

## Sharing Data from Molecular Simulations

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# Sharing Data from Molecular Simulations

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3 33 **KEYWORDS** Data Sharing, Open Science, Reproducibility, File Standard, Molecular  
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9 35 **ABSTRACT** Given the need for modern researchers to produce open, reproducible scientific  
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11 36 output, the lack of standards and best practices for sharing data and workflows used to  
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13 37 produce and analyze molecular dynamics (MD) simulations have become an important issue  
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15 38 in the field. There are now multiple well-established packages to perform molecular dynamics  
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17 39 simulations, often highly tuned for exploiting specific classes of hardware, and each with  
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19 40 strong communities surrounding them, but with very limited interoperability/transferability  
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21 41 options. Thus, the choice of the software package often dictates the workflow for both  
22  
23 42 simulation production and analysis. The level of detail in documenting the workflows and  
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25 43 analysis code varies greatly in published work, hindering reproducibility of the reported results  
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27 44 and the ability for other researchers to build on these studies. An increasing number of  
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29 45 researchers are motivated to make their data available, but many challenges remain in order  
30  
31 46 to effectively share and reuse simulation data. To discuss these and other issues related to  
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33 47 best practices in the field in general, we organized a workshop in November 2018 (  
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35 48 <https://bioexcel.eu/events/workshop-on-sharing-data-from-molecular-simulations/> ). Here, we  
36  
37 49 present a brief overview of this workshop and topics discussed. We hope this effort will spark  
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39 50 further conversation in the MD community to pave the way towards more open, interoperable  
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41 51 and reproducible outputs coming from research studies using MD simulations.  
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## 53 Introduction

54 Molecular simulations have become increasingly powerful and accessible in recent  
55 years, due in part to the rise of HPC<sup>1-3</sup> and GPU-powered clusters and powerful desktop  
56 computers<sup>4</sup> as well as the development of user-friendly software to set-up simulations<sup>5,6</sup>. The  
57 underlying physical models and methods have also improved over the years to address ever  
58 more complex biological and chemical questions<sup>7,8</sup>. Finally, the number of users and available  
59 tools is continuously increasing, as is the amount and complexity of workflows and produced  
60 outputs<sup>9,10</sup>. In this context, defining best practices related to documentation of protocols and  
61 code used to generate and/or analyze Molecular Dynamics (MD) simulations is becoming  
62 more important than ever<sup>11</sup>. A set of guidelines for reporting results obtained using molecular  
63 dynamics techniques and an opportunity to share data, similar to what structural biologists  
64 have achieved with the world-wide Protein Data Bank<sup>12</sup> (wwPDB), should generally help to  
65 improve the quality, reproducibility, statistics, and re-use of the published results.

66 Here, we would like to focus on the term reproducibility. The definition of reproducibility  
67 and its distinction from replicability can vary between disciplines<sup>13-15</sup>, but in this context, we  
68 will broadly define reproducibility as the ability to re-implement the workflows of published work  
69 and obtain similar behavior for observables of interest as well as define the appropriate way  
70 to measure/calculate and report these observables<sup>16</sup>. Reproducibility is a long-standing issue  
71 for molecular modeling<sup>17</sup> and a key step toward better reproducibility and improved  
72 collaboration is making data more accessible and workflows interoperable. This can help  
73 reduce the entry barrier for the newcomers, but it could also help the existing practitioners to  
74 focus on answering scientific questions rather than wasting time in redeveloping existing sets  
75 of parameters or translating files formats to pass from one software to another. To reach this  
76 goal, it is now necessary to overcome several difficulties:

- 77 • First, there is now a multitude of package-specific file formats and object models.

78 This variety, although increasing the efficiency for each package, introduces limitations in the

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3 79 interoperability and creates friction for users juggling with various software to generate and  
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5 80 analyze their data.

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8 81       • Second, there is still a lack of exhaustive documentation related to new software  
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10 82 development. The proliferation of various libraries and toolkits definitely opens up new  
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12 83 avenues of research, but documenting the entire workflow from building a molecular model  
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14 84 and parameterization to data analysis and visualization has become more complex. The  
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16 85 method sections in publications often lack sufficient details to successfully re-implement the  
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18 86 protocol or repeat the study from scratch, and default parameters to run a simulation may vary  
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21 87 from one software version to another.

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24 88       • Last but not least, there is no consensus to share data. The recent years have  
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26 89 seen developments of different open data platforms, but the (ever-increasing) size of the  
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28 90 generated trajectories makes it difficult to share simulation data efficiently. The absence of  
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30 91 appropriate infrastructure, guidelines, and incentives further complicate the situation<sup>18,19</sup>.

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35 93       In general, we are witnessing a growing effort to make science more open by  
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37 94 researchers themselves and increasingly so by funders and journals<sup>20,21</sup>. Soon, it may be  
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39 95 mandatory to share data and deposit models obtained from hybrid/integrative approaches  
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41 96 combining molecular modeling and experimental results<sup>22</sup>. Finding a way to consistently share  
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43 97 data, workflows, and protocols will be thus necessary to ensure an efficient information  
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45 98 exchange. Defining best practices and coming up with solutions should be a community effort  
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47 99 to achieve the best outcome for everyone involved. In an effort to start a discussion around  
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49 100 these questions, we organized a BioExcel workshop on *Sharing Data from Molecular*  
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51 101 *Simulations* (SDMS) in Stockholm, November 2018. In this paper, we present a summary of  
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55 102 discussions broadly focused on 4 topics:  
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- 104 • Standardization of file formats
- 105 • Streamlining molecular simulations data
- 106 • Tools for trajectory file sharing
- 107 • Reproducibility of molecular simulations

108 Each topic was introduced by 2 researchers and then openly discussed by all participants. All  
109 the presentations and the discussions were recorded and are accessible here:  
110 <https://bioexcel.eu/sdms18-recordings/>. The slides for the majority of the talks can be found  
111 here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2652703>.

### 113 **Standardization of file formats**

114 While in structural biology the established PDB file format was stable for decades<sup>12</sup>,  
115 the MD simulations field has a tendency to produce a multitude of input/output formats each  
116 related to one MD package<sup>1,23-27</sup>. With the rapid growth in complexity, size, and number of  
117 macromolecular structures led by advances in experimental techniques, even the canonical  
118 PDB format is now evolving to allow rendering and analyzing larger files with a gain in  
119 performance<sup>28</sup>. This evolution may also encourage the MD community to update its file formats  
120 to deal with larger and more heterogeneous data.

121 A new jointly developed format would need to be modular and flexible enough to not  
122 only take into account current but also catch future needs. Here arises a first question: What  
123 are the current and future needs of the MD community for such format? While particle  
124 coordinates are the current main feature both for input and output standards, other features  
125 need to be discussed such as physical/chemical descriptions of the model, experimental data  
126 used to create the model, technical details related to the simulation (such as algorithms used,  
127 sampling method, and forcefield). Different formats may be used as templates such as  
128 MMTF<sup>28</sup>, MMCIF<sup>29</sup>, JSON (<http://www.json.org/>), TNF<sup>30</sup>. At this workshop we all agreed that it

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3 129 would be a great advance if this new standard can follow the FAIR principle<sup>31</sup>: Findable,  
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5 130 Accessible, Interoperable, and Reproducible/Reusable. Many details remain to be discussed  
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8 131 and the standardization question cannot be solved in one workshop with only a small sample  
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10 132 of the MD community but need to be discussed by all main software developers joined with  
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12 133 users to ensure usability. To do so another workshop will be held soon in New York to further  
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14 134 discuss the question of file format and MD packages interoperability:  
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16  
17 135 <https://molssi.org/2019/07/29/molssi-workshop-molecular-dynamics-software-interoperability/>  
18

19 136 .  
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21 137 For further details and discussions interested readers can watch associated videos from the  
22  
23 138 2018 workshop:

- 26 139 • [Introduction of the topic](https://youtu.be/2S3qjBIE6Y4) by Mark Abraham (<https://youtu.be/2S3qjBIE6Y4>)
- 27  
28 140 • [Preliminary talk I](https://youtu.be/Hvy8-gyTmj8) by Erik Lindahl (<https://youtu.be/Hvy8-gyTmj8>)
- 29  
30 141 • [Preliminary talk II](https://youtu.be/48Eb2MLHoYU) from Alexandre Bonvin (<https://youtu.be/48Eb2MLHoYU>)
- 31  
32 142 • [Breakout discussions](#) presented by Phillip Stansfeld, Mikael Trellet, Daniel Smith  
33  
34 and Johanna Tiemann (<https://youtu.be/4fnV5EFXDpc>)  
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### 145 **Streamlining molecular simulations data**

146 The MD simulation is often not a means and an end in itself but instead is run as part of a  
147 larger workflow. Such workflows involve joining together the output of many independent  
148 programs, such as those used for parameterizing molecules, those for performing molecular  
149 dynamics, and those for trajectory analysis. Managing the data movement between different  
150 programs in this workflow is challenging for several reasons:

- 151 1. The file formats used by different programs in the workflow may be incompatible,  
152 thereby preventing certain combinations of tools from being used together.



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3 153 2. The features and forcefields supported by different programs in the workflow may be  
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5 154 incompatible, thereby forcing researchers to choose algorithms and forcefields based  
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8 155 on software compatibility rather than for good scientific reasons.  
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10 156 3. Different programs may implement features or forcefields in different ways, thereby  
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12 157 meaning that the results of running the workflow will depend on the exact combination  
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14 158 of programs (and possibly program versions) used. It is generally not possible to mix-  
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17 159 and-match different programs and get the same results.  
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21 161 These challenges have forced researchers to develop workflows using specific  
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23 162 software packages and specific forcefields. This creates divisions within the community and  
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26 163 makes it difficult to write workflows that function equally well across a number of forcefields  
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28 164 and a number of different software packages.

30 165 One of the solutions to this problem is the development of programs that  
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32 166 convert/handle molecular information between the different file formats such as VMD<sup>32</sup>,  
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34 167 cpptraj<sup>33</sup>, MDAnalysis<sup>34,35</sup>, mdtraj<sup>36</sup>, LOOS<sup>37,38</sup> and many others for trajectory analysis and  
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37 168 TopoGromacs<sup>39</sup>, CHARMM-GUI<sup>40</sup>, CHAMBER<sup>41</sup>, ParmEd  
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39 169 (<http://parmed.github.io/ParmEd/html/index.html#>), InterMol<sup>42</sup>  
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41 (https://github.com/shirtsgroup/InterMol), and others for topology generation and editing. The  
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43 170 aim of these programs is to translate as much information as possible from one molecular file  
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45 171 format into another. One recent example is BioSimSpace (<https://biosimspace.org/>), which  
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47 172 provides wrappers that simplify the generation of the command files that are used to control  
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49 173 the running of simulations. This allows researchers to write workflows that are independent of  
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51 174 the choice of the underlying packages used to perform the simulation. BioSimSpace aims to  
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53 175 run all stages of the workflow using the simulation software installed on the researcher's  
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55 176 computer that is compatible with the forcefield chosen for the specific calculation.  
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3 178 While translators and program wrappers like ParmEd and BioSimSpace solve some  
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5 179 of these problems, they are not a universal solution. They do not solve the issue that different  
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7 180 simulation programs use different algorithms (or interpretations of algorithms, for example,  
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9 181 different implementations of thermostats or integrators), or that different programs store and  
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11 182 represent molecular information in different ways (e.g. SHAKE information for constraining  
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13 183 bonds is represented in the molecular topology in GROMACS, while it is a simulation  
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15 184 command parameter in NAMD and AMBER). This means MD properties/observables  
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17 185 computed with one package will be systematically different by an often small but statistically  
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19 186 significant amount from those computed with a different package as shown for free energy  
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21 187 calculations<sup>43</sup>. Thus, the version and name of the MD program used to produce a simulation  
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23 188 result will affect that result, and must be reported accordingly. Furthermore, MD simulations  
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25 189 outputs are mainly trajectories which (1) represent ensemble averages (2) are chaotic in that  
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27 190 small differences in initial conditions cause large differences in the subsequent dynamics  
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29 ('butterfly effect'). This adds another layer of complexity and needs also a consensus on how  
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31 191 to further analyze/process these trajectories to provide the final quantities of interest.  
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37 193 The recordings of this session can be found here:

- 38  
39  
40 194 • [Introduction to the topic](https://youtu.be/6xOfN0y_uoQ) by John Chodera ([https://youtu.be/6xOfN0y\\_uoQ](https://youtu.be/6xOfN0y_uoQ))  
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42 195 • [Preliminary talk I](https://youtu.be/YPYeujSD-6Y) by Philip Stansfeld (<https://youtu.be/YPYeujSD-6Y>)  
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44 196 • [Preliminary talk II](https://youtu.be/w1d1xtbGhHc) by Christopher Woods (<https://youtu.be/w1d1xtbGhHc>)  
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46 197 • [Breakout discussions](#) presented by Christian Blau, Christopher Woods, Jonathan  
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48 Barnoud and Mark Abraham (<https://youtu.be/Z-JfBU3Emug>)  
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## 52 53 200 **Tools for trajectory file sharing**

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55 201 The benefits of sharing data together with the peer-reviewed publication, preprint or as a self-  
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57 202 standing research output seem to be many - from receiving additional credit for one's work to  
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3 203 improving reproducibility, reusability or offering potentially new avenues of research<sup>20,44</sup>. Some  
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5 204 disciplines, such as protein crystallography or genomics, have open data practices well  
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7 205 integrated into their workflow, with metadata being collected throughout the workflow, and  
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9 206 those practices are a *de facto* standard in scholarly communication. However, data sharing in  
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11 207 the MD community still has not become widely adopted because best practice guidelines or  
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13 208 journal recommendations on how to share MD simulations are yet to be established and  
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15 209 adopted by the whole community. Making data sharing a standard practice in the field faces  
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17 210 both technical and cultural challenges, although these are currently being tackled by some  
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19 211 ongoing initiatives and solutions<sup>20,45,46</sup>. Thus, the development of best practices and guidelines  
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21 212 for simulation data sharing will be of tremendous value, especially if created with the FAIR  
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23 213 principles in mind<sup>31</sup>. To do so, we need to address several important questions regarding *what*  
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25 214 *data* should be shared, *how* and *where*.

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27 215         Answering to the *what data* question would need longer discussions not limited to a  
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29 216 small group of individuals but involving the whole community and especially all the MD  
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31 217 packages (another workshop will be held soon to help starting to answer to this question:  
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33 218 <https://molssi.org/2019/07/29/molssi-workshop-molecular-dynamics-software-interoperability/>  
34  
35 219 ). The emergence of dedicated tools is now helping to answer to the *how* question. Software  
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37 220 such as MDsrv<sup>47</sup>, HTMoL<sup>48</sup>, Mol\* (<https://molstar.org>), Molmil<sup>49</sup> are now taking advantage of  
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39 221 the WebGL API for sharing trajectories through interactive visualization on the web<sup>50</sup>.

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41 222         Other fields of research can help us to answer to the *where* question. Existing  
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43 223 databanks, such as wwPDB<sup>51</sup> and Galaxy (<https://usegalaxy.org>), have been recognized by  
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45 224 the scientific community. However, the establishment of an analogous, specialized platform  
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47 225 for MD data, poses a great challenge, given the current lack of long-term support for the  
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49 226 infrastructure projects of this kind. It is not clear yet who should be responsible for building  
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51 227 such platform and how this infrastructure could be funded in a sustainable way, preferably  
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53 228 without relying on short-term research grants, to cover the costs of development, maintenance  
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229 and data hosting. In the meantime, community-driven, special-purpose platforms like the  
230 GPCRmd (<http://www.gpcrmd.org>), Lipidbook<sup>52</sup> and NMRlipids<sup>45</sup>  
231 (<http://nmrlipids.blogspot.com>), Ligandbook<sup>53</sup>, MoDEL<sup>54</sup> and BIGNASim<sup>55</sup> lead the way,  
232 providing specialized platforms for deposition and analysis of G protein-coupled receptors  
233 (GPCR), lipids, small molecules, proteins, and nucleic acids, respectively. General data  
234 sharing resources like Zenodo (<https://zenodo.org>), FigShare (<https://figshare.com>), Open  
235 Science Framework (<https://osf.io>) and others, also provide an opportunity for every  
236 researcher to deposit their simulation files and trajectories. Nevertheless, those resources may  
237 not provide sometimes enough space to sustainably store MD simulations outputs (with file  
238 size limits ranging between 5 GB and 50 GB).

239 To establish an efficient sharing culture, a systematic approach to developing tools  
240 and sharing guidelines is necessary, with the participation of the entire community in such  
241 activities and efforts. An open and inclusive discussion about best practices in data sharing,  
242 identification of short-term solutions based on the currently available frameworks and tools,  
243 as well as developing a strategy and requirements for future solutions bespoke to MD  
244 community and their needs is necessary. More details about the discussions taking place at  
245 the workshop can be found in the following videos:

- 246 • [Introduction to the topic](https://youtu.be/mvesL9Y_9xU) by Daniel Smith ([https://youtu.be/mvesL9Y\\_9xU](https://youtu.be/mvesL9Y_9xU))
- 247 • [Preliminary talk I](https://youtu.be/VOT6fEc7Iuc) by Johanna Tiemann (<https://youtu.be/VOT6fEc7Iuc>)
- 248 • [Preliminary talk II](https://youtu.be/TVS75j48mQ8) by Jana Selent (<https://youtu.be/TVS75j48mQ8>)
- 249 • [Breakout discussions](https://youtu.be/Uls1isntUPY) presented by John Chodera, Karmen Čondić-Jurkić, Samuli  
250 Ollila and Lucie Delemotte (<https://youtu.be/Uls1isntUPY>)

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## 252 **Reproducibility of molecular simulations**

253 MD simulations are chaotic and as such, the definition of reproducible results is non-  
254 trivial. First, the distinction between repeatability (by the same team and the same  
255 computational setup), replicability (by a different team and the same computational setup) and

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3 256 reproducibility (by a different team, and with a different experimental setup) should be made  
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5 257 <sup>14</sup>. Differences in outputs from these three perspectives may indicate different types of errors  
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7 258 (bugs in software, human errors, or different choices along the workflow - choice of code, force  
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9 259 field, system setup and more). The variability of parameters and dependence of the final  
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11 260 results on both software and hardware makes it complicated (but also often unnecessary) to  
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13 261 achieve the exact replication/repetition of any given setup, and untangling all the effects would  
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15 262 be a difficult task. Focusing on a set of observables that can be calculated and preferably  
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17 263 validated against experiments might be a better way of approaching reproducibility in this  
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19 264 particular field. Similarly, focusing at observables which, despite the underlying chaoticity of  
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21 265 the detailed dynamics, are reproducible without too large variation might be beneficial.  
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23 266 Reaching an agreement on which observables we should aim to reproduce and how to  
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25 267 properly calculate and report these values is thus desirable. For this, educational efforts are  
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27 268 needed: best practice dissemination in terms of calculating statistical properties, for example,  
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29 269 are crucial<sup>16</sup>. Coming up with standard benchmarks would also help, where the performance  
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31 270 of different software/forcefield combinations for selected tasks could be compared.  
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37 271 In practice, data sharing would help with replicability and reproducibility. Practical  
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39 272 challenges come from the size of data sets. However, one can envision sharing at least  
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41 273 minimal data sets to improve

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44 274 ● methods reproducibility: provide sufficient details to replicate the study; this is  
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46 275 in principle already done in publications, but authors, reviewers, and editors  
47  
48 276 should pay special attention to the question, and sharing directly all input files  
49  
50 277 should be mandatory,

51  
52  
53 278 ● raw data reproducibility: share a minimum amount of data in the form of MD  
54  
55 279 simulation snapshots, or even better whole trajectories, on existing data  
56  
57 280 sharing repositories - Zenodo, Figshare, OSF, and

281 • results and inferential reproducibility: share among other analysis code,  
282 pipeline/workflow and example used.

283 Inspiration can be found in other research fields (e.g. Genomics<sup>56</sup> or Proteomics<sup>57</sup>) and existing  
284 dedicated initiatives, like MemProtMD<sup>58</sup> (<http://memprotmd.bioch.ox.ac.uk>), NMRlipids project  
285 ([www.nmr lipids.blogspot.fi](http://www.nmr lipids.blogspot.fi)) and GPCRmd (<http://www.gpcrmd.org>), show that small groups of  
286 people focused on a narrow topic can create the necessary structure to share even large  
287 datasets in an efficient way. For further details and discussions interested readers can watch  
288 associated videos:

- 289 • [Introduction to the topic](#) by Karmen Čondić-Jurkić  
290 (<https://youtu.be/IUTQgOXDEP8>)
- 291 • [Preliminary talk I](#) by Helmut Grubmüller (<https://youtu.be/cliVmGlrKag>)
- 292 • [Preliminary talk II](#) by Samuli Ollila (<https://youtu.be/46s33SonsiU>)
- 293 • [Breakout discussions](#) presented by Mikael Trellet, Alexandre Bonvin, Mark  
294 Abraham and Christopher Woods ([https://youtu.be/ex0\\_bqmJwE8](https://youtu.be/ex0_bqmJwE8))

296 This article summarizes the discussions started during the workshop held in Stockholm  
297 in November 2018. As may be noted by the reader, these discussions have not solved the  
298 issues about sharing data that our field is facing. Of course, this has never been the goal of  
299 such a small workshop. This workshop was intended to start asking relevant questions. Thus,  
300 this document (and the videos associated) can be seen as a road map for future  
301 developments. It is now crucial to build a community responsible for transforming these ideas  
302 into actions. This community needs to represent a diversity of perspectives by including both  
303 MD users and developers, newcomers and more seasoned practitioners, PhD students and  
304 postdocs, who are performing MD simulations on a daily basis, and PIs, who may hold the  
305 bigger picture views. As a community building effort, we are planning to regularly organize

1  
2  
3 306 more specific workshops aiming to address some of the issues raised in this article or to  
4  
5 307 expand the scope of newly recognized problems. Of course, the structure of the workshops  
6  
7 308 limits the number of participants, but care will be taken to ensure the aforementioned diversity  
8  
9  
10 309 of perspectives and roles in the field. In an effort to include as many users as possible in this  
11  
12 310 discussion, the best practices guidelines that will emerge from these workshops will be  
13  
14 311 submitted to the Living Journal of Computational Molecular Science  
15  
16 312 (<http://www.livecomsjournal.org/>). This journal "... *provides a venue where authors can submit*  
17  
18 313 *living documents that are updated on an ongoing basis as websites or Wikipedia articles could*  
19  
20 314 *be, but which still have clear authorship and provide a mechanism for authors to get publication*  
21  
22 315 *credit for their work.*"<sup>59</sup> Hence, researchers interested to help us shape new practices to share  
23  
24 316 data will be able to provide their feedback or directly contribute to the forthcoming document  
25  
26 317 (as per the general idea laid out here: [https://livecomsjournal.github.io/about/paper\\_code/](https://livecomsjournal.github.io/about/paper_code/)).  
27  
28 318 We hope that our work will act as a first step in a community-driven process of defining best  
29  
30 319 practices for tool development and application in the molecular dynamics field.  
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## 43 320

## 44 321

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48 325

### 49 326 **Author Contributions**

50  
51 327 The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given  
52  
53 328 approval to the final version of the manuscript.  
54  
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7  
8

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41 346 their comments.  
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44 347 **Link to the SDMS18 recordings:** <https://bioexcel.eu/sdms18-recordings/>

45 348 **Discussions from Twitter:** can be retrieved/extended by using the hashtag #SDMS18

46 349 **Several participants from this workshop can be contacted/followed on Twitter:**

47 350 @the\_mabraham, @jbarnoud, @amjjbonvin, @Matth\_Chavent, @jchodera, @karmecon,

48 351 @DelemotteLab, @CompBioPhys, @eriklindahl, @NMRlipids, @dga\_smith, @pstansfeld,

49 352 @jOkaso, @chryswoods  
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