO₂ (754 µatm) or present-day control levels (414 µatm). By
13 integrating 33 brain transcriptomes and proteomes with a *de novo* assembled genome we
14 investigate the molecular responses of the fish brain to increased CO₂ and the expression
15 of parental tolerance to high CO₂ in the offspring molecular phenotype. Exposure to high
16 CO₂ resulted in differential regulation of 173 and 62 genes and 109 and 68 proteins in the
17 tolerant and sensitive groups respectively. Importantly, the majority of differences
18 between offspring of tolerant and sensitive parents occurred in high CO₂ conditions. This
19 transgenerational molecular signature suggests that individual variation in CO₂ sensitivity
20 could facilitate adaptation of fish populations to ocean acidification.

21

22 Subject terms: Climate Change, Ocean Acidification, Genomics, Transcriptomics, and
23 Adaptation.

24

25 The uptake of additional carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is changing ocean
26 chemistry, with potentially far-reaching impacts on marine life⁵. Recent studies show that
27 the behaviour of marine fishes and some invertebrates can be impaired by projected near-
28 future CO₂ levels, with implication for key ecological processes such as navigation,
29 habitat selection, recruitment, competition and predator-prey interactions^{6,7}. Impaired
30 behaviour at high CO₂ levels have been found in a variety fish taxa, including sharks⁸,
31 stickleback⁹ and salmon¹⁰. Fish use chemical cues from injured conspecifics (chemical
32 alarm cues (CAC)) to detect the threat of predation and respond by moving away from
33 CAC and decreasing activity¹¹. However, in high CO₂ conditions juvenile fish exhibit a
34 decreased avoidance of CAC and do not learn to associate an increased risk of predation
35 with the presence of CAC¹²⁻¹⁴. The failure to react to predation threat can have
36 immediate consequences for individual survival and may affect population
37 replenishment^{4,13,14}. Furthermore, there appears to be limited capacity for within- or
38 between-generation acclimation of impaired behavioural responses to high CO₂^{3,12}.
39 Consequently, species will need to adapt to avoid adverse effects of ocean acidification
40 on behaviours that are critical to individual performance and population success.

41

42 The adaptive potential of a population depends on the presence of genetic variation upon
43 which selection can act¹. Previous studies have observed variable levels of behavioural
44 impairment among individuals exposed to near future CO₂ levels^{4,13,15}. However, if this

45 variation could be transmitted between generations is unknown. One previous study has
46 shown that the average response of juvenile fish to CAC in high CO₂ does not change
47 with parental exposure to high CO₂¹², but no studies have yet explored the relationship
48 between individual variation in response to high CO₂ between parents and their offspring.
49 We used a transgenerational rearing experiment to investigate the potential heritability of
50 variation in behavioural sensitivity to ocean acidification in the spiny damselfish,
51 *Acanthochromis polyacanthus*. The underlying cause of behavioural changes in reef fish
52 exposed to high CO₂ appears to be an effect of ionic change from acid-base regulation on
53 the function of the GABA_A receptor, the major inhibitory neurotransmitter receptor in the
54 vertebrate brain^{14,16,17}. Therefore, we focused on transgenerational molecular signatures
55 of CO₂ tolerance and sensitivity in the fish brain. We first tested the behavioural
56 sensitivity of adult fish to elevated CO₂, (a projected near-future level of 754 µatm). Fish
57 that retained an innate avoidance of CAC in high CO₂ water were considered ‘tolerant’ to
58 high CO₂ whereas fish that became attracted by CAC in high CO₂ were termed
59 ‘sensitive’. Adult males and females of similar tolerance or sensitivity to high CO₂ were
60 paired for breeding, with half of the pairs breeding in control conditions and half of the
61 pairs breeding in high CO₂ conditions. Offspring of these parental pairs were then reared
62 in the same CO₂ conditions as their parents. Full brain transcriptomes were sequenced
63 and proteomes were obtained for a total of 33 offspring from the four parental-sensitivity
64 x CO₂ rearing conditions: (1) nine offspring from tolerant parents reared in control
65 conditions, (2) six offspring from tolerant parents reared in high CO₂ conditions, (3) nine
66 offspring from sensitive parents reared in control conditions and, (4) nine offspring from
67 sensitive parents in high CO₂ conditions (Fig. 1). The *de novo* genome of *A. polyacanthus*

68 was sequenced and assembled to facilitate the assembly and annotation of the
69 transcriptome and proteome datasets (Supplementary methods).

70

71 The expression of brain mRNA and proteins differed markedly between offspring reared
72 in elevated CO₂ compared with control conditions and between offspring of tolerant and
73 sensitive parents (Fig. 2a). We identified 173 and 62 mRNA transcripts (Fig. 2b) and 109
74 and 68 proteins (Fig. 2c) showing differential expression between control and CO₂
75 conditions for offspring of tolerant and sensitive parents, respectively. Only seven
76 transcripts and eighteen proteins were commonly differentially expressed in response to
77 high CO₂ in both parental groups (Fig. 2b,c), revealing a distinct parental influence in
78 responses to CO₂ exposure. Importantly, the majority of differences between these two
79 groups of offspring occurred in fish reared at high CO₂, with 152 transcripts and 99
80 proteins differentially expressed, compared with 14 transcripts and 46 proteins in control
81 conditions (Fig. 2; Supplementary Fig. 1).

82

83 The general response to high CO₂, irrespective of parental sensitivity, involved genes and
84 proteins associated with the brain's glucose, serine and glycine metabolism. *Pck1*,
85 cytosolic phosphoenolpyruvate, is the main control gene for gluconeogenesis and the
86 most up-regulated gene of the seven found differentially expressed between high CO₂ and
87 control conditions regardless of parental phenotype (Supplementary Table 1). Thirty three
88 per cent of these differentially expressed genes matched to differentially expressed
89 proteins directly, but multiple glycolytic proteins involved in similar pathways such as
90 fructose-bisphosphate aldolase or glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase, also

91 showed increased expression at the high CO₂ level (Supplementary Table 2). Several
92 other fish species exhibit increased blood glucose levels when exposed to stress and
93 environmental perturbations such as pH changes¹⁸. Furthermore, up-regulation in *pck1*
94 has also been shown to promote a glucose side-branch metabolism: the serine and
95 glycerol-3-phosphate pathways¹⁹. *Phgdh*, phosphoglycerate dehydrogenase, catalyses the
96 early step of the L-serine synthesis from 3-P-glycerate and is up-regulated at the
97 transcript and protein level here. *Shmt2* (serine hydroxymethyltransferase 2) then
98 converts serine into glycine. Serine and glycine are involved in a wide range of processes
99 such as the biosynthesis of lipids and proteins and are necessary for cell proliferation.
100 Up-regulation of these metabolic pathways in the brain has also been seen in zebra fish
101 after the exposure to chemicals²⁰. All high-CO₂ individuals, regardless of parental
102 phenotype, exhibited an increased expression of genes related to serine biosynthesis
103 (Supplementary Table 3), revealing a common cost in the stress response to high CO₂
104 exposure.

105

106 The molecular phenotype of offspring from CO₂ sensitive parents was substantially
107 different to that of offspring from CO₂ tolerant parents (Fig. 2). At the protein level,
108 offspring of sensitive parents exhibited a nine-fold overexpression of histone 1 (H1),
109 possibly compacting the chromatin and regulating gene expression by inaccessibility to
110 transcription factors²¹. On the transcript level, gene ontology analysis showed that genes
111 involved in transfer ribonucleic acid (tRNA) aminoacylation were uniquely enriched in
112 the sensitive-parents group (Supplementary Table 3). These included several tRNA
113 synthetases, such as *aars*, *dars* and *kars*. tRNA synthetases are necessary for the

114 translation from mRNA into proteins as they bind the proper amino acid to tRNA. Until
115 recently tRNA synthetases were thought to be housekeepers, but new evidence links
116 differential expression and mutation in these synthetase genes to human diseases²², stress
117 response and rapid adaptation to environmental stressors in yeast and *E.coli*²³. tRNA
118 synthetases are also responsible for adaptive translation²³ and although rarely studied in
119 fish seem to be involved in temperature acclimation²⁴. Thus, the elevated expression of
120 tRNA synthetases in offspring of sensitive parents may be triggered by an unsuccessful
121 attempt to acclimate. It is possible that this may even become maladaptive in offspring of
122 sensitive parents.

123

124 Not only were tRNA synthetases more highly expressed in the transcriptomes of
125 offspring from CO₂ sensitive parents, but there were also differences between the
126 sensitive and tolerant offspring group in the genomic sequence of two tRNA related
127 genes. We measured the fixation index (F_{ST}) of all single nucleotide polymorphisms
128 (SNPs) found across the transcriptomes of all tolerant-parent offspring against all
129 sensitive-parent offspring to evaluate a potential difference due to a fixed genetic
130 variation. Four outliers were found with different genotypes for offspring of tolerant and
131 sensitive parents within the sequenced coding regions (Supplementary Fig. 2). One SNP
132 was found in the *coro1a* gene involved in immune deficiency and another just upstream
133 of the *igdcc3* (immunoglobulin superfamily) coding region. For both SNPs the sensitive-
134 parents offspring revealed homozygosity (both copies of the same allele), possibly
135 indicating less adaptive potential for these genes. The other two outlier SNPs were
136 located in *trnt1* and *iars*, tRNA synthetase related genes of which *iars* was also

137 differentially expressed for sensitive-parent offspring at high CO₂. This is consistent with
138 a role of tRNA synthetase in the cellular response to environmental stressors²³. In this
139 study we focused on coding regions of the genome, but additional important genetic
140 variants might be located in upstream regulatory regions of the differentially expressed
141 genes.

142

143 The main inhibitory neurotransmitter receptor in vertebrate brains, the gamma-
144 aminobutyric acid receptor A (GABA_A), is an ion-channel with conductance for Cl⁻ and
145 HCO₃⁻, and its function has been shown to be affected by the exposure to near future CO₂
146 levels^{16,17}. Fish with impaired behaviour regain normal behaviour after treatment with
147 gabazine, a GABA_A receptor antagonist, and the underlying mechanism is thought to be
148 related to pH regulatory processes altering the neuronal gradients for Cl⁻ and HCO₃⁻^{9,14,17}.

149 The GABA receptor genes were highly expressed in the transcriptomes of all our tested
150 fish, but at the same level across treatments. However, on the protein level we found
151 aldehyde dehydrogenase 9 member A1 (AL9A1), a protein involved in the
152 dehydrogenation of gamma-aminobutyraldehyde to GABA, to be 1.7 fold overexpressed
153 at high CO₂ in offspring of tolerant parents. Altered GABA receptor function with high
154 CO₂ exposure could be expected to affect the expression of transporter genes and proteins
155 such as the solute carrier family (slc). However, only one non-GABA related
156 neurotransmitter transporter gene (*slc6a15*) and the glycine neurotransmitter transporter
157 protein (SC6A5) were differentially expressed, but again were up-regulated in offspring
158 of CO₂ tolerant parents in high CO₂ conditions (Supplementary Table 4). This up-

159 regulation might help fish deal with the interference of high CO₂ with the function of the
160 GABA_A receptor and at least partly explain individual variation in CO₂ tolerance.

161

162 Fish have acid-base and osmo-regulatory mechanisms allowing them to avoid tissue
163 acidosis when exposed to high CO₂, which is one of the predicted physiological costs of
164 acidified oceans²⁵. The importance of this is demonstrated by the overexpression of the
165 arginine vasotocin protein in our fish at high CO₂ level, which is a key component in the
166 coordination of osmotic challenges²⁶. Most fish closely regulate their acid-base relevant
167 ions (primarily Cl⁻, HCO₃⁻ and H⁺) in response to environmental fluctuations of CO₂¹⁶.
168 Many processes involving osmoregulation are under circadian regulation, such as acid-
169 base regulation when exposed to different levels of pH^{27,28}. In this study we find the
170 molecular signature of CO₂ tolerance to be defined by the differential regulation of nearly
171 all components of the circadian rhythm system (Fig. 3). Differential expression of most
172 circadian genes and several proteins are found in offspring of tolerant parents in high
173 CO₂, in comparison to offspring of the same parents at control CO₂ and offspring of CO₂
174 sensitive parents at high CO₂ levels. Circadian rhythm and rhythmic process are also
175 enriched biological functions (Supplementary Table 3). The main circadian rhythm
176 activator genes such as *bm11* (also known as ARNTL in mammals) or *clock* were down-
177 regulated, whereas circadian rhythm repressors such as *per1*, *nr1d1* or the Paraspeckle
178 component protein 1 were up-regulated in offspring of tolerant parents in high CO₂
179 condition. Altered levels of circadian rhythm genes evoke a phase shift in the circadian
180 clock²⁹ and such phase shifts can provide an adaptive advantage when faced with
181 environmental change³⁰. Opposing this down-regulation in circadian rhythm for offspring

182 of tolerant parents, we find *asmt* (acetylserotonin O-methyltransferase), the enzyme that
183 catalyses the final reaction in the synthesis of melatonin, a key regulator of the circadian
184 rhythm, up-regulated in offspring of sensitive parents. Ion-regulatory adjustments in fish
185 are managed by melatonin, concurrent with the circadian rhythm³¹. It is possible, therefore,
186 that offspring of sensitive parents display more pronounced ion-regulatory adjustments in
187 response to elevated CO₂, which in turn leads to more profoundly altered Cl⁻ and HCO₃⁻
188 gradients that interfere with the GABA_A receptor function. We hypothesise that offspring
189 of tolerant parents inherit the ‘flexibility’ in ion-regulatory control and therefore the
190 ability to phase shift the circadian clock and avoid a maladaptive reaction to elevated
191 levels of CO₂. This transgenerational signal suggests adaptive potential of impaired
192 behaviours from high CO₂ due to existing natural variation.

193

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274 **Acknowledgments**

275 This study was supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the ARC
276 Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies (P.L.M), the Office of Competitive Research
277 Funds OCRF-2014-CRG3-62140408 from the King Abdullah University of Science and
278 Technology (T.R., M.L.B., P.L.M, T.Ryu, C.S.), and the University of Oslo (G.E.N.).
279 This project was completed under James Cook University (JCU) ethics permit A1828.
280 We thank the Marine and Aquaculture Research Facilities Unit (JCU), Integrative
281 Systems Biology Laboratory (KAUST), and Biosciences Core Laboratory (KAUST) for
282 support and assistance.

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315 **Author contributions:** M.W. and P.L.M designed and managed the fish rearing
316 experiments. M.W. performed the adult fish behavioural phenotyping. C.S. prepared the
317 samples for RNA sequencing and together with H.Z. protein samples for mass
318 spectrometry. T.Ryu performed the genome assembly and gene annotation and wrote the
319 corresponding part. C.S. analysed transcriptome expression data, performed quantitative
320 real-time PCR expression validation and variant analysis. C.S. analysed mass

321 spectrometry data and integrated the datasets. G.E.N. assisted in interpreting the
322 expression data. C.S., P.L.M., T.Ravasi and G.E.N. wrote the paper and all authors read
323 and approved the final manuscript.

324

325 **Additional information:**

326 RNA-seq transcriptome sequences have been deposited in GenBank under BioProject ID
327 PRJNA311159. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to
328 T.Ravasi or P.L.M.

329

330 **Competing financial interests**

331 The authors declare no competing financial interests.

332

333

334 **Figure legends:**

335

336 **Figure 1: Sampling design of juvenile fish for molecular analysis of brain**
337 **transcriptomes and proteomes.** Offspring were sampled from breeding pairs of spiny
338 damselfish characterised as tolerant or sensitive to the behavioural effects of elevated
339 CO₂ (top left corner). T are ‘tolerant’ parents, whose behaviour is not impeded and S are
340 ‘sensitive’ parents, whose behaviour changed when exposed to high CO₂. Three offspring
341 (biological replicates) from different parental pairs each were sampled from four
342 parental-sensitivity x CO₂ rearing conditions. Colour of the fish indicates different family
343 lines. Fish brains were dissected and processed for transcript and protein differential
344 expression analysis by using a *de novo* assembled genome as the reference.

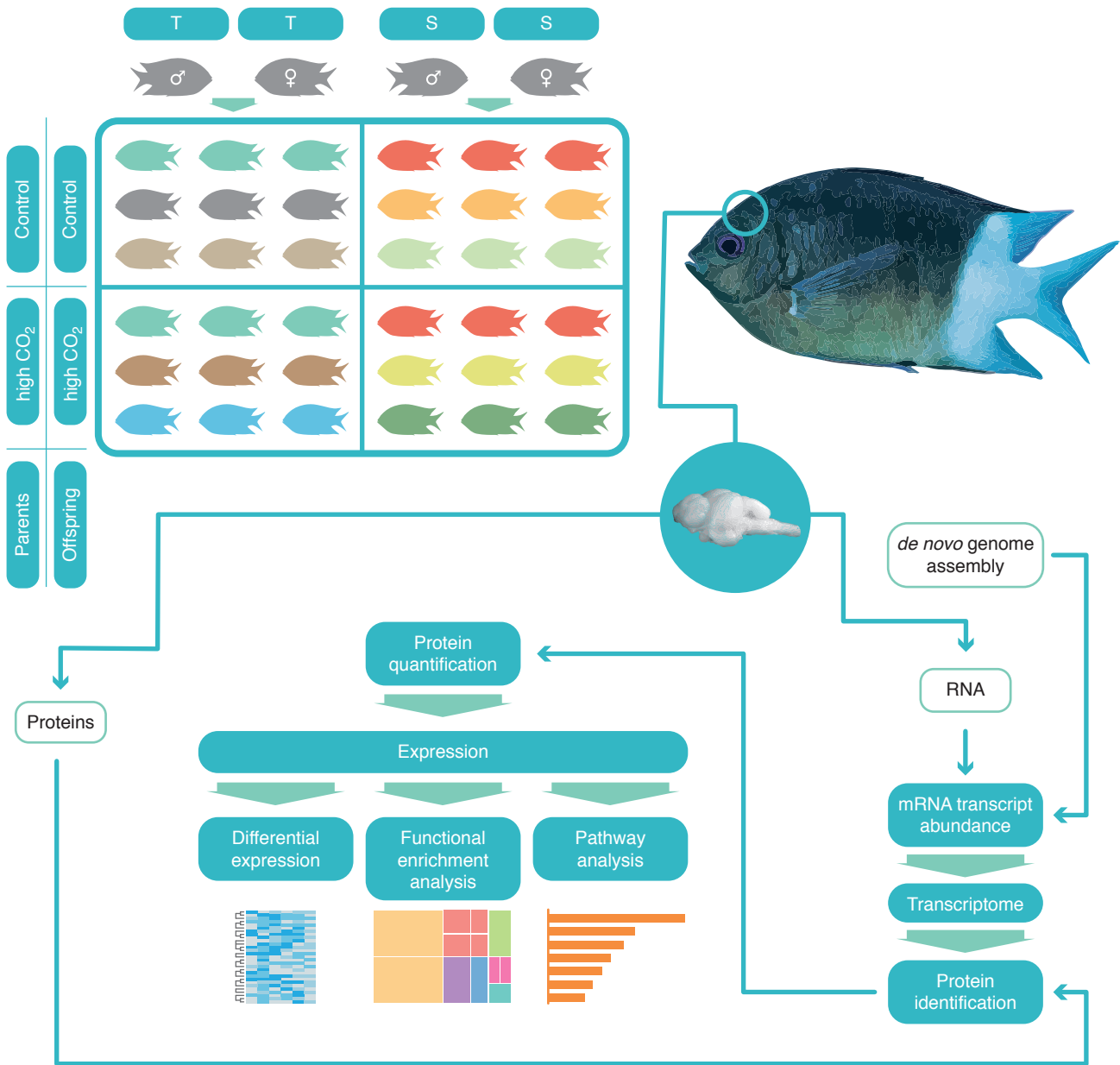
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346 **Figure 2: Differential expression of transcripts and proteins for the four different**
347 **comparisons of parental-sensitivity x CO₂ rearing conditions.** a) Heatmap of all
348 differentially expressed transcripts with hierarchical gene clustering. Expression level is
349 indicated by the z-score. Tol= tolerant parents, Sen= sensitive parents, C= control
350 condition, CO₂= high CO₂ condition. b) Venn diagram of differentially expressed
351 transcripts and c) differentially expressed proteins. Brackets in b) represent the overall
352 factorial comparisons e.g. 41 transcripts are differentially expressed for control versus
353 CO₂ regardless of parental phenotype. Rectangles show the total amount of differential
354 expression. Upward arrows represent the number of transcripts/proteins that are up-
355 regulated in the respective condition.

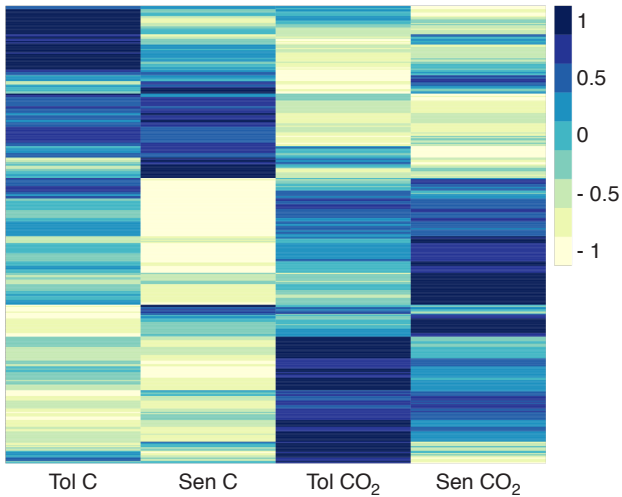
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357 **Figure 3: Differential regulation of circadian rhythm genes for offspring of tolerant**
358 **parents at high CO₂ condition.** All pathway genes are differentially expressed and up-
359 regulation is represented by different colours and refers to different offspring/treatment
360 groups. T stands for tolerant parent, S for sensitive, CO₂ for high CO₂ condition and C for
361 control condition. Pathways of activation (green arrows) and repression (red lines) of
362 different genes²⁹. Importantly, repressors are up-regulated for offspring of tolerant
363 parents reared in high CO₂ conditions, whereas activators are found down-regulated for

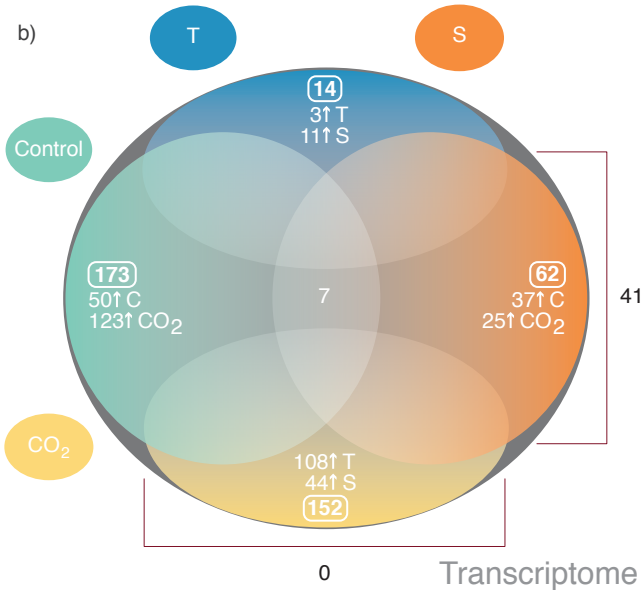
364 this group. The scissors represent the posttranscriptional activity of *ccrn4l* by degrading
365 the poly-A tails.



a)



b)



c)

T

S

Control

93

9↑C
84↑CO₂

44

7↑T
39↑S

14

18

68

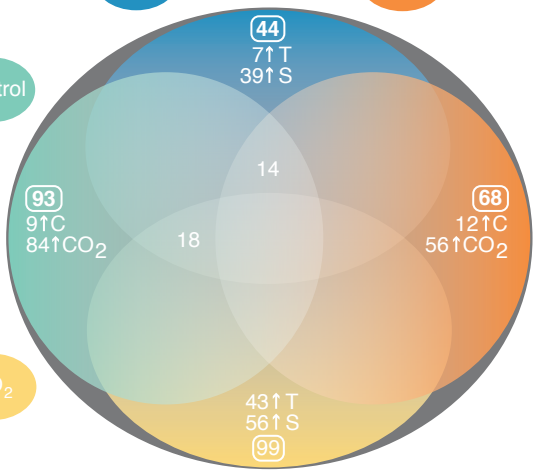
12↑C
56↑CO₂

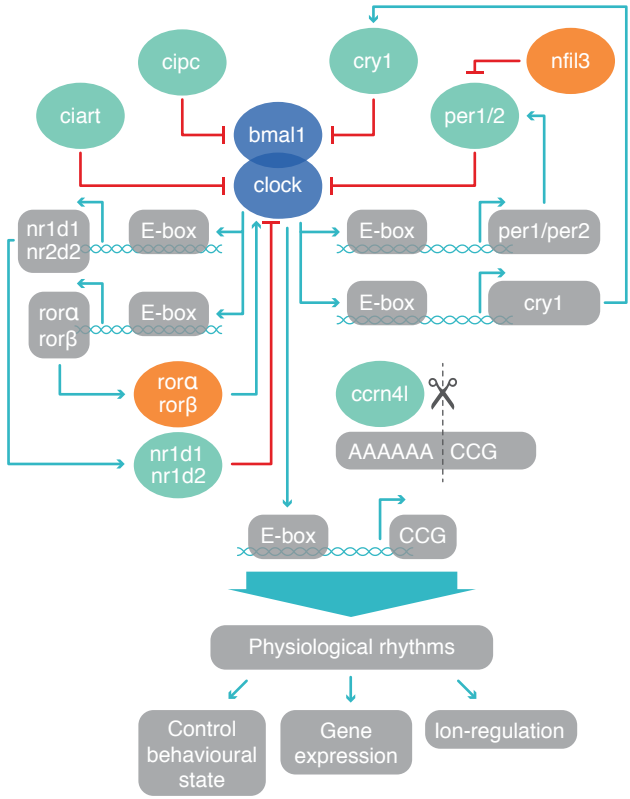
43↑T
56↑S

99

CO₂

Proteome





T CO₂

S CO₂ & TC

S CO₂