

STRUCTURAL–FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BIOPOLYMERS AND THEIR COMPLEXES

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Role of the Structural Context in Selection of Hydrophobic Side-Chain Rotamers in a- and d-Positions of α -Helices

E. V. Brazhnikov and A. V. Efimov

*Institute of Protein Research, Russian Academy of Sciences, Pushchino, Moscow region, 142290 Russia;
e-mail: efimov@protres.ru*

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Abstract—It was demonstrated for the first time that the distribution of side-chain rotamers in the a- and d-positions of α -helices of coiled-coil (cc) proteins follows a certain trend, rather than being random. For instance, most side chains adopt t rotamers in the a-positions and g^- rotamers in the d-positions of helical dimers. Vice versa, most side chains adopt g^- rotamers in the a-positions and t rotamers in the d-positions of tetramers. It was concluded that selection of the side-chain rotamers depends on the packing of α -helices and, consequently, depends on the structural context.

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INTRODUCTION

As the number of resolved protein structures is increasing in the Protein Data Bank (PDB), an increasing number of works focus on side-chain rotamers in proteins. Most works are aimed at identification of various side-chain rotamers, their classification, statistical analysis of their frequencies in proteins, and construction of rotamer databases and libraries (e.g., [1–5]). Significant differences in side-chain rotamer frequencies have been observed as dependent on the local conformation of the main chain [1–7] and the membrane environment (for membrane proteins) [8]. These studies have shown that, in proteins, side chains adopt one of the three sterically possible rotamers, which are designated as g^- ($\chi_1 = -60^\circ$), g^+ ($\chi_1 = +60^\circ$), and t ($\chi_1 = 180^\circ$). In α -helical regions, the main chain imposes additional limitations on the conformational freedom of side chains, and C_β -branched side chains contained in α -helices have only one allowable conformer (Val, t; Ile and Trh, g^-), while side chains nonbranched at C_β can have either g^- or t rotamers.

However, the other factors affecting the selection of side-chain conformations in proteins are still poorly understood. We have earlier shown that a close packing of hydrophobic side chains on the surfaces of α -helices is reached owing to certain combinations of rotamers [9, 10]. The conformation of polar side chains can be selected depending on their structural environment. When a polar side chain has a partner to

form a hydrogen or salt bond, one (e.g., t) conformation is selected; otherwise, the side chain adopts another conformation so that its polar moiety is accessible for water molecules [10]. In this work, we considered the role of the structural context in selection of the conformation of hydrophobic side chains with the example of α -helical leucine-zipper proteins. As a result, we observed new features of the distribution of g^- and t rotamers of side chains in hydrophobic cores of α -helical structures and revealed a dependence of the side-chain conformation on the mode of α -helix packing.

EXPERIMENTAL

Our main subject was a class of coiled-coil (cc) proteins, also known as leucine zippers. Such proteins consist of long α -helices, which are packed in a parallel or antiparallel manner to form dimers, trimers, tetramers, or, rarely, pentamers. These can be homo- or heterooligomers. In most known cc proteins, α -helices are packed with angle $\Omega \approx 20^\circ$. In the ideal case, this angle between axes is characteristic of α -helices whose amino acid sequences have heptad repeats (abcdefg)_n with a- and d-positions occupied usually by hydrophobic residues (for a review, see [11, 12]).

Such proteins are best suited for our purpose for several causes. First, many cc proteins and their model analogs have Leu in the a- and d-positions. Such an almost homogeneous set of side chains makes the

packing of α -helices nearly ideal, in contrast to heterogeneous sets, especially those with side chains dramatically differing in size. To study the selection of side-chain rotamers, our sample included only the cc proteins having the a- and d-positions occupied mainly by Leu, Phe, and Tyr residues (their side chains are most similar in size and can have two rotamers), but not proteins containing mostly Val and Ile in the a- and d-positions (see Tables 1–5). In addition, our database included homologous proteins and their model analogs that can be switched, e.g., from dimers to trimers or tetramers as a result of point mutations. This is of special importance for studying the effect of the structural context on the selection of side-chain conformations, because the same or a very close set of side chains occurs in different structural environments in such cases. Another advantage of cc proteins is that their α -helices are rather long (mostly, of 20 or more residues), which substantially reduces the marginal effects. Necessary structural information was taken from PDB (<http://www.rcsb.org/pdb/>). Torsion angle χ_1 was computed using the MOLMOL program [13].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The packing of α -helices against each other in proteins follows two main patterns, face-to-face and side-by-side, which differ in the arrangement of hydrophobic surfaces (or clusters) [9, 10, 12]. In the case of face-to-face packing, hydrophobic clusters are between the backbones of α -helices in the contact region and form a bilayer of hydrophobic side chains. Such a packing is observed in all dimeric cc proteins with a parallel or antiparallel arrangement of α -helices and in long isolated α -helical hairpins of globular proteins (Tables 1, 2). In the case of side-by-side packing, hydrophobic clusters are combined to form a single layer of hydrophobic side chains on the surface of the double-helical structure. Such α -helix packing is observed in tetramers and pentamers of cc proteins (Tables 4, 5) and in four-helix bundles of globular proteins. In trimeric cc proteins, the packing of α -helices is most similar to side-by-side packing but shows some features of face-to-face packing (Table 3). Thus, depending on the α -helix packing, hydrophobic side chains are arranged differently relative to each other and to the backbones of the α -helices and, consequently, occur in different structural environments, which substantially affects their conformation.

Table 1 summarizes the angles χ_1 computed for all residues occupying the a- and d-positions of cc dimers whose α -helices are packed face-to-face and are parallel. Analysis of these data revealed an important feature in the distribution of rotamers of the hydrophobic side chains that are sterically allowed to adopt two conformations (Leu, Phe, Tyr, etc.). Most of the chains occur as t rotamers in the a-positions and as g^- rotamers in the d-positions. To illustrate, Fig. 1 shows

a circular diagram of the χ_1 distribution for Leu residues occurring in the a- and d-positions of cc dimers with parallel α -helices.

Angles χ_1 computed for residues occupying the a- and d-positions in α - α -hairpins and antiparallel dimers are summarized in Table 2; their distribution is shown in Fig. 2. Although less distinct, the feature observed in this case was the same as in dimers with parallel α -helices. The side-chain conformation will be considered a t rotamer when χ_1 ranges from -150° to $+150^\circ$ and a g^- rotamer when χ_1 ranges from -50° to -100° . These criteria are more stringent than, for example, in [7], where $\chi_1 = 180 \pm 60^\circ$ suggested t rotamers and $\chi_1 = 0$ to -120° , g^- rotamers. A simple calculation shows that 64% of the side chains of Leu, Phe, and Tyr occupying the a-positions in antiparallel dimers and hairpins adopt t rotamers; 19% adopt g^- rotamers, and 17% have sterically prohibited conformations (Fig. 2). For a comparison, 75% of Leu residues in the a-positions of dimers with parallel α -helices adopt t rotamers, 21% adopt g^- rotamers, and 4% have sterically prohibited conformations (Fig. 1). In the d-positions of hairpins and antiparallel dimers, 76% of Leu, Phe, and Tyr side chains adopt g^- rotamers, 12% adopt t rotamers, and 12% have sterically prohibited conformations (Fig. 2). In parallel dimers, virtually all Leu residues in the d-positions adopt g^- rotamers (Fig. 1). We think that the distribution (Fig. 2) displayed a greater number of deviations from the general trend as compared to that in Fig. 1 because the side-chain composition of antiparallel dimers and hairpins was more heterogeneous.

The distribution of side-chain rotamers in trimeric proteins substantially differed from that in dimers. As evident from Table 3 and Fig. 3, most (75%) of the a-position side chains of trimers adopt g^- rotamers, rather than t rotamers, as in dimers. As for the d-positions, the situation with trimers was similar to that with dimers: 63% of the residues adopt g^- rotamers, 25% adopt t rotamers, and 12% have sterically prohibited conformations. A similar distribution was observed for tetramers-1 (the a- and d-positions of tetramers-1 are occupied mostly by Leu, while the composition of tetramers-2 is heterogeneous): 82% of Leu residues in the A-positions adopt g^- rotamers, t rotamers are absent, and 18% of residues have sterically prohibited conformations (Table 4, Fig. 4). Of the five residues found in the d-positions of tetramers-1, three adopt g^- rotamers and two adopt t rotamers.

The rotamer distribution in tetramers-2 is opposite to that in dimers: most side chains in the a-positions adopt g^- rotamers, while side chains in the d-positions mostly adopt t rotamers (Table 5, Fig. 5). According to our estimates, 83% of the Leu, Phe, and Tyr residues in the a-positions of tetramers-2 adopt g^- rotamers, 8% adopt t rotamers, and 9% have sterically prohibited conformations. In the d-positions of tetramers-2,

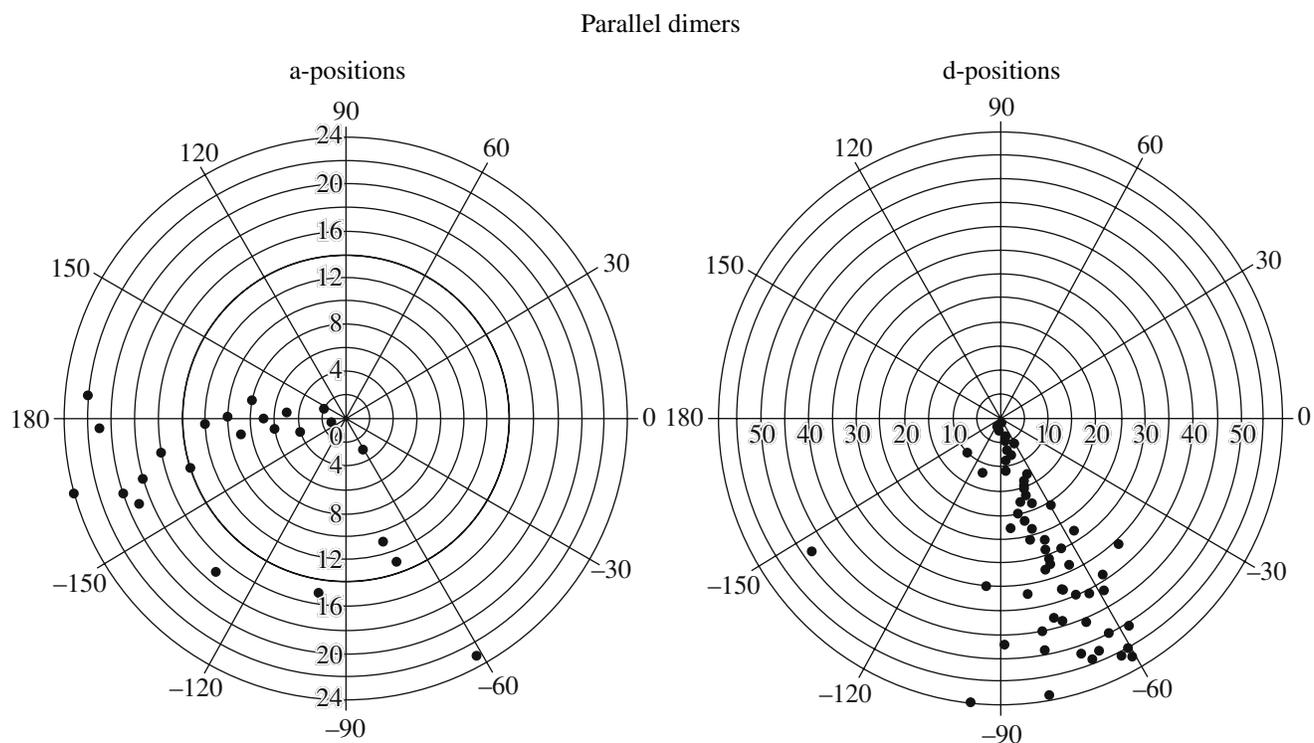


Fig. 1. Torsion angle χ_1 distribution of Leu residues occupying the a- and d-positions in parallel cc dimers (based on Table 1). Here and in Figs. 2–5, distributions are shown as circular diagrams. The upper half-circles correspond to positive (χ_1 ranging from 0 to 180°) angles and the lower ones, to negative (χ_1 ranging from 0 to -180°) angles.

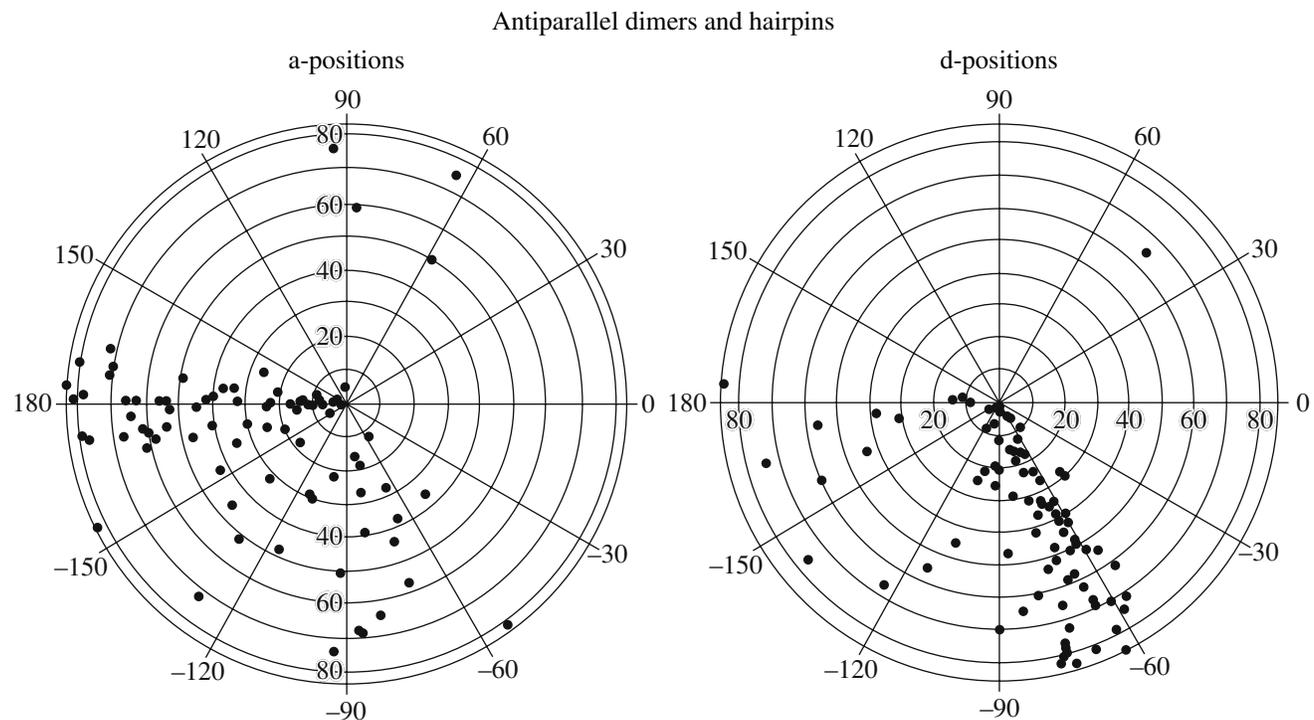


Fig. 2. Torsion angle χ_1 distribution of Leu, Phe, and Tyr residues occupying the a- and d-positions in antiparallel cc dimers and α -helical hairpins (based on Table 2).

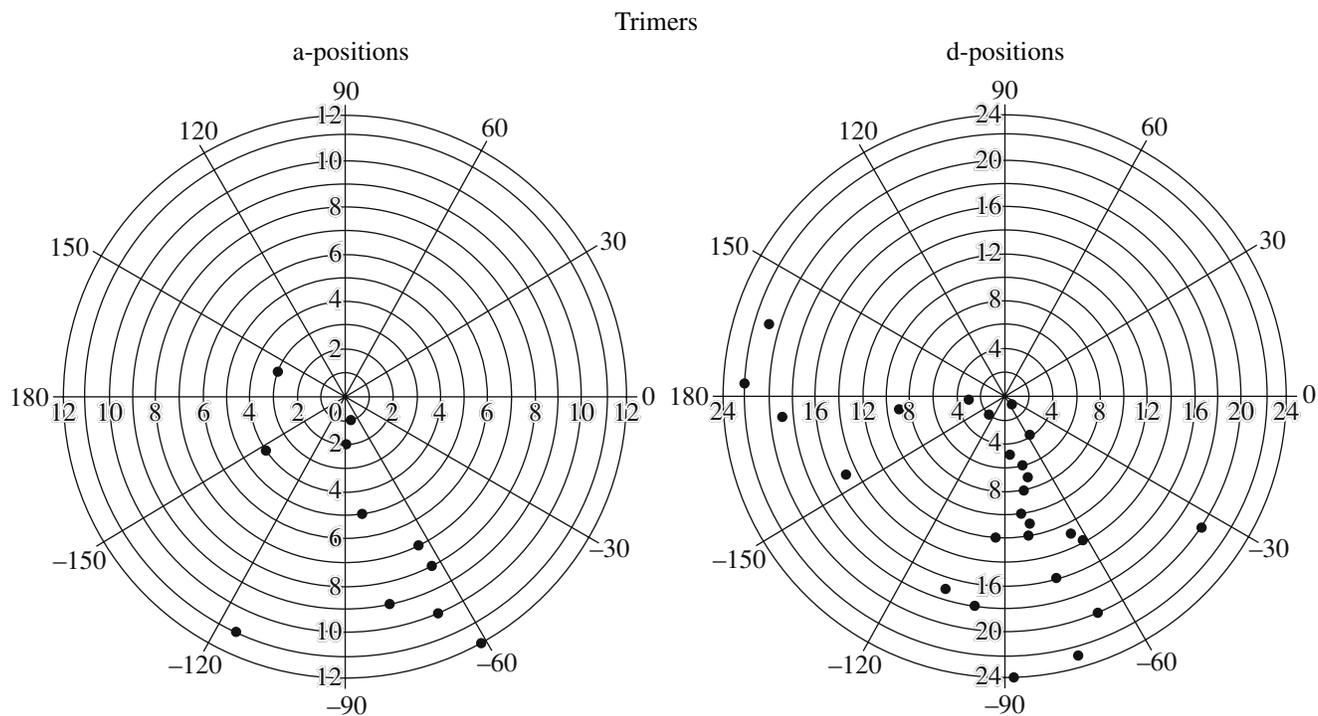


Fig. 3. Torsion angle χ_1 distribution of Leu, Phe, and Tyr residues occupying the a- and d-positions in trimers (based on Table 3).

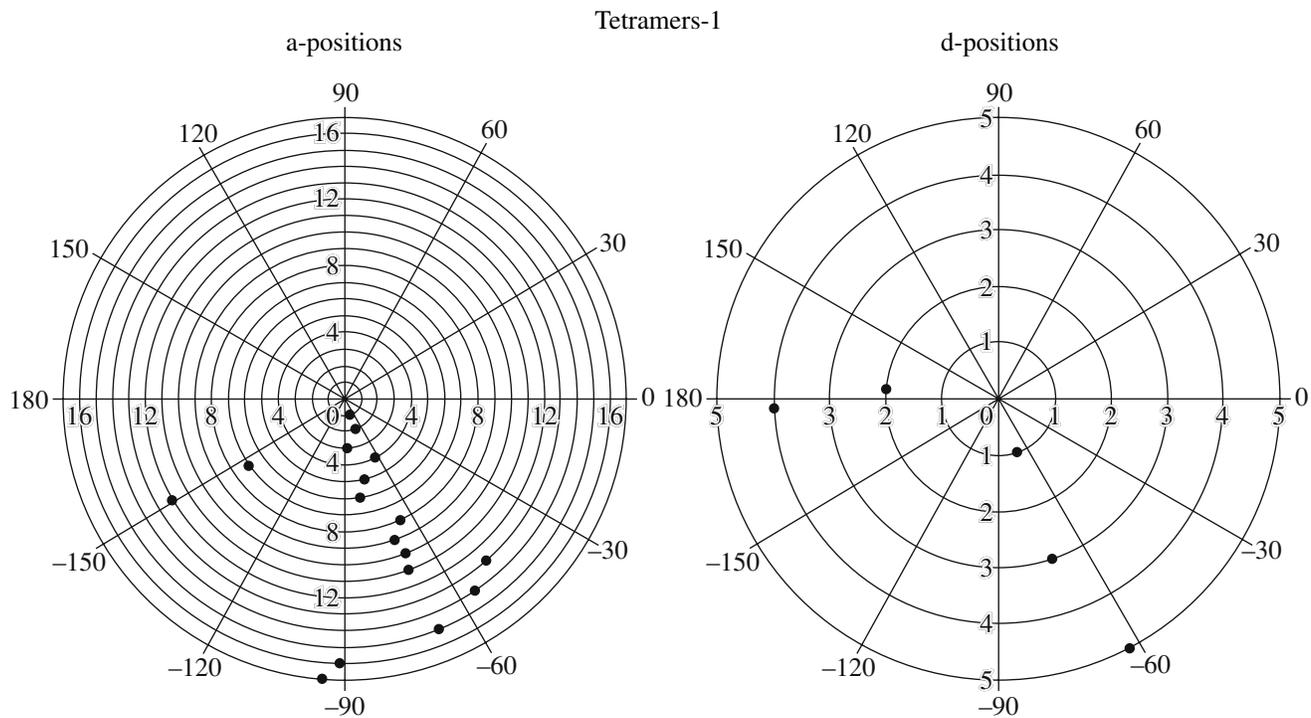


Fig. 4. Torsion angle χ_1 distribution of Leu residues occupying the a- and d-positions in tetramers-1 (based on Table 4).

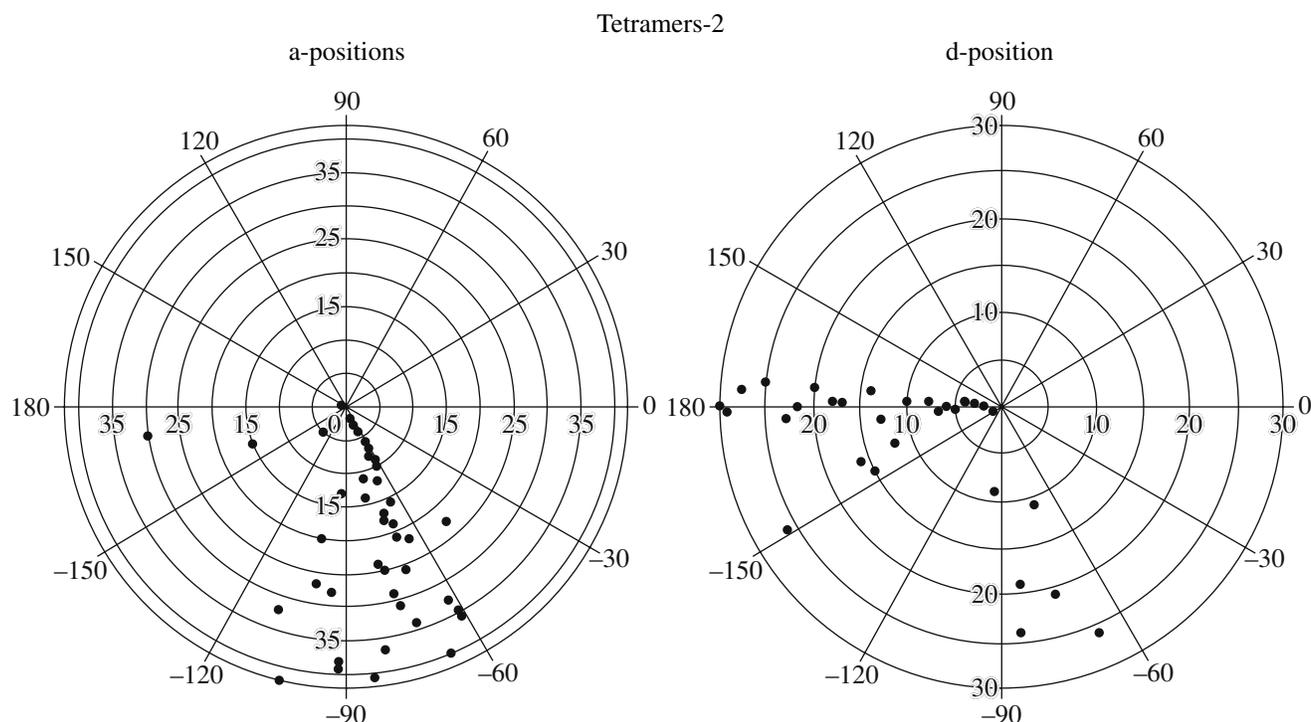


Fig. 5. Torsion angle χ_1 distribution of Leu, Phe, and Tyr residues occupying the a- and d-positions in tetramers-2 (based on Table 5).

80% of residues adopt t rotamers and 20% adopt g^- rotamers.

Thus, a trend is distinct: the conformation of side chains changes from t to g^- rotamers in the a-positions and from g^- to t rotamers in the d-positions upon the transition from dimers to trimers and tetramers; i.e., as the α -helix packing changes from face-to-face to side-by-side. In the intermediate cases of trimers and tetramers-1, especially with a homogeneous set of side chains, g^- rotamers are prevalent in both a- and d-positions. In other words, the selection of side-chain rotamers in the a- and d-positions depends on the α -helix packing and, consequently, on the structural context.

The trend observed can be explained by a simple squeezing mechanism; i.e., the side chains are squeezed out of the helix-helix interface. A possible scenario is considered below with the example of dimers. Assume that dimers initially have g^- rotamers of side chains in the a-positions and t rotamers in the d-positions. In this case, a major part of each side chain in these positions occur in the space between the backbones of α -helices. As the a-position side chains adopt t rotamers and the d-position side chains adopt g^- rotamers (as observed), the centers of mass of the side chains are displaced from the helix-helix interface outwards, and the tendency to a closer packing reduces the distance between the axes of the α -helices. Thus, the interactions between helices and the tendency to a closer packing bring the axes of the α -

helices close together and displace the side chains from the between-helix space. This mechanism will be detailed elsewhere.

The trends observed in the rotamer distribution in dimers, trimers, and tetramers of cc proteins are of importance. Advantage of them can be taken in modeling protein structures and designing new structures in protein engineering. It should be noted that the side-chain rotamers can be predicted not only for Leu, Phe, and Tyr, but also for β -branched Val and Ile, because these residues each have a single sterically allowable rotamer in the vast majority of cases (as can be seen from Tables 1–5).

The observed deviations from the above trends can be explained by the effects of the following factors. Analysis showed that such deviation occur mostly at the ends of helices; i.e., marginal effects do take place. This is possibly because α -helices are diverged from each other at the ends of some oligomers and no longer affect each other. The heterogeneity of the sets of a- and d-position side chains can further contribute to the deviations. For instance, the trends are more distinct in parallel dimers, which have almost homogeneous sets of Leu residues (Fig. 1), than in antiparallel dimers, whose sets of side chains are heterogeneous (Fig. 2).

To conclude, it should be noted that similar trends in the distributions of side-chain rotamers were observed for four-helix bundles (our preliminary data)

Table 2. Angle χ_1 for residues in the **a**- and **d**-positions in dimers of cc proteins and α -helical hairpins with an antiparallel and face-to-face α -helix packing

No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d
1	1A32(1)		P24	I28	L31	I35	L38	L42	L38	L42	L38	L42	L38	L42	L38
			-	-65	-88	-67	-171	-92	-171	-92	-171	-92	-171	-92	-171
2	1A32(2)		S51	L55	M58	R62	L65	L69	L65	L69	L65	L69	L65	L69	L65
			-57	177	-73	-170	-74	-129	-74	-129	-74	-129	-74	-129	-74
3	1A36(1)	M644	L647	I651	K654	L658	A661	L665	A661	L665	A668	L665	A672	L665	A668
		-	-74	-67	-35	173	-	-178	-	-178	-	-178	-	-178	-
4	1A36(2)		T680	V684	K687	V691	L694	L698	L694	L698	L701	L698	A705	L698	R708
		E91	-56	179	-76	172	-68	179	-68	179	-71	-60	-	-60	-
4	1AQT(1)		A94	K98	A101	I105									
		-173	-	-173	-	-70									
4	1AQT(2)	Y114	A117	L121	A124	L128	I131								
		171	-	-173	-	-66	-73								
5	1CXZ(1)		A28	Q32	L35	R39	L42	I46	L42	I46	E49	R60	A56	T63	G67
			-	-78	-64	-76	-68	-70	-68	-70	-153	-167	-	-60	-
5	1CXZ(2)		V73	L77	S80	L84	L87	L91	L87	L91	L94				
			-152	-81	-175	-82	-62	-173	-62	-173	-60				
6	1DG3(1)		R539	L543	Q546	L550	K553	Q557	K553	Q557	L560				
			-175	-180	-80	177	-74	-168	-74	-168	-74				
6	1DG3(2)	S569	M572	I576	L579	M583									
		180	-77	-65	177	-70									
7	1E79(1)	L105	A108	L112	A115	L119									
		-149	-	-141	-	-171									
7	1E79(2)	R128	I131	I135	N138	V142	L145								
		-72	-41	-66	-75	-176	-65								
8	1FXK(A1)	V7	Q10	F14	L17	A21	I24	K28	I24	K28	V31	L42	T38	L45	L45
		-170	-95	179	-79	-	-78	-166	-78	-166	78	-86	-61	-90	-90
8	1FXK(A2)		K67	T71	L74	L78	L81	E85	L81	E85	I88	L99	V95	M102	M102
			165	-61	-74	178	-72	174	-72	174	-69	-82	170	-	-
8	1FXK(A3)	L7	I10	L14	Y17	V21	I24	M28	I24	M28	V31	E42	L38	L45	L45
		-176	-55	-77	-75	168	-65	-73	-65	-73	179	-79	-79	-61	-68
8	1FXK(A4)	M94	I97	K101	L104	L108	M111	L115	M111	L115	I118	A129	L125	L132	V136
		-66	-67	-64	-67	-153	-69	179	-69	179	-62	-	-55	-57	66
9	1GRJ(1)	A11	L14	L18	L21	R26	I29	I33	I29	I33	A36				
		-	-122	-158	-57	176	-72	-51	-72	-51	-				
9	1GRJ(2)	Y48	A51	Q55	C58	I62	I65	L69	I65	L69	-				
		179	-	-146	-68	-68	-64	-71	-64	-71	-				

Table 2. (Contd.)

No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d
10	IIDS(1)		G22	E26	H29	H33	Y36	A40	A43	L47	A50				
	IIDS(2)		N62	L66	N69	H73	H76	W80	L83	-81	-				
11	IQOJ(1)	P629	L632	I636	L639	178	-72	-57	-57						
	IQOJ(2)	A655	I658	L662	L665	F669	A672								
12	IQSD(1)	L6	K9	L13	L16	E20	Y23	L27	Q30	V34	L37				
	IQSD(2)	L48	Q51	L55	T58	L62	L65	I69	F72	L76	F79				
13	ISRY(1)	L30	L33	V37	L40	L44	V47	R51	V54	-177	176				
	ISRY(2)	-178	L69	G73	L76	A80	L83	L87	K90	L94	L97				
14	ICII(1)		L232	Q236	L239	Q243	N246	I250	A253	L257	V260			L278	Q281
	ICII(2)		A383	I387	A390	V394	A397	L401	R404	Q408	A411			178	-59
	ICII(3)	R67	I70	D74	I77	K81	L84	Q88	N91	R95	A98			L116	L119
	ICII(4)	-67	Q132	L136	A139	E143	F146	I150	Y153	R157	T160			D112	-141
15	IL8D(1)	L399	L402	K406	I409	R413	I416	I420	L423	I427	L430			-76	
	IL8D(2)	D453	R456	L460	Y463	L467	S470	L474	L477	K481	L484			L498	
16	IFPO(1)	T17	L20	F24	L27	Y31	-58	-173	-112	-178	-73			-59	
	IFPO(2)	Q44	A47	S51	I54	W58	L61	W58	L61	-64	-64				

Table 2. (Contd.)

No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	
17	1A92(A)	R13	I16	W20	G23	L27	L30	L34	L37	I41	L44									
		-74	-63	-173	-	-168	-75	-168	-173	-64	-123									
18	1GMJ(A)	I53	H56	I60	L63	I67	H70	I74	L77	E81										
		-75	-74	-74	-65	-70	-73	-71	-67	-161										
19	1Q05(A)	K81	T84	V88	I91	I95	L98	R102	L105	A109	C112									
		-174	-54	165	-62	-68	-61	-170	-69	-	171									
20	1YF2(A)		I174	L178	I181	I185	I188	I192	L195	K199	L202									
			-65	-65	-56	-66	-68	-71	-157	168	-65									
21	2C2A(A)	L285	L288	L292	I295	S299	L302	L306	L309											
		-56	-115	-112	-71	-76	-160	179	174											
22	2AYU(A)	V92	K95	L99	L102	L106	V109	F113	E116	L120	K123									
		174	-55	-110	-107	-115	-166	173	-69	-172	172									
23	1ZHC(A)	F19	I22	H26	L29	I33	A36	N40												
		95	-49	177	-137	46	-159	-90												
		V46	M49	K53	L56	I60	M63	Y67	K70											
		-168	-61	-154	-94	-75	-162	-154	73											
24	1K1F(A)	V28	I31	L35	A38	I42	L45	V49	E52	M56	L59									
		168	-43	-169	-	-74	-64	170	-63	-	E66									
			A30	L34	I37	Q41	L44	I48	Q51	L55	T58									
			-	-136	-74	-59	-108	-73	-76	-87	62									
			W120	I124	Y127	I131	L134	S138	Q141	N145	E148									
		-171	-177	-87	-77	-58	-87	-64	-103	-66	-77									
26	1JAL(A)		A133	L137	C140	I144	L147	A151	G154											
			-	178	179	-79	-70	-	-											
			M165	L169	L172															
		L162	-64	172	-63															
27	1QVR(A)	I403	L406	K410	L413	R417	L420													
		-80	-54	-179	-50	70	-62													
			I435	I439	L442	I446	L449	W453	E456											
			-179	-79	-82	-69	-62	-179	-89											
			I459	L463	A466	L470	V473	I477	A480	Y484	N487									
			-61	-161	-	171	167	-72	-	176	-49									
			R493	L497	L500	V504	L507	L511												
			-174	172	-49	94	-59	-65												

Table 3. Angle χ_1 for residues in the **a**- and **d**-positions of trimers

No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d
1	1AQ5(A)	Q18 -88	V21 154	I25 -148	L28 -84	L32 160	V35 142	I39 -80	L42 -74
2	1B08(B)	V1204 -	L1207 -49	V1211 177	L1214 -75	V1218 175	L1221 -79	F1225 -158	Y1228 -88
3	1EQ7(A)		S2 65	I6 -72	L9 -74	V13 167	L16 -80	V20 166	L23 -107
		A41 -	A44 -	L48 -78	M51 60	Y55 -61			
4	1SWI(A)	M2 -49	L5 -128	V9 175	L12 -78	A16 -	L19 -64	V23 147	L26 -98
5	2BEZ(C)	Y899 -	Q902 -	A906 -	F909 178	I913 -82	I916 -77	L920 -64	T923 -64
			V934 162	A938 -	L941 -173	V945 174	L948 -61	F952 -75	I955 -68
6	1G2C(A)		L160 -174	V164 172	I167 -74	L171 -146	T174 -72	V178 171	L181 -175
7	1COS(B)	W2 -173	L5 -56	L9 -90	L12 -82	L16 -82	L19 -154	L23 -63	L26 -34
	1COS(C)	-60	-83	-115	-65	-94	-80	-78	163
No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d
1	1AQ5(A)	I46 -68							
2	1B08(B)	E1232 -133							
3	1EQ7(A)	V27 170	M30 -140	V34 178	A37 -				
4	1SWI(A)	V30 141							
5	2BEZ(C)								
		L959 -67	I962 -71	L966 -115	V969 156				
6	1G2C(A)	V185 168	L188 177	V192 165	L195 -74	I199 -64	Q202 -62	I206 67	K209 -
7	1COS(B)								

Table 4. Angle χ_1 for residues in the **a**- and **d**-positions of tetramers-1

No.	PDB ID	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d	a	d
1	2BNI(A)	M2 -59	I5 -69	L9 -77	I12 -70	G16 -	I19 -69	L23 -69	I26 -77	L30 -56	
2	2B1F(B)	V2 -69	L5 -70	V9 169	L12 -71	N16 -151	L19 -178	V23 165	L26 -62	V30 167	
3	1W5K(A)	M3 -170	I6 -68	L10 -73	I13 -77	L17 -82	I20 -72	L24 -70	I27 -73	L31 -68	
4	1C94(A)	R4 57	V7 168	L11 -88	V14 162	L18 -146	N21 -77	L25 -150	V28 169	L32 -91	M35 49
5	4HB1(A)		L4 175	L8 -63	A11 -	L15 -66	A18 -	A22 -			
6	1GCL(A)	M2 -59	I5 -87	L9 -77	I12 -58	L16 -71	I19 -82	L23 -49	I26 -67	L30 -95	

and other α -helical proteins (see [9, 10]), which are a subject of our further studies.

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