The influence of center-of-mass movements on the variation in the structure of human postural sway

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A B S T R A C T

The present article investigates the influence of center-of-mass movements on the variation of the structure in human postural sway. Twelve healthy younger persons performed 60 s quiet standing, 60 s relaxed standing, and 10 min relaxed standing on two force plates. Center-of-pressure (CoP) and gravitational line (GL) profiles were calculated from the ground reaction forces and moments. The temporal variation of CoP structure was calculated by the local scaling exponent $h_t$ and a Monte Carlo surrogate test was used to identify phase couplings between temporal scales. The range of variation of $h_t$ was significantly larger in relaxed standing compared to quiet standing ($p<0.00001$) and highly correlated with the range of GL movements ($r=0.76, p<0.001$). However, the variation in $h_t$ was not generated by the GL movements because the CoP–GL traces was close to identical variation in $h_t$ ($r>0.95, p<0.00001$). The Monte Carlo surrogate test indicated the presence of intermittent phase couplings between the temporal scales of both CoP traces and the CoP–GL residuals in the periods with GL movements. The present results suggest that human posture is controlled by intermittent phase coupling of the CoP and GL movements. Furthermore, the investigation of the variation in CoP structure might extend existing theories of changes in postural control for example older persons and patients with a neurodegenerative disease.

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1. Introduction

Postural control is a fundamental aspect of human locomotion and whole body movement, and is commonly investigated through the traces of the center of pressure (CoP). In most studies, magnitude-based parameters like range, standard deviation, root-mean-square, and coefficient of variation are used to quantify the mean magnitude of variation conceals the multifractal characteristics (i.e., temporal variation in the scaling exponents) of postural control in a similar way as the mean magnitude of variation conceals the multifractal characteristics (cf. Newell et al., 1993). Secondly, most studies of postural control investigate the structure of CoP traces in quiet standing, that is in standing as still as possible (e.g., Collins and De Luca, 1993; Norris et al., 2005). The argumentation for this is to eliminate the influence of voluntary movements of the gravity line (GL, the 2D ground projection of the CoM along the direction of the gravitational force) during relaxed standing that might...
obscure control mechanisms revealed in involuntary adjustments of CoM. However, a recent study found that voluntary control of CoP through visual feedback changes the structure of the CoP more than its amplitude due to modulations in GL and residual CoP–GL (Danna-Dos-Santos et al., 2008). Furthermore, differences were also found between younger and older persons in the structure of CoP for relaxed standing that are not present in quiet standing (Duarte and Sternad, 2008; Duarte and Zatsiorsky, 1999). Thirdly, postural control is influenced more by the interrelation between GL and CoP than by the CoP alone (Corriuville et al., 2004). According to the inverted pendulum model of human standing, CoP must vary around GL to maintain an upright posture and prevent falls or stepping responses (Winter, 1995). An earlier study found that the somatosensory system and muscle strength explain the amplitude of the CoP variation around GL in both healthy older persons and patients with stroke and neuro-pathy (Corriuille et al., 2004). The voluntary modulation of the GL and CoP–GL structures were also found to be dependent on the standing task condition (Reynolds, 2010) and visual feedback (Danna-Dos-Santos et al., 2008). Thus, the long-term structure of GL movements necessarily influences the structure of CoP dynamics.

The main aims of the present article are (1) to introduce a method that can assess the temporal variation in the structure of the CoP traces during standing, (2) to compare the variation in the structure of the CoP traces for quiet and relaxed standing, and (3) to investigate the influence of GL movements on the variation of the scale-invariant structure of CoP.

2. Methods

Twelve healthy young subjects (6 males and 6 females, age 21.8 ± 3.5 yrs, height 1.75 ± 0.01 m, and body mass 80.5 ± 1.18 kg) participated in the present study. The study was approved by the regional ethical committee, and all subjects signed a written consent before participation. The participants performed three trials, 60 s quiet standing, 60 s relaxed standing, and 10 min relaxed standing. The order of trials was fixed across participants, starting with quiet standing, followed by short and longer relaxed standing. Quiet standing was performed in the Romberg position (Black et al., 1982), looking straight ahead at the wall 7.5 m in front of the participants, with the instruction to stand as still as possible. In the two relaxed standing conditions, the participants were instructed to stand naturally and relaxed as when waiting for a bus. In all conditions, participants were instructed to stand with each foot on a separate force plate.

The gravitational line (GL) of the CoP was estimated by a two-step procedure. First, GL was defined by double integration of the horizontal AP and ML components of the ground reaction force. A linear detrending of the obtained GL position was then performed to adjust for the unknown initial condition of the GL velocity (cf. Gl.2 in King and Zatsiorsky, 1997). Nevertheless, this method is susceptible to small nonlinearities in the horizontal components of the ground reaction force. The second step addressed this shortcoming of the King and Zatsiorsky algorithm (1997) as indicated by the reconstruction of the horizontal components of the ground reaction force from GL.

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The erroneous GL trend was then subtracted from the GL position and the CoP reaction force. The second step addressed this shortcoming of the King and Zatsiorsky algorithm (1997) as indicated by the reconstruction of the horizontal components of the ground reaction force from GL.

The range of CoP movement during standing is significantly different from the quiet condition (all ps < 0.02). The range of h3 for the CoP trace was dependent on the temporal changes in GL position, particularly during 60 s and 10 min relaxed standing (see Figs. 2 and 3). In time periods with large changes in GL position, the local scale-invariant structure of the CoP trace became less persistent (i.e., exponent h3 < 1.5) compared to the periods with little movement of the GL, as reflected by the negative skew of distributions P(h3) in Figs. 2 and 3. This variation in h3 was present for both CoP position and velocity. The range of h3 was dependent on standing condition in both ML (F(2,11)=29.00, p < 0.00001) and AP directions (F(2,11)=19.25, p < 0.00001). The range of h3 was significantly

suggested by King and Zatsiorsky (1997), as indicated by the reconstruction of the horizontal components of the ground reaction force from GL.

The variation in the scale-invariant structure was defined for the position and velocity of CoP and CoP–GL. The temporal change in the scale-invariant structure is defined by a local scaling exponent by the following equations (Mandelbrot, 1974; Riedi, 2002):

$$h_3 = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{t=t_0}^{t_0+s} \frac{|x_t - \text{mean}|}{x_t}$$  (1)

where $h_3$ is the local root mean square variation of the signal $x_t$ in the time interval $[t_0-t/2, t_0+t/2]$ around a polynomial trend $P_m$ of order m:

$$h_{3, m} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{t=t_0}^{t_0+s} \frac{|x_t - P_m(t)|}{x_t}$$  (2)

Eqs. (1) and (2) are multifractals extensions of the detrended fluctuation analysis (cf. Ihlen, 2012). The polynomial trend order in Eq. (2) is reported for m = 1 in the present study, but additional analyses showed that the results were not dependent on m. Furthermore, (Eq. 2) was computed with the scaling range s = 0.1–0.8 s. Eq. (2) was employed directly to the CoP and the GL–CoP residual trace $X_t$ to define the variation of $h_3$ of CoP and CoP–GL velocity, and indirectly to the integrated profile of the same traces to define the variation of $h_3$ of CoP and CoP–GL positions. Both the CoP trace and its integrated profile have been used to investigate the scale-invariant structure of CoP and position, respectively (Delignières et al., 2011). However, our analyses indicated that $h_3$ for CoP and CoP–GL velocity are approximately $h_3$ - 1.0 for the $h_3$ of CoP and CoP–GL position and, thus, only $h_3$ for CoP and CoP–GL positions will be presented here. The local scale-invariant structure of CoP and CoP–GL positions are referred to as persistent when $h_3$ > 1.5 and anti-persistent when $h_3$ < 1.5. The scale-invariant structure is similar to a time-independent random walk in the special case $h_3$= 1.5. The advantage of Eqs. (1) and (2) compared to conventional methods like detrended fluctuation analysis, rescaled range analysis, and spectral analysis is that the scaling exponent $h_3$ can be defined locally in both time and scale s. The magnitude of variation of $h_3$ was defined by the range of $h_3$ for s = 0.8 s in Eq. (2). The variation in the local scale-invariant structure $h_3$ can be generated by phase coupling between the temporal scales that are independent of the central tendency of $h_3$ or the distribution of the CoP dynamics and CoP–GL residuals. A Monte Carlo simulation was performed to test for the presence of phase couplings between the temporal scales. In the Monte Carlo simulation, 1000 iterated amplitude-adjusted Fourier-transformed (IAAFT) surrogate time series were generated for each CoP and CoP–GL trace that replicated their spectral density (i.e., central tendency of $h_3$) and distribution, but eliminated the phase couplings between the temporal scales (Schreiber and Schwitz, 1996). Phase couplings between the temporal scales are present when 97.5% (i.e., two-tailed test: p = 0.05) of the surrogates series have higher or lower $h_3$ compared to the original CoP or CoP–GL dynamics.

The range of variation in $h_3$ and GL was defined and repeated-measures ANOVA tested then Subsequent pair-wise comparisons were performed by paired samples t-tests with Bonferroni corrections of the p-values for multiple comparisons. The similarities between the range of movements in GL and the range of the $h_3$ scale were tested by Pearson cross-correlations. Furthermore, the similarity between the variation of $h_3$ in CoP traces and CoP–GL residuals were tested by Pearson cross-correlations for each pair of $h_3$ series.
larger for both the 60 s relaxed standing condition \(t\)-tests: \(p < 0.005\), ML: mean = 1.03, AP: mean = 0.95) and 10 min relaxed standing condition \(t\)-tests: \(p < 0.0002\), ML: mean = 1.17, AP: mean = 1.11) compared to the 60 s quiet standing condition (ML: mean = 0.69, AP: mean = 0.81). Furthermore, the range of \(h_t\) variation was strongly correlated with the range of GL movement in both the 60 s and 10 min relaxed standing conditions \(r_s > 0.76, p < 0.001\), but uncorrelated in the quiet standing condition \(r < 0.02\). Even though the variation in \(h_t\) was dependent on the GL movements, \(h_t\) was not generated by the GL movements, as confirmed by the very high cross-correlations \(r_s > 0.95, p < 0.00001\) between \(h_t\) series from CoP and CoP–GL residual traces, irrespective of standing condition. In contrast, the median \(h_t\) significantly decreased \(t\)-tests: \(p < 0.001\) for CoP–GL residuals compared to the CoP trace for both the 60 s quiet standing condition (from mean = 1.61 to mean = 1.44) and the 60 s relaxed

![Fig. 1. A representative example of the temporal change of CoP (black traces), GL (red traces), and CoP–GL residuals (blue traces) for 60 s quiet (panel A) and relaxed (panel B) standing. The temporal changes in CoP, GL, and CoP–GL residuals are illustrated in each panel for the anterioposterior (AP, upper part) and the mediolateral (ML, lower part) directions. The CoP and GL are also shown as a 2D stabilogram where the ML and AP direction are plotted together for both quiet (panel C) and relaxed (panel D) standing. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)](image1)

![Fig. 2. A representative example of the variation in the structure \(h_t\) (lower part) of CoP and CoP–GL residuals (upper part) for 60 s quiet (panel A) and relaxed (panel B) standing. The relaxed standing condition has periods with less persistent structure (i.e., smaller \(h_t\)) and large movements of GL. Panels C and D: the less persistent structure in periods with large GL movements leads to a distribution \(P(h_t)\) of \(h_t\) that is more negatively skewed in the relaxed standing condition (blue traces) compared with the quiet standing condition (red traces). Notice that the distribution \(P(h_t)\) for all participants are aligned at their modes. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)](image2)
However, this hypothesis of inverted pendulum control suggests
interactions between CoP and GL movements, as reflected by a significant phase coupling between temporal scales in the periods with large GL migration (see Fig. 4). Summarized, the present results indicate that (1) variation in the scale-invariant structure $h_t$ of CoP is present in both quiet and relaxed standing, (2) the variation in $h_t$ is larger in both prolonged and short tests of relaxed standing compared to quiet standing, and (3) the variation in $h_t$ is dependent on, but not generated by, the movements of the CoM.

4. Discussion

The current study identified the influence of movements of the GL on the variation in the scale-invariant structure of CoP in quiet and relaxed standing. The inverted pendulum control hypothesis has been invoked to explain the relationship between CoP and GL in human standing, whereas theories of stochastic processes can explain the scale-invariant structure of CoP. The presence of large variation in the CoP structure (i.e., $h_t$) in the intermittent periods of GL movement suggest that these theories can be combined as discussed in the paragraphs below.

The hypothesis of inverted pendulum control suggests that the structure of the CoP trace will be continuously driven towards the equilibrium GL trace in both quiet and relaxed standing by an elastic-like modulation of the ankle stiffness (Winter et al., 1998, 2001). As a consequence, CoP will vary around the slowly evolving GL trace and the CoP velocity towards the GL trace will increase with the magnitude of the residual CoP–GL trace by increases in the ankle stiffness (Zatsiorsky and Duarte, 1999, 2000). However, this hypothesis of inverted pendulum control suggests continuous control of CoP in accordance with GL movements, whereas the significantly smaller $h_t$ of CoP compared with the $h_t$ of IAAFT surrogates (see Fig. 4) suggests intermittent phase couplings between GL and CoP–GL residuals in time periods with large GL movements. The variation in $h_t$ found in the present study numerically defines changes in the structure of CoP in both quiet and relaxed standing that are dependent on the intermittent phase couplings with the GL movements. These findings are more consistent with a hypothesis of intermittent ballistic control of the inverted pendulum (Bottaro et al., 2005; Morasso and Schieppati, 1999, 2002), in which the GL position is considered as an unstable equilibrium point and small perturbations cause intermittent shifts in the CoP traces. Intermittent ballistic control is further supported by a series of experimental studies (Loram and Lakie, 2002a, 2002b; Loram et al., 2005) that indicate intermittent ankle torque generation rather than continuous modulation of ankle stiffness. However, the hypothesis of intermittent ballistic control of human standing has so far not introduced numerical methods that parameterize the particular features of intermittent postural control. The GL-dependent variation in $h_t$ introduced in the present study is a promising numerical method to parameterize the intermittent structure of the CoP movements that might be important for clinical applications as well.

Two-component theories, such as open- and closed-loop control (Collins and De Luca, 1993) and conservative and operative control (Dijkstra, 1998; Gatev et al., 1999), have been developed to explain the short- and long-range components of the CoP structure. However, these two-component theories do not consider the influence of GL movements like the hypothesis of inverted pendulum control above does. The present results indicate that the short-range persistent and long-range anti-persistent structure of both CoP position and velocity profiles in quiet standing are influenced by the lack of GL movement.
The present results further suggest that the lack of differences found in the long-range anti-persistent structure of the CoP position and velocity between younger and older persons (Collins et al., 1995) and between older persons with high and low risk of falling (Norris et al., 2005), may only reflect the constraints on the GL movements in quiet standing. Furthermore, the differences between these same groups in the short-range persistent structure are likely related to the larger magnitude of phase couplings between the temporal scales in periods with large GL movements, particularly in the relaxed standing condition. The significantly smaller $h_t$ contribute to the negatively skewed $P(h_t)$ for relaxed standing, illustrated by the larger blue sub-distributions in the right parts of panels B and D compared to the blue sub-distributions for quiet standing (right parts of panels A and C). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

![Fig. 4. Representative example of phase coupling between temporal scales (i.e., contour plot) of the CoP movements (upper trace) in AP (panels A and B) and ML (panels C and D) directions for both quiet (panels A and C) and relaxed (panels B and D) standing. The variations in $h_t$ are illustrated in a contour plot for multiple temporal scales where the periods with red colors reflect large $h_t$ (i.e., more persistent structure of CoP) whereas blue colors illustrate small $h_t$ (i.e., less persistent structure of CoP). The vertical alignment of blue and red dots illustrates the time instants where $h_t$ are significantly larger or smaller ($p < 0.05$) than the ensemble of surrogates and, consequently, the structure (i.e., $h_t$) is significantly influenced by phase couplings between the temporal scales. $h_t$ is significantly influenced by phase couplings between the temporal scales in periods with large GL movements, particularly in the relaxed standing condition. The significantly smaller $h_t$ contribute to the negatively skewed distributions $P(h_t)$ for relaxed standing, illustrated by the larger blue sub-distributions in the right parts of panels B and D compared to the blue sub-distributions for quiet standing (right parts of panels A and C). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)](image-url)
variation in the CoP–GL residuals in older adults with high risk of falling, which may reflect alterations in the timing of the intermittent ankle torque generation (Loram et al., 2005). Without the imposed constraint to stand as still as possible, additional characteristics about postural control can be picked up, and these characteristics show up both in longer (10 min) and shorter (60 s) tests of relaxed standing. Therefore, relaxed standing should be introduced in future studies to investigate differences in GL movements and, consequently, differences in the long-range component of the structure of CoP position and velocity in different age and clinical groups.

Most stochastic models suggested for CoP movement, like the Ornstein-Uhlenbeck process (Frank et al., 2000; Newell et al., 1997), the stochastic time-delayed process (Boulet et al., 2010), and the pinned polymer model (Laak et al., 1998), consist of additive processes that are only capable to replicate the central tendency of $h_i$ but not the range of $h_i$ as found in the current study. The central tendency of $h_i$ and other conventional scaling exponents are not robust against changes in the superposition of additive sub-processes, like subtraction of trends, as reflected by the significant difference of the central tendency of $h_i$ between CoP and the residual CoP–GL traces in both relaxed and quiet standing. In contrast, the variation of $h_i$ as illustrated by the width of the distribution $P(h_i)$ (see Figs. 2–4) is robust against the subtraction of the GL movements but nevertheless sensitive to multiplicative interactions between sub-processes as seen in the intermittent periods with GL movements. The width of distribution $P(h_i)$ of $h_i$ (see Figs. 2–4) is directly related to the width of the so-called multifractal spectrum (Ihlen and Vereijken, 2010). Multifractal variation is generated by multiplicative processes, not by conventional additive processes, indicated by the significant difference between the structure (i.e., $h_i$) of CoP and $h_i$ of the additive IAAFT surrogates in the intermittent periods of GL movements (see Fig. 4). Multifractal spectra with non-zero widths have previously been reported for CoP traces during quiet standing (Morales and Kolaczyk, 2002; Shimizu and Thurner, 2001), but the large change in $h_i$ in the intermittent periods of GL movements suggest that the multifractal variation of CoP is dependent on GL movements. The smaller central tendency of $h_i$ and narrower spectrum width (i.e., the narrower range of $h_i$ in Fig. 2) found in the CoP dynamics of Parkinson’s patients (Morales and Kolaczyk, 2002) and persons with balance disorders (Shimizu and Thurner, 2001) indicate that these patients have less movement in GL and larger variation in CoP–GL residuals, resulting from a decoupling between the time scales of the CoP dynamics. Furthermore, older persons have less GL movements in relaxed standing compared to younger persons, illustrated in Duarte and Sternad (2008) as a decrease in the central tendency of $h_i$ as computed by detrended fluctuation analysis. These results indicate a decoupling between temporal scales of the CoP dynamics of older persons, numerically defined as a decrease in the variation of $h_i$, which might be similar to Parkinson’s patients and patients with balance disorders. Thus, the numerical definition of variation in $h_i$ could be an important method to identify alterations in postural control in clinical groups.

The present study has a few shortcomings. Firstly, the indirect estimation of GL from the ground reaction force might inflate variations in CoP–GL traces for the relaxed standing condition with large voluntary CoM movements. Inflated variations in CoP–GL might originate from a poor estimation of GL in the periods of large CoM movements and might lead to artificial changes in $h_i$. However, King and Zatsiorsky (1997) found that indirect estimation of GL from ground reaction force performs well for large cyclical movement of the CoM during standing. Nevertheless, further studies should validate the present indirect estimation of CoM from the ground reaction force with the direct estimation from kinematic and anthropometric data in the periods of large CoM movements. Secondly, this study did not introduce explicit models for the variation in $h_i$ of the CoP and CoP–GL residuals. Future studies should employ the present methods for CoP dynamics obtained from multi-segmental models with intermittent ballistic control (Bottaro et al., 2005; Morasso and Schieppati, 1999,2002) and hybrid models that involve stochastic processes (e.g., Peterka, 2000,2002). Thirdly, this study did not measure the ankle, knee, or hip joint kinematics, nor the activation of flexors and extensors muscles of these joints. In subsequent studies, these measurements will be necessary to obtain further information about the intermittent generation of joint torques during quiet and relaxed standing and the contribution of flexor and extensor muscles to this intermittent torque generation. Fourthly, this study did not compare different age or clinical groups to investigate changes in the variation of $h_i$ of the CoP trace and the CoP–GL residuals. Further studies of the relationship between variation of $h_i$ and GL movements in for example older persons, patients with balance disorders, and persons with high risk-of-falling, are important to further our understanding of changes in postural control with age and neurodegenerative disease. Finally, further studies should also address the test–retest reliability of both $h_i$ and $P(h_i)$ measures in these clinical groups.

5. Conclusion

Variation in the scale-dependent structure $h_i$ of CoP during human standing is dependent on changes in GL position. The range of $h_i$ was significantly larger in relaxed standing compared to quiet standing because of a less persistent structure (i.e., smaller $h_i$) in the CoP and CoP–GL in intermittent periods of larger movements of GL. These intermittent periods of GL movements were generated by intermittent phase couplings between the multiple time scales of both CoP and residual CoP–GL traces. The current method for identification of variation in the structure of CoP and CoP–GL traces might contribute to further developments of models of intermittent postural control and improved differentiation of postural adjustments in older persons and patients with neurodegenerative diseases.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that no conflict of interest is associated with the present study.

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References


