

1 Age at maturation has sex and temperature specific effects on  
2 telomere length in a fish  
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12 Running head: Stickleback Telomeres

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15 advice.

17 ABSTRACT

18

19 Telomeres are highly conserved nucleoprotein structures which protect genome integrity. The length of  
20 telomeres is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, but relatively little is known about  
21 how different hereditary and environmental factors interact in determining telomere length. We  
22 manipulated growth rates and timing of maturation by exposing full-sib nine-spined sticklebacks  
23 (*Pungitius pungitius*) to two different temperature treatments and quantified the effects of temperature  
24 treatments, sex, timing of maturation, growth rate and family (genetic influences) on telomere length.  
25 We did not find the overall effect of temperature treatment on the relative telomere length. However,  
26 we found that variation in telomere length was related to timing of maturation in a sex- and  
27 temperature-dependent manner. Telomere length was negatively related to age at maturation in  
28 elevated temperature and early maturing males and females differed in telomere length. Variation in  
29 growth rate did not explain any variation in telomere length. The broad sense heritability ( $h^2$ ) of  
30 telomere length was estimated at  $h^2 = 0.31-0.47$ , suggesting predominance of environmental over  
31 genetic determinants of telomere length variability. This study provides the first evidence that age at  
32 maturation together with factors associated with it are influencing telomere length in an ectotherm.  
33 Future studies are encouraged to identify the extent to which these results can be replicated in other  
34 ectotherms.

35

36 Keywords: aging, heritability, *Pungitius pungitius*, telomere, temperature

37

38 INTRODUCTION

39 Telomeres are nucleoprotein structures whose main function is to protect genome integrity (Blackburn  
40 2000). Telomeres shorten with every cell division which eventually leads to cellular senescence and  
41 various associated pathologies (Blasco 2005). The process of telomere attrition can be accelerated by  
42 an array of stressors, and thus an individual's telomere length may be indicative of its exposure to  
43 stress and/or its stress resistance (von Zglinicki 2002; Epel et al. 2004; Mizutani et al. 2013).  
44 Unsurprisingly, individual variation in telomere length has been linked to variation in various  
45 phenotypic attributes, including survival probability (Bakaysa et al. 2007; Monaghan 2010; Heidinger  
46 et al. 2012; Angelier et al. 2013). While telomere shortening can be to some extent restored by  
47 telomerase enzyme, the process of telomere erosion is usually faster than their elongation (Barrett and  
48 Richardson 2011). Furthermore, the process of telomere restoration may be costly either due to  
49 elevated risk of pathologies or because of diversion of resources which could otherwise be allocated to  
50 other vital life-history functions such as reproduction (Campisi 2005; Monaghan and Hausmann  
51 2006). In fact, when extrinsic mortality is high, investments into the costly maintenance of telomere  
52 length maybe wasteful (i.e. "disposable soma theory"; Kirkwood 1977; Kirkwood and Rose 1991).  
53 Therefore, whether the benefits of telomere length restoration offset its costs may be highly context  
54 dependent, may differ among sexes and among individuals who have experienced different growth  
55 histories.

56 Sex is one of the most important drivers of intraspecific life-history variation (Rice 1984; Slatkin  
57 1984), and telomere length has been repeatedly found to differ between sexes mirroring sex-specific  
58 differences in the lifespan (Barrett and Richardson 2011). While the proximate causes for this remains  
59 unclear, it is conceivable that sex differences in life histories may also drive variation in telomere  
60 dynamics. This possibility is especially interesting in case of sexually dimorphic species in which the

61 two sexes may often differ markedly in optimal values of important life history traits (Roff 1993). For  
62 example, the optimal age at maturation may be very different for males and females. In ectotherms,  
63 such as fish, early maturation is associated with a smaller size, which especially in case of females  
64 translates to reduced fecundity (Roff 1993; Shimada et al. 2011), whereas male reproductive success is  
65 not, or only weakly so, affected by age at maturation (Adams and Huntingford 1997; Uusi-Heikkilä et  
66 al. 2011). Furthermore, experimental studies modulating growth conditions found that high growth rate  
67 is associated with early maturation (Kuparinen et al. 2011) and reduced longevity (Lee et al. 2013).  
68 Therefore, individuals and sexes with different maturation schedules likely differ in their investment  
69 into different life-history traits. Consequently, studies of sex-bias in telomere shortening in species with  
70 sex-specific differences in life-history strategies can be particularly rewarding (Barrett and Richardson  
71 2011). However, up to date, only a limited number of studies have studied sex differences in telomere  
72 shortening in species where the sexes differ conspicuously in their life histories (Foote et al. 2010;  
73 Gopalakrishnan et al. 2013; Rollings et al. 2014; Gao and Munch 2015; Peterson et al. 2015).

74 As most other quantitative traits, variation in telomere length is known to be influenced both by  
75 environmental and genetic factors (Broer et al. 2013; Asghar et al. 2015). Most of what is known about  
76 heritability of telomere length comes from human studies where it ranges from a moderate 36% to as  
77 high as 90% (Bischoff et al. 2005; Baird 2008; Broer et al. 2013). Since traits closely related to fitness  
78 are expected to have low heritability (Price and Schluter 1991; Houle 1992; Merilä and Sheldon 1999),  
79 the high heritability recovered in human studies could indicate that variation in telomere length is not  
80 closely associated with variation in fitness, or that the heritabilities have been overestimated for a  
81 reason or another. Evolutionarily more informative insights on the genetic basis of telomere length  
82 should be obtainable from studies of non-model organisms (Kappei and Londoño-Vallejo 2008;  
83 Monaghan 2010), and such information has been accumulating recently (Horn et al. 2011; Olsson et al.

84 2011; Voillemot et al. 2012; Reichert et al. 2015; Asghar et al. 2015; Atema et al. 2015; Becker et al.  
85 2015). However, most of these studies have been conducted with endothermic birds, and to best of our  
86 knowledge, only one study has focused on inheritance of telomere length variation in ectothermic  
87 vertebrate (Olsson et al. 2011). However, the study of Olsson *et al.* (2011) is problematic in the sense  
88 that it utilized parent-offspring regressions for heritability estimation, in spite of the fact that one of the  
89 critical assumptions underlying the usage of this approach is that the comparable trait is measured in  
90 parents and offspring. Clearly, if telomeres of parents and offspring are not quantified at the same age  
91 and telomere length changes with age, parent-offspring regression may give biased estimates of  
92 heritability.

93 The aim of this study was to assess whether variation in growth rate and age at maturation were  
94 associated with variation in telomere length in nine-spined sticklebacks (*Pungitius pungitius*), and  
95 whether these associations were sex-specific. We predicted that i) variation in telomere length will be  
96 negatively associated with variation in growth rate, and that ii) mature individuals will have shorter  
97 telomeres than immature individuals. The latter may be expected either because of the slower growth,  
98 and thus also lower cell division rate, of immature individuals and/or the fact that maturation itself is  
99 energetically costly. We do not exclude a possibility that if the trade-off between growth and telomere  
100 length arises due to competition for energy and resources it may be in fact masked by resource  
101 acquisition capacities of individuals. Also, because female maturation on average requires more  
102 resources than male maturation (Hayward and Gillooly 2011), we expected that iii) mature females  
103 would have shorter telomeres than mature males.

104 In order to test these predictions, we used data from an experiment where growth rate and timing of  
105 maturation were manipulated by exposing individually reared full-sib individuals from the same nine-  
106 spined stickleback families to two ecologically relevant temperatures (Kuparinen et al. 2011). In

107 addition, leveraging the relatively large set of full-sib families in the data, we evaluated the relative  
108 importance of genetic vs environmental influences (i.e. heritability) in determining variation in  
109 telomere length.

## 110 MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 111 *Fish sampling and rearing*

112 Adult nine-spined sticklebacks were caught with seine nets in 2008 in the Baltic Sea (60°10' N; 25°00'  
113 E) and transported to laboratory facilities at the University of Helsinki (Finland). Nine full-sib families  
114 were created by artificial fertilization as described in (Kuparinen et al. 2011). Fertilized eggs were  
115 incubated at 17°C and fry were photographed within few hours after hatching to measure hatching size.  
116 Shortly after hatching, individuals ( $N = 400$ ) were randomly assigned to one of the two temperature  
117 treatments (14 °C and 17°C) and two replicates per each family and each treatment so that families  
118 were equally represented. Fish were reared individually in 1.4L tanks which were separated by opaque  
119 plastic sheets. Tanks were arranged in four racks (Allentown Zebrafish Rack System, Aquaneering, San  
120 Diego, USA) housing 100 individuals per rack. Each rack had a separate water circulation system  
121 where water was filtered by physical, chemical, biological and UV filters. Light conditions during the  
122 entire experiment were set to 24 hour light to mimic high-latitude summer conditions, as well as to  
123 enhance growth and development. Individuals were initially fed with live *Artemia*, but gradually food  
124 was changed to *Chironomidae* larvae. When individuals were 17 days old, weekly size measurements  
125 were initiated to follow individual growth trajectories. These size measurements continued until the  
126 fish were 15 weeks old (i.e. until 115 days of age) and were obtained by taking a digital photograph  
127 from which body length (from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail base) was measured using a  
128 software TpsDig 1.4 (Rohlf 2002).

129 Age at maturation was closely monitored during the entire duration of the experiment. Upon their  
130 maturation, male nine-spined sticklebacks develop distinctive nuptial coloration, and were thus  
131 considered mature when first signs of such coloration were observed. Females in this species do not  
132 change their coloration visibly when mature, and thus, their maturation was monitored by observing  
133 their reproductive status by gently squeezing visually gravid females (twice a day) so as to see if eggs  
134 were ready to be released. Mainly due to mortality in early growth stages a substantial proportion  
135 (34.75 % or 139 individuals out of 400) of individuals were lost. The experiment was terminated when  
136 the fish were 122 days old and when approximately half of the remaining individuals had matured ( $N$   
137 [matured individuals/total number of individuals alive] = 109/261). Individuals were euthanized with  
138 an overdose of MS-222 (tricainemethanesulfonate) and their sex was confirmed or identified (in case of  
139 immature individuals) by visual examination of the gonads. Brains were dissected out and stored at -  
140 80°C until further analyses.

141

#### 142 *Telomere assay*

143 Telomere length was determined as the ratio between the amount of telomeric repeats and that of a  
144 reference sequence by using quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR; Cawthon 2002). Quantified  
145 this way, the relative telomere length (RTL) corresponds to an average telomere length across all  
146 chromosomes (Cawthon 2002). This approach to quantify telomere length has been successfully  
147 applied in many ecological studies (e.g., Olsson et al. 2011; Heidinger et al. 2012; Plot et al. 2012). The  
148 known shortcoming of this method is that if present, qPCR amplifies also interstitial telomeric repeats  
149 generating noise for inter-individual comparisons (Foote et al. 2013; Nussey et al. 2014). However,  
150 interstitial telomeric repeats have not been detected in nine-spined sticklebacks (Ocalewicz et al. 2011).  
151 Telomeric repeats were amplified using universal primers developed by Cawthon (2002):

152 Tel1b: CGGTTTGGTTGGGTTTGGGTTTGGGTTTGGGTTTGGGTT;

153 Tel2b: GGCTTGCCTTACCCTTACCCTTACCCTTACCCTTACCCT.

154 The zinc finger protein 1 gene (*zic1*) was used as a reference sequence. A partial sequence of *zic1* from  
155 *Pungitius pungitus* was obtained from GenBank (Accession Number:AB445219) and primers  
156 amplifying a fragment of this gene were designed using Primer 3 software (Untergasser et al. 2012):

157 PuZic1Fw.: CAACAGGCGAAGTCACAGAG ,

158 PuZic1Rev.: CGTGGGAGCTGTGGTTTATT.

159 For the telomere assay, genomic DNA was extracted from brain tissue using QIAamp Fast DNA Tissue  
160 kit (QIAGEN) following manufacturer's instructions. The integrity and purity of the extracted DNA  
161 was checked by agarose gel electrophoresis and NanoDrop 2000 (ThermoFisher), respectively. Only  
162 visually intact samples with a  $A_{260/280}$  ratio higher than 1.7 (mean  $\pm$  SD =  $1.85 \pm 0.11$ ) were accepted  
163 for further analyses. The qPCR reactions were run separately for telomere and reference sequence  
164 amplification in a Bio-Rad X1000 real time thermal cycler (BIO-RAD) in 384-well microplates (BIO-  
165 RAD). Each reaction mix included iTaq<sup>TM</sup> DNA polymerase, dNTPs, MgCl<sub>2</sub> and fluorescein-SYBR  
166 found in iQ<sup>TM</sup> SYBR® Green qPCR mix (BIO-RAD), plus primers and 5ng of DNA template. For  
167 telomere reactions 100nM of Tel1b and 300 nM of Tel2b were used, while for *zic1* (reference sequence)  
168 200nM for both forward and reverse primers were used. All plates included serial doubling dilutions  
169 (from 1.25 ng/well to 20 ng/well) of a standard sample, which was made by pooling equal quantities of  
170 DNA from five randomly picked individuals. Each plate also included one extra standard sample and a  
171 no-template control where DNA volume was substituted with water. All reactions were carried out in  
172 triplicate. Individuals were randomly distributed in plates so that all families were proportionally  
173 represented on each of the reaction plate. The qPCR thermal cycling protocol for telomere fragment  
174 amplification started with an initial denaturation step at 95°C for 5 min followed by 21 cycle of 95°C  
175 for 30s, 55°C for 15s and 72°C for 30s. Conditions for *zic1* fragment amplification were as follows:



176 95°C for 5min, and 40 cycles of 95°C for 20 s, 59°C for 30s and 72°C for 30s. As the final stage of  
 177 both protocols melt-curves were generated by slowly (0.1°C/s) increasing temperature from 70 to 95°C.  
 178 LinRegPCR software was used to determine amplicon specific window of linearity, Cq (threshold cycle  
 179 when amplification signal crosses the background level) and individual well efficiencies (Ramakers et  
 180 al. 2003). Plates were standardized for the between plate variation using GenEx 6 software (MultiD,  
 181 Göteborg). Coefficients of variation (CV) between replicates of the same sample were calculated in  
 182 percents, and replicates with CV > 5% were excluded (2 out of 660 values [0.3%] for *zic1* reactions,  
 183 and 9 values out of 660 [1.36%] for telomeres). Resulting mean within replicate repeatability calculated  
 184 as intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) and CV were high both for *zic1* (ICC<sub>zic1</sub> = 0.90, CI [0.88-  
 185 0.92], CV<sub>zic1</sub> = 0.71%) and telomere primer reactions (ICC<sub>TL</sub> = 0.87, CI [0.83-0.89], CV<sub>TL</sub> = 1.73%).  
 186 Finally, relative telomere length (RTL) was calculated for 213 samples using delta CT method as:

$$187 \quad RTL = 2^{(C_t^{TL} - C_t^{zic1})_{standard} - (C_t^{TL} - C_t^{zic1})_{focal}} \quad (1)$$

188 where C<sub>t</sub> – critical cycle for TL and reference gene (*zic1*) respectively. To account for potential biases  
 189 caused by measurement error we have also calculated all combinations of RTL using three replicates of  
 190 telomere and *zic1*/Cq values. Intra-individual repeatability of telomere length calculated in this way was  
 191 significant (ICC = 0.68, CI [0.64-0.72]). Mean estimated RTL-value was 1.10 (±0.44 SD, range [0.25-  
 192 3.86]). We have also used a more common approach of calculating mean values of the replicate Cq  
 193 values and thus obtaining only one RTL estimate per individual. Mean estimated RTL-value using this  
 194 approach was 1.16 (±0.46 SD, range [0.47-2.43]). One sample more than three standard deviations  
 195 away from the mean was removed as an outlier.

196

197 *Statistical analyses*

198 Individual growth curve parameters were obtained using the von Bertalanffy growth curve equation  
199 (von Bertalanffy 1938) and fitting the equation with body size measurements at given age ( $l$ ) through  
200 non-linear least-squares regression (2):

$$201 \quad l(t) = L_{\infty} - (L_{\infty} - L_0)e^{-kt} \quad (2)$$

202 yielding three measures portraying individual growth:  $k$  –the intrinsic growth coefficient;  $L_0$  – size at  
203  $t=0$  and  $L_{\infty}$ -asymptotic length (Kuparinen et al. 2011). The von Bertalanffy equation described the data  
204 very well with the mean goodness of fit estimate of 0.99 ( $\pm 0.004$  SD). Since growth coefficient and  
205 asymptotic size were highly correlated ( $r_p = 0.76$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) only asymptotic length ( $L_{\infty}$ ) was included in  
206 further statistical analyses. Age at maturation is not a growth curve parameter while it is still  
207 proportional to asymptotic size ( $r_p = 0.53$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ).

208 In order to test whether telomere length is associated with growth and maturation in a sex specific  
209 manner, we constructed a linear mixed effect (LME) model in which RTL was the response variable,  
210 and the fixed explanatory variables were sex, maturation status (matured or unmatured), asymptotic  
211 size ( $L_{\infty}$ ) and temperature treatment. Initial models included two-way interactions between these main  
212 explanatory variables. We also included hatching size as covariate to control for possible differences in  
213 *in ovo* conditions, which may affect telomere length. Family identity was included as a random factor  
214 and the model was fitted with maximum likelihood. Model selection progressed in a step-wise manner  
215 by performing likelihood ratio test and excluding non-significant terms from the model (Table1).

216 As the second analysis step, we constructed an identical model to the one described above, with the  
217 difference that the binary maturation status was substituted with a continuous age at maturation (Table  
218 2). Since only 109 out of the 261 surviving individuals reached maturity before the end of the  
219 experiment, the sample size in this analysis was substantially lower than in the former. The initial  
220 model was reduced using the backward step-wise elimination procedure as described above. Residuals

221 of the final model adhered to the assumption of normality and variance inflation factors (VIF) were  
222 lower than 2.2 for all variables included in the model (Dormann et al. 2013). In all analyses, telomere  
223 length was log-transformed before analyses to assure normal distribution of residuals.

224

#### 225 *Heritability of telomere length*

226 To estimate broad sense heritability ( $h^2$ ) of telomere length, we used an animal model approach as  
227 implemented in the MCMCglmm package in R (Hadfield 2010). Four MCMCglmm models were run  
228 which differed in random and fixed effect structure. Firstly, a model where only a binary maturation  
229 status was included as a fixed effect was run. Secondly, a model which included variables and  
230 interactions obtained during LME model (final model) selection using a continuous age at maturation  
231 variable was run. These models included either ‘family’ term as a random effect or both ‘family’ and  
232 ‘individual’ random effects. The later random effect structure was used for models where multiple RTL  
233 estimates were calculated and allows to account for measurement error arising due to small variation  
234 between technical replicates. We used an inverse Wishart prior for the variance component estimation.  
235 Models were run for 1 000 000 (models with error term) and 5 000 000 (models without error term)  
236 iterations discarding the first 100 000 runs as burn-in in both cases, and there after sampling every  
237 500th iteration. This allowed to obtain 1800-9800 samples from the posterior distribution. Heritability  
238 was calculated as genetic variance divided by the total variance and credible intervals for heritability  
239 estimates were given as highest posterior density intervals (HPDI).

240 All statistical analyses were performed in R 2.13.0 (R Core Team 2011).

241

242 RESULTS

243 We did not find any main effect of experimental temperature on telomere length (likelihood ratio ( $LR$ )  
244 = 0.045,  $df = 202$ ,  $P = 0.83$ ). Likewise, a linear mixed effect model using maturation status (mature *vs.*  
245 immature) as an explanatory variable did not reveal any significant main or interactions effects on  
246 variation in telomere length (Table 1). Thus, telomere length variation among individuals was not  
247 explained by their maturation status ( $LR = 0.021$ ,  $df = 200$ ,  $P = 0.885$ ), sex ( $LR = 0.208$ ,  $df = 201$ ,  $P =$   
248 0.648), temperature ( $LR = 0.005$ ,  $df = 199$ ,  $P = 0.945$ ) or individual's asymptotic length ( $LR = 1.365$ ,  $df$   
249 = 203,  $P = 0.243$ ; Table 1). Similarly, hatching size did not explain any variation in telomere length  
250 (Table 1).

251 After restricting analysis to individuals which matured and including individual's age at maturation as a  
252 covariate, different results emerged. There was a significant interaction between an individual's sex  
253 and its age at maturation ( $LR = 5.818$ ,  $df = 69$ ,  $P = 0.016$ ; Table 2, Fig. 1) and between age at  
254 maturation and temperature treatment ( $LR = 7.000$ ,  $df = 69$ ,  $P = 0.008$ ; Table 2, Fig. 2). However,  
255 telomere length was not related to  $L_{\infty}$  ( $LR = 0.033$ ,  $df = 67$ ,  $P = 0.855$ ; Table 2) or hatching size ( $LR =$   
256 1.121,  $df = 68$ ,  $P = 0.290$ ; Table 2).

257 For models where a binary maturation status was used as an explanatory variable, broad sense  
258 heritability for telomere length was 0.47 (HPDI: 0.17-0.91) when measurement error was taken into  
259 account and 0.38 (HPDI: 0.12 - 0.90) when a mean of replicates was used to calculate RTL estimates.  
260 Heritability of telomere length was respectively 0.37 (HPDI: 0.09-0.91) and 0.31 (HPDI: 0.05 - 0.97)  
261 when a continuous age at maturation was included as an explanatory variable.

262

263 DISCUSSION

264 The most important finding of this study is the experimental demonstration that individual variation in  
265 telomere length among sexually mature fish is influenced by rearing temperature, sex, as well as by the  
266 age at which individuals matured. The effect of maturation timing on telomere length was modulated  
267 by sex and temperature treatment so that telomere length in females, but not in males, decreased with  
268 increasing age at maturation. Similarly, telomere length decreased with increasing age at maturation for  
269 individuals exposed to the high temperature treatment whereas not for individuals in the low  
270 temperature treatment. However, we did not find any evidence to support the expectation (cf. Geiger et  
271 al. 2012; Lee et al. 2013) that individuals with higher growth rates would have shorter telomeres). Also,  
272 we did not find that temperature treatment would have had an overall effect on telomere length.  
273 Consistent with observed environmental influences on telomere length, we also discovered that  
274 although variation in telomere length was partially influenced by genetic effects ( $h^2 \approx 0.31-47$ ), much  
275 of the variation appears to be of an environmental origin. The relatively low heritability of telomere  
276 length in nine-spined sticklebacks stands in contrast to much higher estimates from some earlier  
277 studies (Horn et al. 2011; Olsson et al. 2011; Voillemot et al. 2012; Broer et al. 2013; Reichert et al.  
278 2015; Asghar et al. 2015; Atema et al. 2015; Becker et al. 2015).

#### 279 *Interactive effects between sex and age at maturation*

280 Our initial expectation that maturation status (cf. matured vs immature) would explain variation in  
281 telomere length was not supported by the data. A follow-up analysis using age at maturation as a  
282 continuous predictor and ignoring immature individuals revealed that age at maturation had a negative  
283 effect on telomere length. However, this effect was different between the two sexes. One possible  
284 explanation for this difference is that costs of maturation are sex-specific. As in many other fish  
285 species, delayed maturation in female nine-spined sticklebacks is related to a higher reproductive  
286 output (Herczeg et al. 2010; Shikano and Merilä 2011). Although we did not analyze reproductive

287 investment in this study, increased reproductive investment is shown to be associated with shorter  
288 telomeres in other fish (Gao and Munch 2015) and in birds (Bauch et al. 2013; Schultner et al.  
289 2013). This may be because reproduction and particularly egg production is energetically costly, and  
290 increases oxidative stress (Wang et al. 2001; Bertrand et al. 2005), which in turn accelerates telomere  
291 shortening (von Zglinicki 2002). Thus, late maturing large females may be investing resources heavily  
292 into egg production and have fewer resources left for self-maintenance such as, for example,  
293 scavenging of reactive oxygen species which results in shorter telomeres. In contrast, since male  
294 maturation (i.e. sperm production) requires substantially less energy than female maturation (Hayward  
295 and Gillooly 2011), males may be left with sufficient resources for self-maintenance to avoid telomere  
296 shortening.

297 Estrogen deficiency can inhibit telomerase activity (Kyo et al. 1999; Bayne et al. 2008), which is  
298 normally active in all fish tissues throughout their life (Hatakeyama et al. 2008; Lund et al. 2009).  
299 Similarly, estrogens may lower oxidative stress (Behl et al. 1997; Aviv 2006; Razmara et al. 2007) and  
300 thereby work against telomere shortening. These considerations lead to prediction that males and late  
301 maturing females should have on average shorter telomeres than early maturing females (Vihko and  
302 Apter 1984; Emaus et al. 2008; Gopalakrishnan et al. 2013). This is what we indeed observed in nine-  
303 spined sticklebacks in this study. Also data from medaka (*Oryzias latipes*) supports this line of  
304 reasoning: estrogen and telomerase activity peak at sexual maturation time in females, which is also  
305 time when the greatest difference in telomere length is observed between sexes (Gopalakrishnan et al.  
306 2013). This provides an alternative, but not mutually exclusive, explanation for the observation that  
307 especially female telomere length is negatively related to age at maturation.

308 *Interactive effects between temperature and maturation*

309 Ectotherm metabolism, growth and to some extent also maturation is modulated by environmental  
310 temperature (Angilletta 2009). In sticklebacks, higher temperatures increase growth and reduce  
311 survival probability (Kuparinen et al. 2011; Lee et al. 2013). Temperature affects both maturation and  
312 growth rate in females, while only growth rate is influenced by temperature in nine-spined stickleback  
313 males (Kuparinen et al. 2011). In light of these findings, we were surprised not to find any direct  
314 association between telomere length and asymptotic length or telomere length and an overall effect of  
315 temperature treatment (Rollings et al. 2014). One possible explanation for the lack of expected  
316 associations is *ad libitum* feeding regime which might have provided fish with enough energy to both  
317 growth and self maintenance thereby masking an expected trade-off. This would also mean that the  
318 lack of an overall temperature effect on telomere length may not be universal across contexts and may  
319 depend on individual's ability to acquire resources. This possibly could translate into a positive  
320 correlation between life-history traits in some individuals (Hamel e al. 2009). However, alternatively  
321 and not exclusively, it may also be that individual differences in life-history strategies (e.g. relative  
322 investment to growth and reproduction) could lead to differences in telomere length which arise at  
323 certain life-history stages. In support for this expectation we observed that association between age at  
324 maturation and telomere length differed between individual in the two temperature treatments (Fig.  
325 2). This indicates that temperature may influence telomere length through maturation rather than growth  
326 rate *per se*. However, much of the temperature effect appeared to be driven by the presence of early  
327 maturing males with long telomeres in the high temperature treatment, suggesting that the temperature  
328 effect is also influenced by sex. However, three-way interaction between sex, temperature and age at  
329 maturation was never significant (results not shown).

330 *Heritability of telomere length*

331 Previous studies in non-model vertebrates have found that heritability of telomere length varies from  
332 3.8 to 99 %, although some of these estimates were not significantly different from zero (Horn et al.  
333 2011; Olsson et al. 2011; Voillemot et al. 2012; Reichert et al. 2015; Asghar et al. 2015; Atema et al.  
334 2015; Becker et al. 2015). The majority of these studies were conducted on wild or captive birds (Horn  
335 et al. 2011; Voillemot et al. 2012; Reichert et al. 2015; Asghar et al. 2015; Atema et al. 2015; Becker et  
336 al. 2015), and only one of them involved an ectotherm, the sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*; Olsson et al.  
337 2011). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the second one to report heritability of telomere  
338 length for an ectothermic vertebrate, and the first one for a fish species. Our estimate ( $h^2 \approx 40\%$ ) is  
339 fairly low, especially in the view that it is a broad-sense, rather than a narrow-sense estimate. Hence,  
340 the true heritability is likely to be even lower than those estimated. This is because our estimate(s) may  
341 include common environment and non-additive genetic contributions. Yet, the low heritability suggests  
342 that environmental, rather than genetic, sources of variation are likely to explain most of the variance in  
343 telomere length in fish.

344 It is tempting to speculate that the relatively low heritability of telomere length reported in this study –  
345 in contrast to those of several other studies of natural vertebrate populations (Table 3) – might be  
346 related to the fact that most other studies have been conducted in endothermic, rather than in  
347 ectothermic (but see: Olsson et al., 2011) vertebrates. However, methods used for telomere length and  
348 heritability estimation should be also considered (Becker et al. 2015). Many earlier estimates telomere  
349 length heritability were obtained with parent-offspring regression, which assumes that the same trait is  
350 measured at both generations (Lynch & Walsh 1998). However, telomere length does not always  
351 exhibit a linear relationship with age (Hatakeyama et al. 2016). Therefore measurements on parents and  
352 offspring might not be comparable, leading to biased heritability estimates. Similarly, full-sib estimates  
353 of heritability can be problematic since they do not control for common environment or non-additive



354 genetic effects, and hence may provide upward biased estimate of heritability. However, upward-bias  
355 cannot explain the low heritability of telomere length found in this study: if our estimates were upward-  
356 biased, this would mean that the actual heritability of telomere length would be even lower than now  
357 estimated. With the accumulating information on estimates for heritability of telomere length across the  
358 taxa a meta-analysis would be especially rewarding and would allow to see what factors may be behind  
359 the observed discrepancies in telomere length heritability estimates. We also note that accounting for  
360 measurement error in telomere length estimates lead to change in heritability estimates, suggesting that  
361 part of the variation in heritability estimates across the studies might be explainable by differences how  
362 accurately the length of telomere lengths were estimated.

### 363 *Limitations of the study*

364 We utilized qPCR to estimate relative telomere length using the brain tissue. While qPCR has been  
365 successfully used in a large number of studies (Voillemot et al. 2012; Heidinger et al. 2012; Becker et  
366 al. 2015) and have undeniable advantages over telomere restriction fragment analysis, namely it is  
367 high-throughput (Nussey et al. 2014), concerns have been raised about possible biases caused by  
368 presence of interstitial telomeric repeats (Foote et al. 2013). This problem should not be an issue in this  
369 study because nine-spine sticklebacks are unlikely to have telomeric repeats positioned inside  
370 chromosomes (Ocalewicz et al. 2011). Further, qPCR approach may have relatively high measurement  
371 error if not optimized properly. Even a well-optimized assay yielding low CV's and high repeatability  
372 between technical replicates may lead to considerable measurement error. In this study we have taken  
373 this possibility into account by using two approaches to treat technical replicates and calculate  
374 heritability of telomere length. By using the two approaches we have obtained moderately low  
375 estimates of telomere heritability.

376 Another potential concern is that we have analyzed telomere length in brain tissue. Cell turn-over in  
377 neural tissue is usually lower than that in blood or liver, and since cell turn-over rate is related to  
378 telomere length (Sekoguchi et al. 2007), this might have influenced the inference. If the neural tissue  
379 we used had ceased its growth before sampling, then telomere lengths measured from such tissues  
380 could reflect some innate differences between individuals. If so, this could indicate that late maturing  
381 females and late maturing individuals in high temperature treatment had shorter telomeres because they  
382 were of a lower quality, and not because the maturation or treatment had causal influence on telomere  
383 length. This is not unthinkable because telomere length is indeed used as an indicator for individuals'  
384 phenotypic quality and is related to early life-conditions (Aviv 2006; Heidinger et al. 2012; Bauch et al.  
385 2013). Nonetheless, the use of brain tissue is unlikely to be problem in our study for several reasons.  
386 First, telomere length and rate of telomere loss have been found to correlate significantly between  
387 different tissue types (Hatakeyama et al. 2008; Daniali et al. 2013; Gao and Munch 2015). Second, in  
388 contrast to vertebrates with determinate growth (Hastings et al. 2001), growth and neurogenesis in fish  
389 continues throughout their lives (Ganz and Brand 2016). Thus, the brain is capable for plastic responses  
390 to environmental influences even in adulthood (Park et al. 2012; Herczeg et al. 2015). In line with this  
391 finding, telomerase is active throughout a fish life in all tissues including brain potentially facilitating  
392 neural cell proliferation longer than it would be expected for mammals (Klapper et al. 1998;  
393 Hatakeyama et al. 2008). Lastly, we included hatching size in the models in order to control for  
394 possible initial quality related differences between individuals. While hatching size was positively  
395 correlated with size at maturation ( $p=0.01$ ), it did not explain any variation in telomere length. Further  
396 risk of initial quality differences were decreased due to random assignment of subjects across the  
397 treatments.

398 In conclusion, the results show that variation in telomere length in nine-spined sticklebacks is  
399 influenced both by genetic and environmental factors, and that the latter is a greater source for the  
400 observed variability. While sex, age at maturation and temperature treatment all explained significant  
401 amount of variation in telomere length, their influence emerged due to interactive, rather than simple  
402 isolated effects of each factor. In particular, the results indicate that timing of maturation and factors  
403 influencing it may be connected to intra-specific variation in fish telomere length.

404

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612

613 Table 1. Linear mixed effect (LME) model selection for variables explaining variation in relative  
 614 telomere length where a binary maturation status variable was included in the model.

<b>Explanatory variable<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Parameter estimate ±SE</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b>Likelihood ratio (<i>P</i>)<sup>b</sup></b>
Intercept	0.061 ± 0.064	204	
$L_{\infty}$	0.004 ± 0.004	203	1.365 (0.243)
Hatching size	0.070 ± 0.128	202	0.299 (0.585)
Sex (male)	-0.022 ± 0.049	201	0.208 (0.648)
Maturation status (M; 1)	-0.008 ± 0.058	200	0.021 (0.885)
Temperature (T; 17°C)	0.003 ± 0.047	199	0.005 (0.945)
$M \times L_{\infty}$	-0.006 ± 0.007	198	0.603 (0.437)
Sex × M	-0.112 ± 0.110	197	1.057 (0.304)
$L_{\infty} \times T$	0.006 ± 0.007	196	0.782 (0.377)
Sex × T	0.059 ± 0.098	195	0.374 (0.541)
Sex × $L_{\infty}$	-0.002 ± 0.009	194	0.082 (0.774)
$M \times T$	0.009 ± 0.101	193	0.009 (0.925)

615 Abbreviations:  $L_{\infty}$ -asymptotic length, SE-standard error, *df*- degrees of freedom.

616 <sup>a</sup> Sex = female, TEMP=14°C, MAT = 0 (immature) are included in the intercept and considered as references

617 <sup>b</sup>Likelihood ratio tests were conducted and p-values obtained by comparing models with and without the term

618

619

620 **Table 2** Final model (in **bold**) and linear mixed effect (LME) model selection for variables explaining  
 621 relative telomere length. A continuous age at maturation variable was included in the model.

Explanatory variable <sup>a</sup>	Parameter estimate ±SE	df	Likelihood ratio (P) <sup>b</sup>
<b>Intercept</b>	<b>0.795 ±0.666</b>	<b>69</b>	
<b>Sex (male)</b>	<b>-1.743 ±0.667</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>9.328 (0.009)</b>
<b>Age at maturation (AM)</b>	<b>-0.006 ±0.006</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>11.950 (0.008)</b>
<b>Temperature treatment (T; 17°C)</b>	<b>1.360 ±0.557</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>7.819 (0.020)</b>
<b>Sex × AM</b>	<b>0.015 ±0.006</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>5.818 (0.016)</b>
<b>AM × T</b>	<b>-0.014 ±0.005</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>7.000 (0.008)</b>
Hatching size	0.215 ±0.212	68	1.121 (0.290)
L <sub>∞</sub>	-0.001 ±0.007	67	0.0334 (0.855)
AM × L <sub>∞</sub>	0.001 ±0.000	66	2.0416 (0.153)
Sex × L <sub>∞</sub>	0.027 ±0.019	65	2.483 (0.115)
L <sub>∞</sub> × T	0.006 ±0.012	64	0.241 (0.624)
Sex × T	-0.072 ±0.233	63	0.111 (0.740)

622

623 Abbreviations: L<sub>∞</sub>-, asymptotic length, SE-standard error, df-degrees of freedom

624 <sup>a</sup> Sex =female and TEMP=14°C are included in the intercept and considered as a references

625 <sup>b</sup>Likelihood ratio tests were conducted and p-values obtained by comparing models with and without the given  
 626 term

627

628

629 **Table 3** Synopsis of the published heritability estimates of telomere length from non-model organisms

Taxon	Species	$h^2$ (SE/CI)	Method for $h^2$ estimation	Telomere measure (method)	$n_{\text{families}}$	$n_{\text{individuals}}$	Reference
<b>Teleostei</b>	Nine-spined stickleback ( <i>Pungitius pungitius</i> )	0.47 (0.17- 0.91) 0.37 (0.09- 0.91) 0.38 (0.12 - 0.90) 0.31 (0.05 - 0.97)	FS (Anim)	RTL (qPCR)	9	83; 213	current study
<b>Reptilia</b>	Sand lizard ( <i>Lacerta agilis</i> )	0.52; 1.23	PO	Average TL (TRF)	40 (daughter- dam) 80 (son- sire)	80♀ 110♂	(Olsson et al. 2011)
<b>Aves</b>	Kakapo ( <i>Strigopshabroptilus</i> )	0.84	PO	Average TL (TRF)	29	29 offspring 29 mothers	(Horn et al. 2011)
	Collared flycatcher ( <i>Ficedula albicollis</i> )	0.09; 0.18*	FS	RTL (qPCR)	74	359	(Voillemot et al. 2012)
	White-throated dippers ( <i>Cinclus cinclus</i> )	0.038 (0.069)	Anim	RTL (qPCR)	NA	177	(Becker et al. 2015)
	Great reed warbler ( <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i> )	0.35 (0.07); 0.48 (0.12)	Anim	RTL (qPCR)	46	193	(Asghar et al. 2015)
	King penguin ( <i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i> )	0.2 (0.1); 0.3 (0.1)	PO	RTL (qPCR)	53	53 offspring 106 parents	(Reichert et al. 2015)
	Zebra finch ( <i>Taeniopygia guttata</i> )	0.99 (0.87- 1)	Anim	Average TL (TRF)	73	125	(Atema et al. 2015)

630 \*- value reported to be different from originally published in the paper (Becker et al. 2015)



631 Anim = animal model, FS = full-sib analysis; PO = parent offspring regression; TRF = telomere  
632 restriction fragment analysis; qPCR = quantitative PCR analysis; RTL = relative telomere length; TL =  
633 telomere length; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

634

635 **Figure legends**

636 **Fig. 1** Relative telomere length (RTL) as a function of age at maturation in male and female nine-  
637 spined sticklebacks. RTL decreases with postponed maturation in female sticklebacks (f, open circles,  
638 dashed line), while males show little response in RTL with maturation schedule (m, black dots, solid  
639 line)

640

641 **Fig. 2** Relative telomere length (RTL) as a function of age at maturation in high (17°C, open circles,  
642 dashed line) and low (14°C, black dots, solid line) temperature treatments in nine-spined sticklebacks

643

644 **Fig. 3** Mean and variation in residual relative telomere length (RTL) between nine-spined stickleback  
645 families (F4 to F12) included into the study. In the box plot, 25 to 75 percentiles of the data are  
646 enclosed by the box and a median is marked with a horizontal line. Whiskers show range of the data

647

Fig. 1

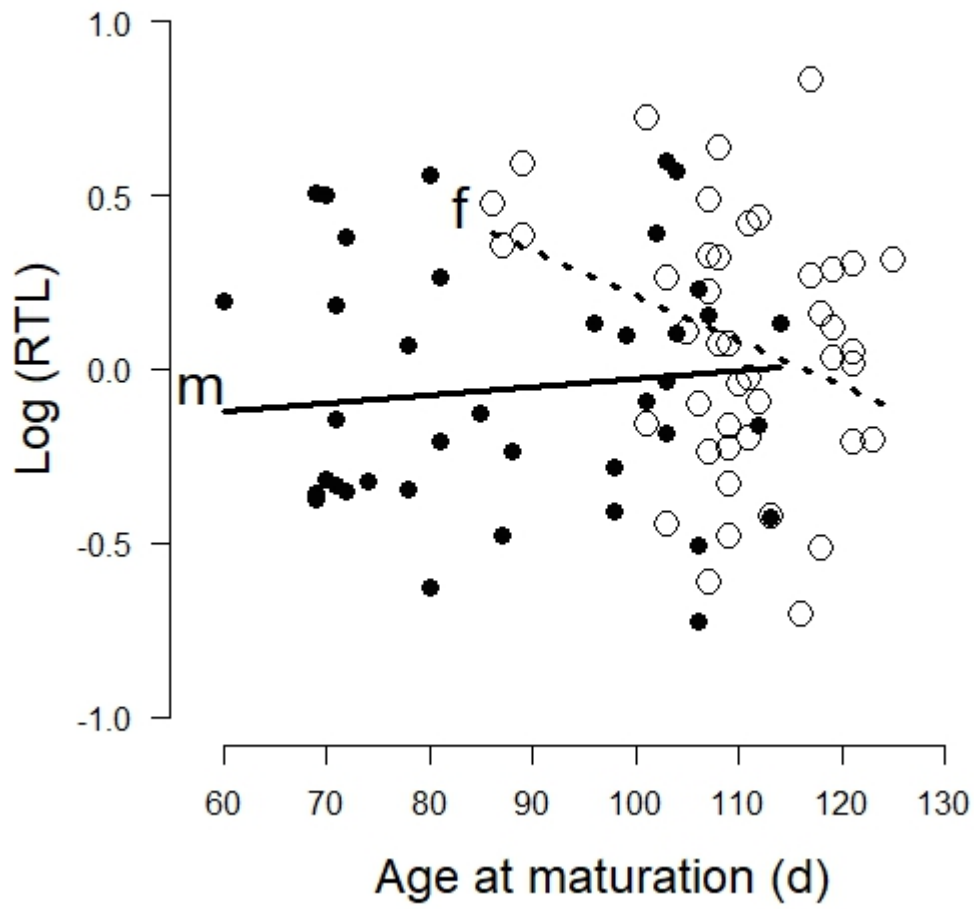


Fig. 2

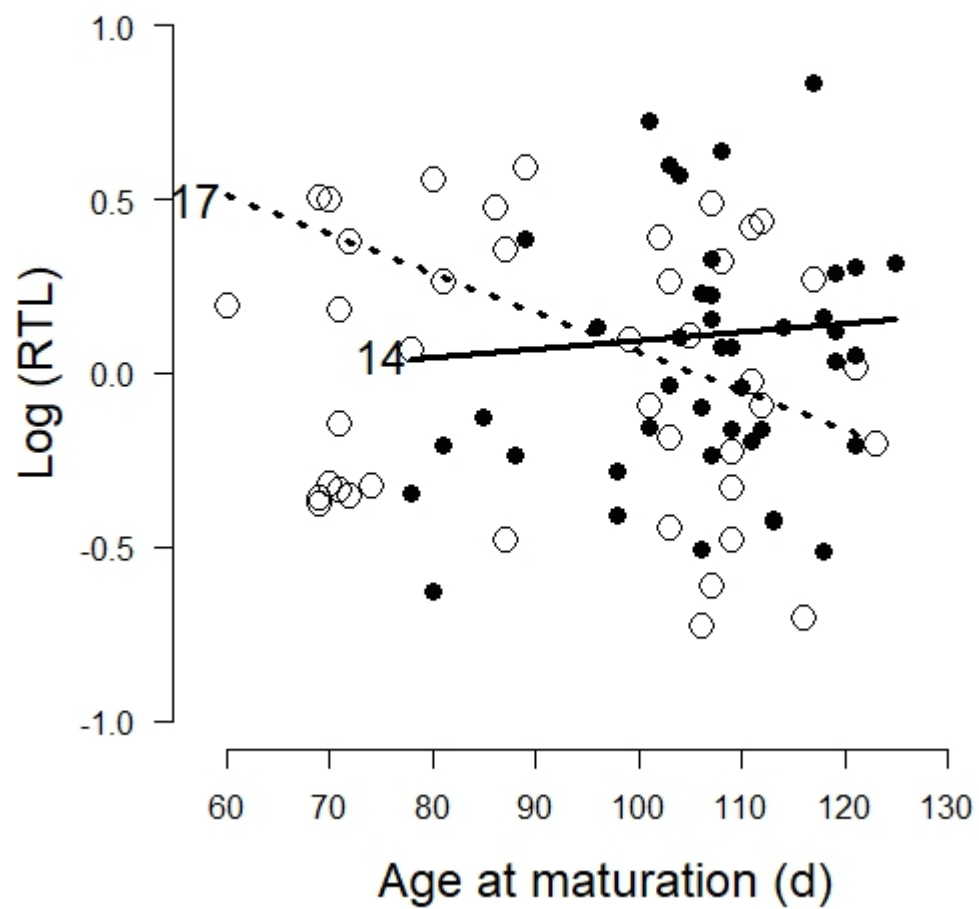


Fig. 3

