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**Biotech Method**

## **Transcriptome-based identification of the optimal reference CHO genes for normalisation of qPCR data**

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Keywords: Chinese hamster ovary cells, qPCR, Gene expression, Reference genes, Expression stability.

Abbreviations: **CHO** = Chinese hamster ovary; **CV** = coefficient of variation; **Ct** = cycle threshold; **MFC** = maximum fold change; **qPCR** = quantitative polymerase chain reaction; **SD** = standard deviation

## **Abstract**

Real-time quantitative PCR (qPCR) is the standard method for determination of relative changes in mRNA transcript abundance. Analytical accuracy, precision, and reliability are critically dependent on the selection of internal control reference genes. In this study we have identified optimal reference genes that can be utilized universally for qPCR analysis of CHO cell mRNAs. Initially, transcriptomic datasets were analysed to identify eight endogenous genes that exhibited high expression stability across four distinct CHO cell lines sampled in different culture phases. The relative transcript abundance of each gene in twenty diverse, commonly-applied experimental conditions was then determined by qPCR analysis. Utilizing GeNorm, BestKeeper, and NormFinder algorithms, we identified four mRNAs (Gnb1, Fkbp1a, Tmed2 and Mmadhc) that exhibited a highly stable level of expression across all conditions, validating their utility as universally-applicable reference genes. Whilst any combination of only two genes can be generally used for normalization of qPCR data, we show that specific combinations of reference genes are particularly suited to discrete experimental conditions. In summary we report the identification of fully-validated universal reference genes, optimized primer sequences robust to genomic mutations, and simple reference gene pair selection guidelines that enable streamlined qPCR analyses of mRNA abundance in CHO cells with maximum accuracy and precision.

## **1. Introduction**

Real-time quantitative PCR (qPCR) is the standard method of choice for determining relative changes in gene expression at the transcriptional level. In Chinese hamster ovary (CHO) cell research it is routinely utilized to, for example, evaluate relative clone performance, determine expression stability, test the functionality of genetic components, and identify mechanistic bases of phenotypic variation (e.g. [1-4]). Accordingly, for this industrially-important cell type, qPCR is a commonly-used core technique, where accuracy and precision are of critical importance.

Accurate relative quantification of gene expression by qPCR is dependent on a normalization strategy to correct for sample-to-sample variations in RNA quantity, RNA integrity, and reverse-transcriptase efficiency [5-7]. Typically, this is achieved by normalizing the expression of genes of interest to that of internal control reference genes. Accordingly, the quality of qPCR data is critically dependent on the ‘quality’ of reference genes used. However, despite the publication of the MIQE guidelines [8], and frequent reminders of the importance of reference gene selection (e.g. [9]), unvalidated, sub-optimal reference genes are still commonly utilized [10-12].

An ideal reference gene exhibits consistent expression levels across all experimental conditions of interest (e.g. cell types, physiological states, growth conditions). However, previous studies suggest that such ideal universal reference genes do not exist, necessitating the use of reference gene combinations specific to different experimental systems. Indeed, it has been shown that many commonly utilized, historically-popular reference genes (e.g. Gapdh, Actb) display divergent expression levels dependent on experimental conditions [13-17]. Unsurprisingly, the universal application of these traditional ‘housekeeping genes’ can lead to significant errors in data interpretation. Accordingly, it is essential to identify and validate specific reference genes for specific experimental systems. This process has been

followed for many diverse cell-types and experimental setups [18-21]. Whilst useful reference genes have been previously identified in CHO cells [22], in this study we significantly improve upon previous work through the use of RNA-seq transcriptomic datasets to identify novel, optimal reference genes and genomic sequence analysis to design primers that are robust across all CHO cell lineages. We validate reference gene performance in previously untested experimental conditions and identify specific, optimal reference gene combinations for commonly applied experimental designs, maximising analytical accuracy and precision. We provide simple guidelines for the selection of fully-validated, universally-applicable reference genes for any qPCR study based on CHO cells.

## 2. Materials and methods

### RNA-seq analysis of CHO cell transcriptomes and candidate reference gene selection

Two distinct transcriptomic datasets were separately generated and analyzed. Total RNA was extracted from 1.) three CHO cell lines (CAT-S, derived from CHOK1 by MedImmune; CAT-S clone expressing glutamine synthetase; CAT-S clone expressing a monoclonal antibody and glutamine synthetase) during exponential and stationary phases of growth (dataset 1; six experimental conditions), and 2.) a single CHO cell line (CHO-S clone expressing a monoclonal antibody) during lag, exponential, and stationary phases of growth (dataset 2; three experimental conditions). For each experimental condition, RNA was extracted from  $5 \times 10^6$  viable cells (two technical replicates) using RNeasy mini kits (Qiagen, Crawley, UK). RNA purity and integrity were confirmed using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Paisley, UK) and 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies, Wokingham, UK). RNA-seq libraries were prepared using the TruSeq RNA library preparation kit (Illumina, Essex, UK) and sequenced using an Illumina HiSeq 2000 system (Illumina). For each dataset, all libraries were indexed and sequenced simultaneously (i.e. dataset 1 comprised two technical replicates of six conditions = twelve libraries). Sequence reads were mapped to the CHO-K1 reference genome using Tophat [23, 24], and the relative abundance of each transcript was calculated using Cufflinks [25]. Genes with mean expression levels above the 80th percentile were selected, and the coefficient of variation (CV%; standard deviation/mean) and maximum fold change (MFC; highest expression level/lowest expression level) of each gene were calculated in both datasets. The five genes with highest expression stability across the experimental conditions (i.e. lowest CV% and MFCs), along with the three highest ranking ‘traditional housekeepers’ [26], were selected as candidate reference genes.

Due to confidentiality restrictions, RNA-seq data from proprietary CHO cell lines cannot be deposited in public databases. However, the datasets can be obtained from the authors for non-commercial research purposes upon acceptance of a material transfer agreement.

#### Primer design and validation

Chinese hamster, CHO-K1, and murine gene sequences were aligned using Clustal [27], and primers were designed to amplify conserved regions. Using Primer-BLAST [28], primers were designed to span exon-exon boundaries and anneal at 60°C (Table 2). Primers were synthesized (Sigma, Poole, UK) and amplification efficiencies were determined from standard curves (10-fold serial dilutions of pooled cDNA samples) using the equation  $E = 10^{(-1/\text{slope})}$  (Table 2). Primer specificities were confirmed by agarose gel electrophoresis, melting curve analysis, and direct sequencing of qPCR products.

#### Cell culture and sampling conditions

All CHO cell lines were routinely cultured in CD-CHO medium (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Paisley, UK) at 37°C in 5% (v/v) CO<sub>2</sub> in vented Erlenmeyer flasks (Corning, UK), shaking at 140 rpm, and subcultured every 3-4 days at a seeding density of  $2 \times 10^5$  cells/ml. Cell concentration and viability were determined by an automated Trypan Blue exclusion assay using a Vi-Cell cell viability analyser (Beckman-Coulter, High Wycombe, UK). Clonal, recombinant protein-expressing cell lines were constructed under MSX (Sigma) selection in the glutamine synthetase expression system. CHO-S derived cell lines evolved over 200 generations were obtained from A. Fernandez-Martell [29]. Cell-line specific RNA samples were obtained from exponentially growing cultures in Erlenmeyer flasks. Cell culture environment-specific samples were obtained from exponentially growing cells cultured in 24-

well plates (static culture; Nunc, Stafford, UK), 96-well plates (shaking culture; Nunc), mini-bioreactors (shaking growth; Sartorius, Epsom, UK), and 125-ml Erlenmeyer flasks (shaking culture; Thermo Fisher Scientific). Experimental technique-specific samples were harvested from i) cells transfected with DNA-lipid complexes comprising DNA and Lipofectamine (Thermo Fisher Scientific), prepared according to the manufacturer's instructions, ii) cells electroporated with DNA using the Amaxa Nucleofector (Lonza; program U024), and iii) cells cultured at 32°C. All samples were collected in triplicate.

#### RNA extraction, reverse transcription, and qPCR analysis

Total RNA was extracted from cells using RNeasy mini kits (Qiagen, Crawley, UK). RNA purity was confirmed by measuring 260 : 230 nm and 260 : 280 nm absorbance ratios using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific). RNA integrity was confirmed using a Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies, Wokingham, UK) and agarose gel electrophoresis. 800 ng of extracted RNA was reverse transcribed using the Quantitect reverse transcription kit (Qiagen), according to manufacturer's instructions (genomic DNA was eliminated during this procedure). cDNA was diluted 1: 10 in nuclease free water prior to qPCR analysis using a 7500 fast real-time PCR system (Applied Biosystems, Cheshire, UK). Reaction mixtures containing 12.5 µl QuantiFast SYBR green PCR master mix (Qiagen), 2 µl cDNA, 2.5 µl primer mix (final concentration of 200 nM per primer), and 8 µl nuclease free water were prepared in MicroAmp fast optical 96-well plates (Applied Biosystems). Amplification conditions were as follows: 95°C for 5 min, followed by 40 cycles at 95°C for 15 s and 60°C for 60 s. Melting curve analysis was performed from 60 – 95°C. Reaction mixtures containing no template, or products from reverse transcription reactions performed in the absence of reverse transcriptase, were used as negative controls. All samples were run in triplicate and mean Ct (cycle threshold) values were used for further analysis.



## Analysis of gene expression stability

Reference gene expression stabilities across varying experimental conditions were analysed using GeNorm ([30]; <https://genorm.cmgg.be/>), NormFinder ([31]; <http://moma.dk/normfinder-software>), and BestKeeper ([32]; <http://www.gene-quantification.de/bestkeeper.html>) software packages according to developer's instructions.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **In silico identification of candidate reference genes**

In order to identify potential reference genes, we analysed two transcriptomic datasets, derived from RNA-seq analyses of 1.) three discrete CHO cell lines (CAT-S, a CAT-S clone expressing glutamine synthetase, and a CAT-S clone expressing glutamine synthetase and a monoclonal antibody) in two different growth phases (exponential and stationary), and 2.) a further CHO cell line (CHO-S clone expressing a monoclonal antibody) in three distinct growth phases (lag, exponential, and stationary). Ideally reference gene expression levels are similar to those of the gene(s) of interest. Therefore, given that the majority of qPCR studies in CHO cells measure expression of strongly-expressed recombinant genes, we focussed our search for reference gene candidates on relatively highly-expressed endogenous genes (expression levels > the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile). Genes were ranked according to expression stability across all experimental conditions in both datasets, as measured by both coefficient of variation (CV%) and maximum fold change (MFC; fold change between the largest and smallest expression values within the dataset).

As shown in Table 1, the five top ranked genes exhibited very high expression stability across the experimental conditions tested, having CVs < 5.5%, and MFCs < 1.16 in both datasets. Accordingly, these genes (Pkar1a, Fkbp1a, Mmadhc, Gnb1, Tmed2) were identified as ideal reference gene candidates for qPCR analyses in CHO cells. We also determined the expression stability of commonly-used ‘traditional housekeepers’ [26]. The three highest ranking housekeepers (Actb, Pgam1, Gapdh) exhibited significantly lower expression stabilities (CVs > 25%, MFCs > 2) than the top-ranked genes. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the five newly-identified candidates would have superior reference gene performance across diverse experimental conditions in CHO cells. However, for comparison, we also included the three top-ranking classical ‘housekeepers’ in our candidate screen. We

note that all genes had significantly higher CVs in dataset 1 compared to dataset 2, presumably due to the increased number of experimental conditions tested ( $6 > 3$ ).

Optimized qPCR primers were designed for each of the eight candidate reference genes using Primer-BLAST [28]. Given that CHO cells are prone to genetic changes (e.g. via genetic drift and DNA replication errors [33-35]), we designed primers to target sequence regions that are conserved between mouse, chinese hamster [36], and CHO-K1 [24] genomes (see Table 2 for primer sequences). We reasoned that these regions will be less susceptible to genetic changes, and accordingly that our primers will be robust across diverse CHO cell lineages and experimental setups. Further, to facilitate the use of reference gene combinations in high-throughput qPCR analysis, all primers were designed to amplify targets at a unified annealing temperature ( $60^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). Specificity and acceptable amplification efficiency (96 - 102%; Table 2) was confirmed for each primer pair by melt curve and standard curve analysis respectively.

### **Gnb1, Fkbp1a, Mmadhc, and Tmed2 exhibit very high expression stability across all experimental conditions**

To identify reference genes that can be utilized for the vast majority of experimental designs we profiled the expression level of each candidate gene in a wide variety of diverse, commonly-applied experimental conditions (Figure 1). Samples included nine discrete CHO cell lines that had been subjected to cloning, selection and directed evolution processes. With respect to the latter, these cell lines had been maintained in culture for over 200 generations, and accordingly enabled a direct assessment of the hypothesis that our designed primers target sequence regions that are robust to genetic drift. Moreover, they provided a direct measurement of the impact of cell culture age (i.e. passage number) on reference gene expression stability. Other conditions tested included varying growth phases (e.g. lag,

exponential, early stationary, late stationary), cell culture environments (e.g. shaking culture, static culture, mini-bioreactors), and commonly used techniques (e.g. electroporation, lipofection, cold-shock). Collectively, these conditions cover the majority of experimental manipulations that are used in qPCR studies employing CHO cells, providing a comprehensive assessment of candidate reference gene functionality.

The relative transcript abundance of candidate reference genes in 20 discrete CHO cell samples (Figure 1) was determined by qPCR analysis. To evaluate gene expression stabilities across the entire dataset we utilized three distinct, commonly-applied software packages. These three algorithms (GeNorm [30], NormFinder [31], BestKeeper [32]) use different methods to measure gene expression stability. NormFinder uses a linear mixed effects model to estimate expression variation, GeNorm calculates the mean pairwise variation for each gene compared to all other candidates (M), and BestKeeper uses Ct values to calculate descriptive statistics such as standard deviation (SD) and CV. Whilst they generally provide very similar results, to account for the relative strengths and weaknesses of each method, they are typically utilized in combination to assess candidate reference gene suitability [37, 38]. Each tool provides a ranking of candidate reference gene performance according to expression stability (S) values (NormFinder), M values (GeNorm) and SDs (BestKeeper), where values greater than 0.5, 0.5 and 1 respectively are considered indicators of unstable expression.

As shown in Table 3, whilst there was no absolute consensus between the three methods, gene rankings were similar for each algorithm and four genes were clearly identified as having higher expression stability than the other candidates. *Gnb1*, *Fkbp1a*, *Tmed2* and *Mmadhc* were identified as the four most stably expressed genes by both GeNorm and Bestkeeper (in different ranking orders; Table 3), and ranked as four of the top five genes by NormFinder. Further, all four of these genes were ranked first by at least one

software package. Moreover, the relative stability values calculated for these genes were significantly lower (i.e. indicating greater expression stability) than those of the four remaining candidate genes (Gapdh, Pkar1a, Actb, Pgam1). For example, Bestkeeper-calculated SDs and GeNorm M values ranged from 0.14 – 0.21 and 0.144 – 0.197 respectively for the top four genes, compared to 0.37 – 0.45 and 0.282 – 0.364 for the bottom four genes. Indeed, GeNorm M values highlight the clear separation of the candidate genes into two distinct groups, as only genes with M values below 0.2 are considered to have ‘very high’ expression stability [39]. These findings are therefore largely in line with our original RNA-seq results (which only profiled relative expression levels in four distinct cell lines and three different growth phases), where the top five ranked genes (including Pkar1a) had significantly higher expression stabilities than classical “housekeepers”. Accordingly, our results i) validated that traditional housekeeping genes, specifically Gapdh, Actb and Pgam1, are suitable reference genes for qPCR analyses in CHO cells (i.e. all three have acceptable expression stabilities, as evidenced by M values < 0.5, S values < 0.5, and SDs < 1), but ii) determined that four newly-identified genes with significantly higher expression stabilities offer superior reference gene performance, and, importantly iii) showed that these four genes exhibit stable expression across a wide range of commonly-used experimental conditions, potentially enabling a universal combination of reference genes to be utilized for all qPCR studies. With respect to the latter, GeNorm can be used to determine the optimal number of reference genes required for accurate data normalization by calculating the pairwise variation ( $V_{n/n+1}$ ) between sequential normalization factors ( $NF_n$  and  $NF_{n+1}$ ) (as described in [30]). Analysing the entire dataset,  $V_{2+3}$  is calculated to be 0.063 ( $V_{3+4} = 0.046$ ), well below the proposed cut-off value of 0.15, indicating that only two of the identified reference genes are generally required for normalization of gene expression in CHO cells.

## **Identifying optimal reference gene-pair combinations for any qPCR study in CHO cells**

To both i) further confirm that a universal set of reference genes can be utilized generically for qPCR experiments in CHO cells, and ii) identify specific, optimal combinations of reference genes for discrete experimental setups, we analysed gene expression stability in distinct conditions individually. To rigorously test candidate reference gene performance in each specific condition, we profiled gene expression levels in all nine discrete cell lines (see Figure 1) following electroporation, lipofection, and cold-shock. Further, we investigated gene expression levels in each growth phase (lag, exponential, early stationary, late stationary) in three different host cell lines (CAT-S, CHO-S, CHO-K1). Late stationary phase RNA samples were taken from cells that had not divided for > 3 days, providing a direct measurement of reference gene expression stability in ‘old cells’. Table 4 shows the results from analysing each individual dataset with GeNorm, BestKeeper and NormFinder. *Gnb1*, *Fkbp1a*, *Tmed2* and *Mmadhc* exhibited very high expression stability in all experimental conditions, having M values < 0.23, S values < 0.25 and SDs < 0.32 in all five datasets. Accordingly, these data conclusively show that all four genes exhibit constant expression levels across diverse experimental conditions, and are therefore ‘ideal’ reference genes that can be universally-applied in qPCR analyses (whilst we predict that their expression will be similarly stable in more unusual experimental conditions not tested here, their performance in such systems should be validated before use). Although we specifically selected candidate reference genes with relatively high expression levels in order to enable optimal normalization of strongly-expressed recombinant gene mRNA transcript abundances, *Gnb1*, *Fkbp1a*, *Tmed2* and *Mmadhc* will also be suitable for studies measuring expression of endogenous CHO genes. In each of the RNA samples that we analyzed by RNA-seq, the log<sub>2</sub> fold change between the highest expressed reference gene and median gene expression levels was < 4.7 (data not shown). Accordingly, our identified reference genes are not too highly

expressed to prevent accurate normalization of most endogenous gene transcript abundances in qPCR analyses.

As shown in Table 4, specific optimal combinations of reference genes were identified for different experimental conditions, where  $V_{2+3}$  was  $< 0.07$  for each dataset. For example, our findings indicate that Gnb1+Mmadhc and Gnb1+Fkbp1a are ideal reference gene selections when quantifying gene expression by qPCR following electroporation and lipofection respectively. Whilst the four newly-identified, universally-applicable reference genes all exhibit highly stable expression in each experimental system, utilizing the most stably expressed gene pair for each condition will optimize both accuracy and precision. Accordingly, the use of condition-specific gene pairs may decrease the minimum detectable fold-change in gene expression levels. Therefore, based on our findings, we suggest the following simple rules for reference gene selection for qPCR analyses in CHO cells:

1. Routinely use the same reference gene pair for all studies (we recommend Gnb1 and Fkbp1a, but Tmed2 and Mmadhc are also applicable; see Table 3).
2. When maximum accuracy is required (e.g. detecting fold changes  $< 1.5$ ), use condition-specific reference gene combinations according to Table 4.
3. If conditions are significantly different to those tested in this study (see Figure 1), validate the performance of Gnb1, Fkbp1a, Tmed2 and Mmadhc in the experimental system, and use genes that exhibit highest expression stabilities.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, we have utilized transcriptomic datasets to identify novel reference gene candidates, and subsequently comprehensively validated their expression stability in diverse, commonly-used experimental conditions. We have identified a set of optimal reference genes (Gnb1, Fkbp1a, Tmed2, Mmadhc) that can be used universally in qPCR studies in CHO cells,

and specifically designed corresponding primers that are robust to genomic mutations. These genes function in different cellular pathways, being involved in protein folding (Fkbp1a), protein trafficking (Tmed2), signal transduction (Gnb1), and vitamin B12 metabolism (Mmadhc), and accordingly the risk of co-regulation is minimal. Our findings show that these newly-identified genes exhibit sufficient expression stability such that only two reference genes are required for accurate normalization of qPCR data, enabling significant savings in time, cost, and sample usage. The provision of fully-validated universal reference genes, optimized primer sequences, and simple gene pair selection guidelines (including specific, optimal gene combinations for discrete experimental conditions) will enable industrial and academic groups to perform streamlined qPCR analyses with maximum accuracy and precision. The specific route of reference gene identification and validation described in this study is particularly applicable to other cell-types that are commonly utilized in a large number of diverse experimental conditions.



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**Table 1: Identification of candidate reference genes.** Two transcriptomic datasets derived from RNA-seq analysis of four discrete CHO cell lines in different growth phases were analysed to identify genes exhibiting highest expression stabilities (dataset 1 = three cell lines in two growth phases, dataset 2 = one cell line in three growth phases). Genes were ranked according to coefficient of variation (CV%; standard deviation/mean) and maximum fold change (MFC; highest expression level/ lowest expression level) in expression across different experimental conditions. The five genes with highest expression stabilities are shown, as well as the three highest ranking genes from a panel of ‘traditional housekeepers’. FPKM = fragments per kilobase of transcript per million mapped reads.

Gene	RNA-seq dataset 1			RNA-seq dataset 2		
	Mean FPKM	CV%	Max FC	Mean FPKM	CV%	Max FC
<b>All Genes</b>						
Pkar1a	160	2.55	1.08	341	0.21	1.00
Fkbp1a	687	3.20	1.10	568	2.05	1.05
Mmadhc	124	4.36	1.13	108	3.02	1.06
Gnb1	457	5.49	1.15	1124	1.23	1.03
Tmed2	217	5.43	1.14	286	3.01	1.07
<b>House-keepers</b>						
Actb	2722	25	2.00	5066	4.43	1.11
Pgam1	306	27	2.16	613	2.35	1.05
Gapdh	803	32	2.64	2163	2.80	1.07

**Table 2: Reference gene primer sequences and amplification efficiencies.** Primers span exon-exon boundaries, anneal at 60°C, and amplify regions conserved in Chinese Hamster, CHO-K1 and Mouse. Amplification efficiencies and correlation coefficients ( $R^2$ ) were determined from standard curves (10-fold serial dilutions of pooled cDNA samples) using the equation  $E = 10^{-1/\text{slope}}$ , and linear regression analysis respectively. Ct values represent the mean of twenty independent experiments (see Figure 1).

Gene	NCBI Accession number	Primer sequences	Primer Efficiency	$R^2$	Amplicon size (bp)	Ct value
Pgam1	XM_007617182.1	AGGCGCAGGTAAAGATCTGG TGCGATCCTTACTGATGTTGC	96.06%	0.996	96	19.47
Pkar1a	XM_003500312.2	GAATCCTCATGGGAAGCACTCTG CCTTGCACCACGATCTTCTG	96.49%	0.995	160	19.64
Mmadhc	XM_003513988.2	TGTCACCTCAATGGGACTGC CAGGTGCATCACTACTCTGAAAC	97.63%	0.997	145	21.34
Gapdh	NM_001244854.2	GAAAGCTGTGGCGTGATGG TACTTGGCAGGTTTCTCCAG	98.03%	0.998	187	15.71
Gnb1	NM_001246701.1	CCATATGTTTCTTTCCAATGGC AAGTCGTCGTACCCAGCAAG	98.39%	0.999	184	18.02
Tmed2	XM_007648402.1	GCCCACATGGATGGGACATAC TGATGAGCTTCTGTCTCCATGTC	98.44%	0.999	131	20.57
Fkbp1a	XM_003499952.2	CTCTCGGGACAGAAACAAGC GACCTACACTCATCTGGGCTAC	99.09%	0.998	95	19.74
Actb	NM_001244575.1	TGACCCAGATCATGTTTGAGACC CAGGATGGCATGAGGGAGAG	101.80%	0.998	173	16.90

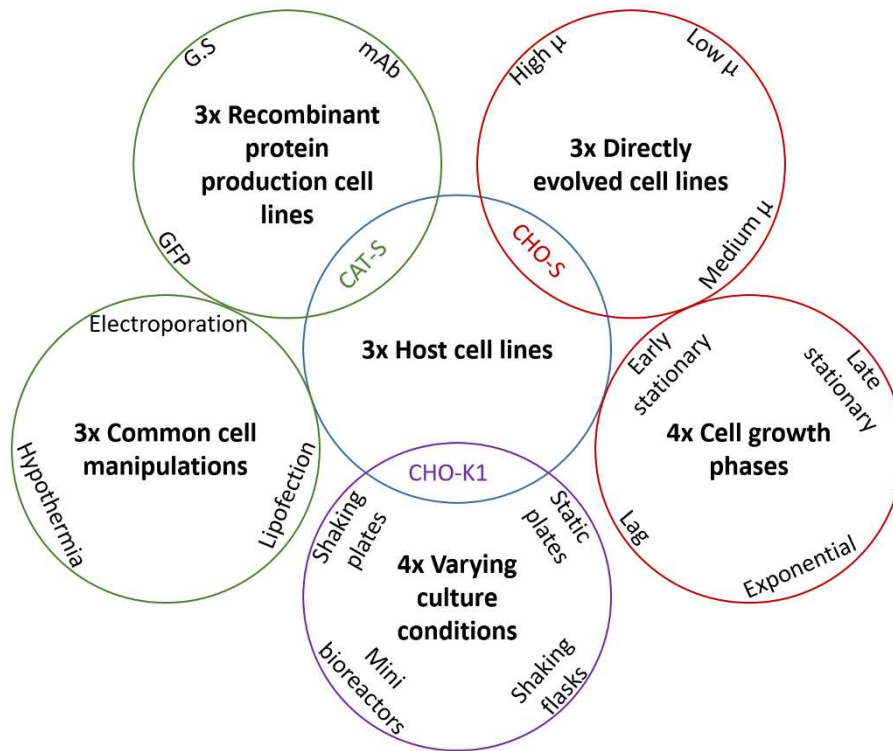
**Table 3: Gnb1, Fkbp1a, Tmed2 and Mmadhc exhibit very high expression stability across diverse, commonly-applied experimental conditions.** The transcript abundance of eight candidate reference genes in twenty discrete CHO cell samples (see Figure 1) was measured by qPCR analysis, and relative gene expression stabilities across all experimental conditions were determined using GeNorm, NormFinder and Bestkeeper software packages.

	geNorm		NormFinder		BestKeeper	
	Stability Value (M)	Rank	Stability Value (S)	Rank	SD ( $\pm$ CP)	Rank
<b>Gnb1</b>	0.197	4	0.148	1	0.15	2
<b>Fkbp1a</b>	0.144	1	0.180	2	0.21	4
<b>Tmed2</b>	0.183	3	0.288	4	0.14	1
<b>Mmadhc</b>	0.144	1	0.291	5	0.18	3
Gapdh	0.282	5	0.251	3	0.37	5
Pkar1a	0.348	7	0.305	6	0.40	6
Actb	0.326	6	0.309	7	0.41	7
Pgam1	0.364	8	0.324	8	0.45	8



**Table 4: Identification of specific, optimal reference combinations for discrete experimental conditions.** The expression stability of the four ‘best-performing’ reference gene candidates (see Table 3) was analysed in distinct conditions individually. For each experimental system, samples were collected from nine discrete CHO cell lines (see Figure 1). Optimal reference gene combinations recommended for use in each specific experimental condition are shown in bold.

Condition	Expression stability (rank)	V <sub>2+3</sub>	V <sub>3+4</sub>	NormFinder S values (range)	GeNorm M values (range)	BestKeeper SD (± CP) (range)
Discrete cell lines (exponential phase growth)	<b>Fkbp1a</b> <b>Tmed2</b> Mmadhc Gnb1	0.06	0.056	0.055 – 0.213	0.108 – 0.200	0.12 – 0.14
Cell growth phases	<b>Mmadhc</b> <b>Fkbp1a</b> Gnb1 Tmed2	0.041	0.057	0.051 – 0.226	0.04 – 0.165	0.12 – 0.31
Lipofection	<b>Gnb1</b> <b>Fkbp1a</b> Mmadhc Tmed2	0.046	0.046	0.078 – 0.167	0.139 – 0.179	0.08 – 0.13
Electroporation	<b>Gnb1</b> <b>Mmadhc</b> Tmed2 Fkbp1a	0.064	0.061	0.068 – 0.247	0.117 – 0.223	0.07 – 0.15
Hypothermia	<b>Tmed2</b> <b>Fkbp1a</b> Gnb1 Mmadhc	0.042	0.045	0.044 – 0.176	0.088 – 0.152	0.07 – 0.16



**Figure 1: Reference gene expression levels were profiled in a wide range of commonly-applied experimental conditions.** The expression stability of eight candidate reference genes (see Table 1) was determined across twenty discrete experimental samples (see Table 3). Host cell-line specific RNA samples were obtained from exponentially growing cultures of CAT-S, CHO-S and CHOK1. Other condition-specific RNA samples were obtained from varying host cell lines (denoted by circle colours). GFP = green fluorescent protein; mAb = monoclonal antibody;  $\mu$  = growth rate.