Improved Stability of the Jun-Fos Activator Protein-1 Coiled Coil Motif

A STOPPED-FLOW CIRCULAR DICHROISM KINETIC ANALYSIS*

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Two c-Jun leucine zipper variants that bind with high affinity to c-Fos have been selected using semirational design combined with protein-fragment complementation assays (JunW) or phage display selection (JunWPh1). Enriched winners differ from each other in only two of ten semi-randomized positions, with ΔTm values of 28 °C and 37 °C over wild-type. cFos-JunW, cFos-JunWPh1, and two intermediate mutants (cFos-JunWQ21R and cFos-JunWQ21R) display biphasic kinetics in the folding direction, indicating the existence of a folding intermediate. The first reaction phase is fast and concentration-dependent, showing that the intermediate is readily populated and dimeric. The second phase is independent of concentration and is exponential. In contrast, in the unfolding direction, all molecules display two-state kinetics. Collectively this implies a transition state between unfolded helices and dimeric intermediate that is readily traversed in both directions. We demonstrate that the added stability of cFos-JunWPh1 relative to cFos-JunW is achieved via a combination of kinetic rate changes; cFos-JunWQ21R has an increased initial dimerization rate, prior to the major transition state barrier while cFos-JunWQ21R displays a decreased unfolding rate. The former implies that improved hydrophobic burial and helix-stabilizing mutations exert their effect on the initial, rapid, monomer-collision event. In contrast, electrostatic interactions exert their effect late in the folding pathway. Although our focus is the leucine zipper region of the oncogenic transcription factor Activator Protein-1, coiled coils are ubiquitous and highly specific in their recognition of partners. Consequently, generating kinetic-based rules to predict and engineer their stability is of major significance in peptide-based drug design and nano-biotechnology.

Understanding how a specific sequence of amino acids is able to form a unique and functional three-dimensional structure has long been regarded as the last piece of the genetic jigsaw.

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3 The abbreviations used are: AP-1, activator protein-1; CD, circular dichroism; GuHCl, guanidine hydrochloride; PCA, protein-fragment complementation assay; Fu, fraction unfolded.
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FIGURE 1. Helical wheel representations of the AP-1 Jun-Fos coiled coil, looking down the helical axis in the N- to C-terminal direction. The c-Fos helix (left) was not varied. The Jun-based helix (right) shows residue variations for the five helices. In gray are the residues common to all Jun variants. Black indicates those residues unique to c-Jun. Magenta indicates residues found in JunW variants. An Arg (blue) at position 21 (e3) represents the Q21R mutation. Likewise, a Lys (red) at position 23 (g3) represents the E23K mutation. A green circle around both of these residues highlights the double mutant JunW<sub>Q21R,E23K</sub>.

We previously constructed high affinity peptide variants directed at the leucine zipper regions of c-Jun and c-Fos (see Fig. 1) (29). The ultimate aim of this study was to create dominant negatives that bind to either Fos or Jun with much improved stability over wild-type, and to understand how sequence defines structure. Extracting information on how key residues at crucial positions within the structure confer kinetic rules for stability would permit fast tracking the design process for future variants. We therefore explored how differences in stability for these variants are manifested. Is stability achieved at the kinetic level where dimeric proteins are able to fold faster, because of a lowering of the transition state barrier, relative to the unfolded protein? Conversely, is the stability achieved at the thermodynamic level, by raising the height of the transition state barrier relative to the folded state? Answering these questions will permit designing for improved stability protein-protein interactions, which fulfill these criteria from the outset.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Peptide Purification—Peptides (cFos: ASTDTLQAEETDQL-EDEKYALQTEIANLLLKEEKL GAP; cJun: ASIARLEEKKVLKQAQNYELASTANMLREQVQAQLGAP; JunW: ASAAELEEVKTLKAIEYELSEANMLREQVQAQLGAP; JunW<sup>Q21R</sup>: ASAAELEERVKTLKAIEYELRNQAQLQAGLP; JunW<sup>E23K</sup>: ASAAELEERVKTLKAIEYELQSKMLREQVQLGAP; JunW<sup>Q21R,E23K</sup>: ASAAELEERVKTLKAIEYELQSKMLREQVQLGAP) were synthesized by Protein Peptide Research Ltd (Fareham, UK) and subsequently purified to >98% purity using RP-HPLC with a Jupiter Proteo Column (4-μm particle size, 90-Å pore size, 250 × 10 mm; Phenomenex) and a gradient of 5–60% acetonitrile (0.1% trifluoroacetic acid) at 1.5%/min. Residue changes relative to JunW are highlighted in bold. Masses corresponding to the major peaks were assessed using in-house electrospray mass spectrometry. Peptide concentrations were determined in water by absorbance at 280 nm with an extinction of 1209 M<sup>–1</sup> cm<sup>–1</sup> (31) corresponding to a tyrosine residue inserted into a solvent-exposed b3 position.

Equilibrium Denaturation—Circular dichroism spectra and chemical denaturation profiles were performed at 20 μM total peptide concentration in 10 mM potassium phosphate, 100 mM potassium fluoride, pH 7.0. Ultra-pure guanidine hydrochloride (GuHCl) was purchased from Carl Roth Chemicals GmbH (Karlsruhe, Germany) and concentrated to 6 M as determined by refractometry. The CD signal at 222 nm, corresponding to the α-helical content, was allowed to equilibrate before being recorded using a 1-cm pathlength CD cell in a Jasco J810 Circular Dichroism spectrophotometer. Sequential 50-μL additions of 20 μM total peptide (in 10 mM potassium phosphate, 100 mM potassium fluoride, 6 M GuHCl, pH 7.0) were added and the CD signal recorded, following equilibration, to ensure that the protein concentration in the CD cell remained constant. All reaction solutions were maintained at 293 K using a thermostatted circulating water bath and were monitored continuously with a sensitive thermocouple. From this, the fluctuation in temperature was determined to be no more than (0.1 K). Thorough mixing of the solutions was ensured using a magnetic bar.

Stopped-flow Circular Dichroism (SF-CD)—Folding measurements (Fig. 2A) were initiated by mixing a 220 μM solution of unfolded peptide containing 10 mM potassium phosphate, 100 mM potassium fluoride, and 3.5 M GuHCl (pH 7.0) against 10 volumes of the given concentration of GuHCl at 293 K in a PiStar-180 (π<sup>n</sup>-180) SF-CD apparatus (Applied Photophysics Ltd) to give a postmix peptide concentration of 20 μM. In the case of the wild-type protein, cFos-cJun, a 40 μM post-mix total peptide concentration at 283 K was still not sufficient to be able to monitor folding or unfolding. For all other samples, k<sub>eq</sub> was calculated from k<sub>ap</sub> according to Equation 12. The relationship between the first phase and protein concentration was found to be linear within the 5–20 μM range (Fig. 3A). A wavelength of 222 nm was selected using entrance and exit slit widths of 4 mm. The post-mix concentration of GuHCl was calculated according to the following: (3.5 M +(pre-mix [GuHCl] × 10))/
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Significantly. For the unfolding reactions (Fig. 2), which the unfolding rate was not expected to contribute significantly. Unfolding is unimolecular and was found to be independent of protein concentration (Fig. 3B). All concentrations of GuHCl dilutions were determined by refractometry. The resulting data points are the result of at least three kinetic transient averages.

Equilibrium Data Analysis—Equilibrium curves were fitted to the two state model in Equation 1,

\[
K = \frac{N_2}{2U} \quad \text{(Eq. 1)}
\]

where \(N_2\) is the native peptide dimer, \(U\) is the unfolded monomer, and \(K = [U]^2/[N_2]\).

The upper and lower baselines of the unfolding profiles were defined according to Equations 2 and 3,

\[
ub = ui + us \cdot [\text{GuHCl}] \quad \text{(Eq. 2)}
\]

\[
li = li + ls \cdot [\text{GuHCl}] \quad \text{(Eq. 3)}
\]

where \(ub\) and \(lb\) are the upper and lower baselines, \(ui\) and \(li\) the upper and lower intensities (the respective ellipticities at 0 M denaturant), and \(us\) and \(ls\) are the upper and lower slopes relating to the unfolded and folded states, respectively. The fraction unfolded can be calculated according to Equation 4,

\[
F_U = \frac{\theta_u - lb}{ub - lb} \quad \text{(Eq. 4)}
\]

to yield the fraction of protein which is unfolded at any given concentration of GuHCl, where \(\theta_u\), \(lb\), and \(ub\) are the CD signals at point \(X\), for folded protein, and unfolded protein, respectively. Once \(F_U\) has been determined for any concentration of denaturant, it may be converted to \(K_D\) according to Equation 5,

\[
K_D = \frac{(2F_U Pt)}{1 - F_U} \quad \text{(Eq. 5)}
\]

where \(P_t\) is the total protein concentration (in molar units). For the purposes of the global fitting procedure \(F_U\) can described purely in terms of \(K_D\) and \(P_t\). The \(K_D\) can then be converted to \(\Delta G\) for each GuHCl data point according to Equation 6.

\[
F_U = -\frac{K_D}{4P_t} + \frac{\sqrt{K_D^2 + 8K_D P_t}}{4P_t} \quad \text{(Eq. 6)}
\]

This quadratic function is formed by combining the three equations \(K_D = [U]^2/[N_2]\), \(P_t = 2[N_2] + [U]\), and \([U] = F_U P_t\) to describe \(F_U\) in terms of \(K_D\) and \(P_t\) only. Values for \(F_U\) are calculated using Equations 2–4 (see Fig. 5A), and Equation 6 is solved to derive a value for \(K_D\). To obtain the most accurate value for the free energy of unfolding in water (\(\Delta G_{U \rightarrow W}\)); however, values for \(F_U\) were taken from the transition zone of the denaturation profiles, converted to \(K_D\) according to Equation 5, and a linear fit was carried out (Fig. 5B). This is because the signal to noise ratio is at its lowest where the change in intensity is at its greatest, and is achieved by plotting the derived ln(\(K_D\)) as a function of [GuHCl]. A linear fit is used to extrapolate to the free energy of unfolding in water, \(\Delta G_{U \rightarrow W}\), in accordance with the linear extrapolation method (32–34) in Equation 7,

\[
\Delta G_{U \rightarrow W} = \Delta G_{U \rightarrow F} + m_{eq} \cdot D \quad \text{(Eq. 7)}
\]

11. Folding measurements were taken between 0.32 and 1.39 M post-mix GuHCl concentrations (see Fig. 4, A and B), a range in which the unfolding rate was not expected to contribute significantly. For the unfolding reactions (Fig. 2B), a 220 μM solution of folded peptide in 10 mM potassium phosphate, 100 mM potassium fluoride pH 7.0 was mixed against 10 volumes of an appropriate concentration of GuHCl at 293 K and the post-mix GuHCl concentration calculated according to the following: (pre-mix [GuHCl] × 10)/11. Unfolding measurements were taken between 2.77 and 4.28 M GuHCl (see Fig. 4C) where folding was not predicted to contribute significantly. Unfolding is unimolecular and was found to be independent of protein concentration. All concentrations of GuHCl dilutions were determined by refractometry. The resulting data points are the result of at least three kinetic transient averages.
where $\Delta G_{F \rightarrow U}$ represents the free energy of unfolding at any given concentration of denaturant, and the slope $m_{eq}$ is an approximate measure of the water accessible protein surface exposed per unit concentration of denaturant (with units cal mol$^{-1}$ M$^{-1}$).

**Thermal Data Analysis**—Thermal stability was similarly assessed according to Equations 1–4 and Equation 6. This can then be applied to give a global non-linear fit (shown in Fig. 5C) to derive thermal melting ($T_m$) values; the temperature at which the protein is 50% unfolded. The $T_m$ values (given in the Abstract) can be derived using a global fit to Equations 2, 3, 4, and 6 and Equation 8.

\[
\Delta G = \Delta H(T_m/T) \times (\Delta H + R \times T_m \times \text{ln}(P_d)) \\
+ \Delta C_p \times (T_A - T_m - T_A \times \text{ln}(T_n/T_m)) \\
(\text{Eq. 8})
\]

where $\Delta H$ is the enthalpy change, $T_A$ is the reference temperature, $R$ is the ideal gas constant, and $\Delta C_p$ is the change in heat capacity. Once again to obtain the most accurate estimate of $\Delta G_{F \rightarrow U}$, $F_U$ data corresponding to the transition only were taken, converted to $\ln(K_{eq})$ according to Equation 5 and plotted against temperature (Fig. 5D) according to Equation 9.

\[
\Delta G_{U \rightarrow FWI} = m \cdot T + C \\
(\text{Eq. 9})
\]

where $m$ is the gradient, $T$ is the temperature (in Kelvin) and $C$ is the intercept. Using this fit, a free energy value for the coiled coils at any concentration of denaturant (with units of kcal mol$^{-1}$) can be derived using a global fit to Equations 2, 3, 4, and 6 and Equation 8, associated with the first folding transition, $k_{f1}$ is the rate constant for the first folding transition at a given peptide concentration, $k_{f2}$ is the rate constant associated with the second folding transition, and $t$ is time.

In the unfolding direction, only one exponential model is required to fit the kinetic transients, such that the barrier between $U$ and $I_2$ is Equation 13.

\[
\theta (t) = \theta_0 + \theta_1 \cdot (1 + (k_{app} \cdot t))^{-1} + \theta_2 \cdot \exp(-k_u \cdot t) \\
(\text{Eq. 11})
\]

\[
k_{app} = k_{f1} \cdot \text{Pt} \\
(\text{Eq. 12})
\]

where $\theta_0$ is the final ellipticity, $\theta_1$ is the change in ellipticity associated with the first folding transition, $\theta_2$ is the change in ellipticity associated with the second folding transition (2U = $I_2$), $k_{app}$ is the apparent rate constant for the first folding transition at a given peptide concentration, and $k_u$ is the rate constant associated with the second folding transition, and $t$ is time.

In this model (see Equation 10), $k_{u1}$ is slow relative to $k_{u2}$ because of the small size of the transition state barrier that is associated with the first transition, and consequently $k_u \approx k_{u1}$. This unimolecular reaction is not influenced by the concentration of dimer prior to unfolding and is therefore independent of protein concentration (Fig. 3B). This model is supported by equilibrium data collected at $20 \mu M$ where no intermediate is detectable; taken together this indicates that the folding barrier between the unfolded state and intermediate is easily surmounted in both directions. Finally, folding data can be fitted as a function of denaturant concentration to yield the kinetic constant of folding and unfolding in 0 M denaturant (w) according to Equations 14–16.

\[
\ln(k_{f1(w)}) = \ln(k_{u1}) + (m_w - m_{u1}) \cdot D \\
(\text{Eq. 14})
\]

\[
\ln(k_{f2(w)}) = \ln(k_{u2}) + (m_w - m_{u2}) \cdot D \\
(\text{Eq. 15})
\]

\[
\ln(k_{u(w)}) = \ln(k_u) + (m_w - m_u) \cdot D \\
(\text{Eq. 16})
\]

In this model, $k_{u1}$ represents a dimeric intermediate. In the folding direction, two phases are observed, which is consistent with an intermediate state. Evidence for this intermediate is supported by the fact that the first folding constant ($k_{f1}$) is bimolecular, being dependent upon the concentration of denaturant-dependent decrease in ellipticity (increase in helicity) in Equations 11 and 12.

\[
\theta (t) = \theta_0 + \theta_1 \cdot (1 + (k_{app} \cdot t))^{-1} + \theta_2 \cdot \exp(-k_u \cdot t) \\
(\text{Eq. 11})
\]

\[
k_{app} = k_{f1} \cdot \text{Pt} \\
(\text{Eq. 12})
\]
in Fig. 6. These equations are used to extrapolate the rate constant and/or free energy of the relevant transition to zero denaturant concentration.

Equilibrium Unfolding — Circular dichroism spectra demonstrated all peptides to be α-helical, with characteristic minima at 208 and 222 nm. GuHCl denaturation profiles were performed at 293 K for all dimeric peptides. All demonstrate a sigmoidal lowering of the 222 nm signal indicative of dimer unfolding. The transition was completely reversible, and the helical signal could be regained upon dilution of the denaturant (data not shown). Values corresponding to the fraction of unfolded protein ($P_{\text{U}}$) were obtained as described above. These values around the transition point were converted to $\Delta G$ values and extrapolated to the y-axis (see Fig. 5B) to give the most accurate estimation of the free energy of unfolding in water ($\Delta G_{\text{u}}$). The gradient of this plot corresponds to the $m$-value ($m_g$) associated with the overall unfolding transition, and reports upon the exposure of hydrophobic groups to the denaturant in the unfolded state, relative to the folded.

Kinetic Studies — The kinetics of folding were unable to be fitted to a two-state bimolecular model that has been widely reported for GCN4-p1 (12, 14, 17, 35). Fitting to this model did not achieve satisfactory residuals (Fig. 2A). Rather, a biphasic fit that assumed a dimeric intermediate was necessary (Equation 13). Evidence for a dimeric intermediate comes from the fact that the first transition was found to be concentration dependent for the peptide range 5–20 $\mu$M for cJun-FosW (data not shown), and further, fitting the data to a monomeric intermediate did not achieve satisfactory residuals. Rather a three state model was proposed with a dimeric intermediate (Equation 10). For all dimers, the first of these two transitions was very fast (Table 1; approximately $10^6$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$), in agreement with previously reported coiled coil folding rates (12, 17), while the second was much slower ($\sim 1$ s$^{-1}$) suggesting that the two events are not coupled. The unfolding rate, in accordance with a unimolecular reaction, was not concentration-dependent, and was fitted to a two state mechanism.

RESULTS

cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ — Kinetic parameters for the wild-type molecule could not be obtained, even at 283 K and 40 $\mu$M total peptide. This is because of its low overall stability (it is around 3 kcal mol$^{-1}$ less stable than the other variants). All remaining peptides were shown to form a relatively unstable dimeric intermediate with a bimolecular rate constant of between 1.5 and $10^6$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$ (see Table 1 and Fig. 4A). The exception was cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$, which displayed an accelerated $k_{f_1}$ rate constant of 3.8 $\times$ $10^6$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$. Faster folding for this mutant is at first glance somewhat perplexing. The mutation of Glu to Lys at position $g'3$ (see Fig. 1) is predicted to be of slightly lower helical propensity (1.59 versus 1.23) according to an experimental study on coiled coil systems that accounts for both solvent-exposed and buried residues, as well as residues located at the center of the helix and at the termini (36). Pairing with Leu at position $e4$ of c-Fos (for notation see Fig. 1) is difficult to rationalize, although it is likely that the additional hydrophobic bulk of Lys adds better core shielding to the dimer and may interact better with Leu on the opposing helix. Additionally, Lys at $g'3$ is likely to interact much more favorably than Glu with Glu residues at positions $c'3$ and $g'2$ in the same helix, generating additional intrahelical stability. As, at least partial helicity must precede dimerization if monomers are to clash productively (29), it seems likely that the added intramolecular stability of JunW$_{E23K}$, as well as the additional hydrophobic bulk able to exclude core solvation in the cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ dimer, is a major driving force in speeding the helix to a conformation capable of dimerization. Indeed, helical content prediction at the residue level using the AGADIR algorithm (37–39) demonstrates that the E23K mutation propagates helical stability across the entire molecule (see Fig. 7).

The unfolding rate for cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ is very close to that of cFos-JunW suggesting that this mutation plays no role in late, post major transition state, events. A second indication of increased structure in the first transition state of cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ comes from a lowering of the $m$-value for the rate constant associated with this transition; a value of 0.5 for the other three molecules lowers to $\sim 0.7$ cal mol$^{-1}$ M$^{-1}$ for cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$, indicating that the molecule has a greater extent of exposed surface area (relative to the folded state) buried at the first transition state ($\sim 36\%$) relative to the other three molecules ($\sim 27\%$). Thus the molecule is more native-like at this stage.

cFos-JunW$_{Q21R}$ — As is shown in Table 1, this mutant displayed a very similar $k_{f_1}$ folding rate $(1.6 \times 10^6$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1})$ to both cFos-JunW $(1.5 \times 10^6)$ and cFos-JunW$_{ph1}$ $(1.7 \times 10^6)$. Collectively this implies that the extra stability afforded to the first transition state for cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ is compensated by the additional Q21R mutation in cFos-JunW$_{ph1}$. The mutation does not cause any significant change in the helical propensity (1.27 versus 1.21 (36)), but rather appears to generate a better intermolecular partner for g2 Glu of c-Fos, by giving a favorable charge-charge interaction (see Fig. 1). It is interesting that the increase in $k_{f_1}$ observed for cFos-JunW$_{E23K}$ is not also realized in the cFos-JunW$_{ph1}$ double mutant, especially since the Q21R mutation like the E23K mutation also adds considerable hydrophobic bulk to the dimeric interface. This implies that the Q21R mutation neutralizes the E23K mutation at this step and prevents this faster folding rate from being realized. This may be explained by intrahelical repulsions introduced at the $e'3$ position with neighboring $e'2$ and $e'4$ residues Lys and Arg, the side-chains of $e'2$–$e'3$ and $e'3$–$e'4$ are $\sim 10$ Å apart in space according to the crystal structure of the wild-type molecule (40). In agreement with Coulomb's law this 10 Å distance would be predicted to contribute $\sim 0.4$ kcal mol$^{-1}$ of unfavorable potential energy to the molecule. This is also supported by helical content prediction at the residue level by AGADIR (37–39) (see Fig. 7) which demonstrates JunW$_{Q21R}$ to have decreased helical content, at the C-terminal region, relative to JunW.

The $E_{g2}Q_{e3} \rightarrow E_{g2}R_{e3}$ interhelical interaction that arises from the Q21R mutation is predicted to have a favorable $\Delta \Delta G$ of $\sim 0.6$ kcal mol$^{-1}$ (41). Because this mutation has little or no effect on the initial fast transient, it seems likely that the formation of the Coulombic interaction occurs late in the folding process, thus accounting for the slower unfolding rate when it is strengthened. The fact that the mutation has no effect upon folding can be explained by the intramolecular repulsion pro-
vided by surrounding e′2 Lys and e′4 Arg. Again, this may explain why the faster folding of the E23K mutation is only partially realized in the double mutant JunW_{ph1}. Whereas Gln would be predicted to interact well with these two residues, Arg almost certainly results in steric repulsion with both. Together with the E23K mutant, which has the opposite effect of strengthened intramolecular contacts with neighboring residues (i.e. with g′2 Glu as well as e′3 Glu), these data together imply that intramolecular (i.e. helical) and possibly hydrophobic interactions are formed early on in the folding process, whereas intermolecular Coulombic interactions are consolidated later on in the folding process, after the major transition state has been traversed. This is logical when one considers that one helix must have a degree of order before it is able to specifically recognize and bind to the second. Again, an initial hydrophobic collapse would be consistent with this model. Later intermolecular charge-charge interactions can only be achieved when a large degree of organized folded structure has already been realized. Once again a study of the m-values consolidates this interpretation; whereas the other three dimeric molecules display m-values of 1.04–1.08 cal mol⁻¹ M⁻¹ associated with the F-to-mt₂ transition, cFos-JunW_{Q21R} displays an m-value of 1.4 cal mol⁻¹ M⁻¹, indicating that relative to the fully folded state, the amount of exposed surface area is greater at mt₂ for this molecule (~78% exposed) than for the others (56%). This correlates with the extra E{sub e′2} ↔ R{sub e′4} interaction that has yet to be satisfied at this point in the pathway. It is likely that the intramolecular steric repulsions also introduced with this mutation lead to a lack of overall stability for this mutant, and is also why the combination of the Q21R and E23K mutations only gives rise to a small increase in k_{f1} for cFos-JunW_{ph1}. Similarly, the thermodynamic stability afforded by the Q21R mutation is only marginally realized in the double mutant when analyzing k_{u1}. One explanation is that the additional stability revealed by thermal melting data is accounted for by the changes in k_{u2} or k_{u3}, which were unable to be determined. These thermal melting data (see Table 2 and Fig. 5) performed at 20 μM and 150 μM demonstrate the double mutant dimer to be around 1.6 kcal mol⁻¹ more stable than cFos-JunW_{E23K} and 0.8 kcal mol⁻¹ more stable than cFos-JunW_{Q21R}.

cFos-JunW_{ph1}—The double mutant cFos-JunW_{ph1} did not exhibit the fast initial phase displayed by cFos-JunW_{E23K} because the improved g′2 ↔ g′3 intramolecular contacts in JunW_{E23K} (EE ↔ EK) that contribute to an increased folding rate are compensated for by weakened e′3 ↔ e′4 (QR ↔ RR) and e′2 ↔ e′4 (KQ ↔ KR) intramolecular contacts in JunW_{Q21R}, which would be predicted to lower intramolecular stability.

The double mutant JunW_{ph1} does however partially retain the slower unfolding rate that is exhibited by cFos-JunW_{Q21R}. In the first instance, the additional free energy (~0.6 kcal mol⁻¹) contributed by the EQ ↔ ER charge interaction late in the JunW_{Q21R} folding pathway is only partially compensated for by the E23K mutation (LE ↔ LK) which represents a gain of two methylene groups and would be predicted to increase core shielding. The major effect of the E23K mutation, however, is increased intra-helical stability. Consequently, a fast initial collapse is observed as helices form and dimerize. This initial fast formation of helicity is compromised in Q21R, which lowers

![Image](https://jbc.asm.org/content/282/32/23020/f1.large.jpg)
intrahelical interactions with surrounding residues (i.e. with ε'2 K and ε'4 R). Consequently, the combining of these two mutations results in little overall effect on the first folding transitions, but retains partially slower unfolding. It is interesting as to why the partial lowering of the unfolding rate in the double mutant is not reflected in the m-value.

While \( m_\alpha \), \( m_{11} \), \( m_{12} \), and \( m_t \) (approximated by combining equilibrium data with kinetic data) are known, \( m_{12} \) is not. This is because of the fact that the relationship between [GuHCl] and \( k_{12} \) is unreliable (see Fig. 4B), and that data for \( k_{12} \) cannot be calculated. However, subtracting \( m-values \) associated with \( k_{11} \) and \( k_{12} \) from our value for \( m_{12} \) (derived using GuHCl denaturation data; see also Fig. 6) shows that the change in \( m-value \) associated with the \( m_{11} \)-to-\( m_{12} \) transition is around \(-0.3\) for all mutants. Collectively, it can be calculated from the \( m-values \) associated with \( k_{12} \) (see Table 1 and Fig. 6) that only around 44% of the native structure is achieved by the time the second transition state (\( t_2 \)) is reached, more surprising is that only around 27% of the hydrophobic burial is achieved at the time of the first transition state (\( t_1 \)). This implies that the structure of both transition states must be remarkably similar and that the majority of hydrophobic exclusion does not occur until after the second transition state is traversed. This is interesting since the change in ellipticity demonstrates that the majority of helicity is attained within the first phase (i.e. by \( m_{11} \)). It would therefore appear that while the individual monomers are almost fully helical at this point, they are far from native-like as a dimeric species (42). The remainder of the folding pathway must therefore be spent optimizing quaternary structure e.g. intermolecular contacts that are seen to form after the second transition state in the cFos-JunWQ21R dimer as well as optimizing hydrophobic packing and solvent exclusion from the hydrophobic helix-helix interface. This is in agreement with a hierarchical model of folding where local interactions dominate early events and the native structure forms from smaller structures (43, 44). Indeed the larger \( m-value \) for the \( m_{12} \)-to-\( m_{12} \) transition for this mutant suggests \( m_{11} \) and \( m_{12} \) are almost identical in terms of hydrophobic exposure, and that formation of this additional intermolecular electrostatic interaction makes a major contribution.

**DISCUSSION**

The Fos-Jun transcription factor AP-1 plays a central role in signaling pathways and is deregulated in tumors (25, 26). Peptides that target the leucine zipper dimerization domain and modulate transcription factor function are consequently powerful tools for dissecting cellular pathways and in developing anticancer drugs (45, 46). In addition, a firm understanding of rules that give rise to stable and specific peptide-peptide interactions is of great use in designing and engineering proteins (47, 48). We have elucidated the mechanism of coiled coil assembly by dissecting the folding pathway of Fos-Jun based peptides.

The instability of the wild-type molecule cFos-clun (29, 49) did not permit the kinetic parameters to be extracted, even at low temperatures and high peptide concentrations. This was not surprising, because a full melting profile could not be achieved even at 150 \( \mu \)M total peptide concentration. Nonetheless comparison of cFos-JunW, cFos-JunWPh1, and the two intermediate mutants cFos-JunWQ21R and cFos-JunWQ21K permitted us to assess the contributions of these residues to identifiable kinetic steps in the folding pathway. JunWQ21K resulted in increased intramolecular stability (\( K_{d3} \rightarrow E_{d2}, K_{d3} \rightarrow E_{d3} \); see Fig. 1) and a greater potential for hydrophobic burial in the heterodimer; this is because the side-chain of Lys has two additional methylene groups relative to Glu and therefore generates improved shielding of the closely packed a/d residues from the solvent. Both factors led to an increased rate of formation of the initial dimeric intermediate.

In contrast, JunWQ21R led to a decrease in the rate of unfolding from the fully folded heterodimer to the dimeric interme-
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diate. This is accountable to an additional interhelical Coulombic interaction with cFos (Ec2 → Rɛ3; see Fig. 1) that is less favored for the wild-type (Ec2 → Aɛ3) or cFos-JunW (Ec2 → Qɛ3) dimer (41). Indeed, even Asn-Asn pairs buried in the core of GCN4 have been shown to exert their effect on the molecule late in the folding pathway (35). However, the same mutation also destabilizes the helix by forming intrahelical charge-charge repulsions with neighboring e’ residues Lys and Arg, preventing accelerated folding. Thus, when the E23K and Q21R mutations are combined, a double mutant (JunWph1) stabilized by faster folding and slower unfolding is only partially observed (see Table 1 and Fig. 4). Collectively this implies that interhelical interactions for protein-protein interactions are formed late in folding, after the rate-limiting transition state. This is supported by studies on GCN4 which suggests interhelical salt-bridges stabilize the molecule but do not accelerate folding (50).

The dimeric complex cFos-JunWph1 displays a partially faster folding rate relative to cFos-JunW and cFos-JunWQ21R. The combined mutant also displays a partial slowing of the unfolding rate relative to cFos-JunW and cFos-JunWQ21R. The result correlates well with thermal unfolding data performed at both 20 μM and 150 μM (see Table 2), but correlates less well with equilibrium denaturation data where satisfactory lower baselines were not observed (see Fig. 3A). Equilibrium derived free energy values have therefore been included for completeness but have not been used in the interpretation. The overall picture to emerge from thermal melting data is that of an unstable wild-type molecule (5 kcal mol⁻¹; see Table 2), with cFos-JunW stabilized (8 kcal mol⁻¹). Relative to this stabilized molecule, cFos-JunWQ21R is more stable still (8.5 kcal mol⁻¹), and cFos-JunWQ23K is partially destabilized (7.6 kcal mol⁻¹). The double mutant cFos-JunWph1 is more stable (9.2 kcal mol⁻¹) than either of the two intermediate mutants. When creating coiled coils of increased stability, designing for thermodynamic stability by engineering decelerated unfolding rates would appear to be the most logical approach. This is especially true of Jun-Fos folding, where the initial folding amplitude does not represent the formation of the folded state, and little information can be extracted from the second phase. In contrast, for the unfolding direction there is only one major transition state to traverse. This outcome suggests that carefully selecting mutations that maintain helix propensity and intramolecular interactions, but increase intermolecular electrostatic contributions, can make large increases to the free energy of unfolding and are relatively easy to design.

Another central finding of this study is that different selections yield different peptides. While both protein-fragment complementation assays (PCA) (51–53) and phage display systems express proteins in Escherichia coli, they have fundamental differences; phage display requires proteins to locate and fold in the periplasm, and selection occurs in vitro under artificial conditions. By contrast, in PCA, expression and selection occurs in the cytoplasm of E. coli in the presence of a vast number of cellular proteins, perhaps these extra constraints for PCA explain why a Tm comparable to the phage display technique was unable to be achieved.

TABLE 1
Kinetic folding data
Shown are the kinetic data associated with each of the identifiable transitions. The first column is associated with the 2U-to-I2 transition, the second with the I2-to-F2 transition, and the third with the F2-to-2U transition. The rate constants and m-values associated with these transitions are derived from Equations 12–14, and displayed in Fig. 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutant</th>
<th>Folding 1st exp</th>
<th>Unfolding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Folding m-to-m</td>
<td>Folding 2nd exp</td>
<td>Unfolding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m-to-m1</td>
<td>m-to-m2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>k values</td>
<td>k values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s⁻¹ M⁻¹</td>
<td>s⁻¹ M⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFos-JunW</td>
<td>1.476 ± 1.72e4</td>
<td>0.46 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFos-JunWQ21R</td>
<td>1.566 ± 7.82e4</td>
<td>0.51 ± 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFos-JunWQ23K</td>
<td>3.226 ± 1.10e5</td>
<td>0.72 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFos-JunWph1</td>
<td>1.786 ± 6.04e4</td>
<td>0.52 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
E23K mutations relative to JunW are overall helical propensity enforces a "trigger sequence" for folding initiation (18, 54). Rather, AGADIR (37–39).

FIGURE 7. Helical content prediction at the residue level as calculated by AGADIR (37–39). c-Fos (black line) is of lowest helical propensity throughout the sequence and naturally pairs with c-Jun (gray). JunW (magenta) is of improved helical propensity, with the Q21R mutation (JunWQ21R; blue) causing a lowering in propensity relative to JunW, notably around the mutation at the C terminus of the helix. In contrast, the E23K mutation found in both JunWQ21R (red) and JunWPh1 (green) exerts its effect of increased helical propensity across the entire helix. Shown below are the sequences corresponding to the above residue number. For the latter three sequences the Q21R and E23K mutations relative to JunW are bold and underlined.

No sequences have been identified that conform to a speculated "trigger sequence" for folding initiation (18, 54). Rather, overall helical propensity enforces α-helical topology early in the folding pathway to give rise to structures that are able to associate within a realistic time frame. This notion is supported by helical content predictions using the algorithm AGADIR (37–39). AGADIR is based on an empirical analysis of experimental data and estimates energy contributions (such as intrinsic helical propensities, side-chain to side-chain interactions, main-chain to main-chain hydrogen bonds, and capping effects) to account for the stability of isolated α-helices. Specifically, it predicts JunWQ21R to have a lower helical content than JunW in the C-terminal region where the mutation is found (see Fig. 7). In contrast, the E23K mutation resulted in high helical content for both JunWQ21R and JunWPh1. However, JunWQ21R has the fastest initial folding rate, followed by JunWPh1, which is faster than either JunWQ21R or JunW. In contrast to a previous study (17), these data collectively support the argument that helices are native-like in secondary structure prior to their collision (42).

The overall picture of folding to emerge (see Fig. 6) is that of a coiled coil which has gained almost all of its native helicity at the time of the rapidly formed dimeric intermediate. It is the high helical content as well as hydrophobic interactions at the helical interface that permits dimerization of monomers and, hence, arrival at this state. However, for this intermediate to progress to the folded state, more intricate interactions must be formed, particularly interhelical Coulombic interactions. These can become correctly aligned after the second major transition state has been traversed, resulting in a molecule which is both stable and specific in its dimeric contacts. This second major transition state barrier is also likely to represent adjustments in packing of the hydrophobic interface which optimizes van der Waals interactions and concomitantly dehydrates the core by expelling residual water molecules (55, 30).

In summary, engineered increased folding rates by conserved substitution of helix stabilizing mutations can accelerate the path to the folded state. In contrast optimizing intermolecular Coulombic interactions can generate increased thermodynamic stability, thus ensuring that the unfolded state is inaccessible to preformed complexes. These rules can be further tested to generate specific, stable peptides and peptide-based compounds for use in therapeutics and nanobiotechnology.

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REFERENCES


Table 2

Free energy values of unfolding

Equilibrium derived values are performed at 20 μM total peptide concentration and 293 K. Thermal values have been collected at both 20 μM and 150 μM total peptide concentrations using a reference temperature of 293 K. In all instances, a plot of ln Kd vs. either [GuHCl] or temperature using fraction unfolded (Fu) data from the transition point only was used to give the best estimate of ΔG3D (equation 5; data not shown). It should be noted that the lack of a reliable lower baseline for GuHCl denaturation data (see Fig. 5A) meant that only thermal denaturation data (see Fig. 5, C and D) was used in the interpretation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutant</th>
<th>m_eq</th>
<th>ΔG3D_U (equilibrium)</th>
<th>ΔG3D_U (20 μM thermal)</th>
<th>ΔG3D_U (150 μM thermal)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cJun-cFos</td>
<td>−0.63</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<td>cFos-JunW</td>
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<td>cFos-JunWQ21R</td>
<td>−1.80</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>cFos-JunWQ21R</td>
<td>−1.98</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFos-JunWPh1</td>
<td>−1.87</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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