Strain-stiffening Response in Transient Networks Formed by Reverse Wormlike Micelles

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Strain-stiffening, that is, an increase in material stiffness at large deformations, is a property of many biological materials. Currently, model systems for the study of this phenomenon are elastic networks (gels) of semiflexible filamentous biopolymers such as actin, keratin, or fibrin. Here, we demonstrate strain-stiffening in a class of viscoelastic solutions, comprising reverse wormlike micelles. These structures are formed by the coassembly of the physiological surfactants, lecithin and bile salt, in an organic solvent, cyclohexane. In contrast to the biopolymer gels, the networks here are transient and are formed by the physical entanglement of relatively flexible worms. Our results suggest that neither a permanent network nor a high filament rigidity is required for strain-stiffening. We suggest a different origin, based on a temporary strain-induced increase in the volume fraction of entangled worms. Our system can also serve as a convenient synthetic model for future studies into this phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Strain-stiffening is a nonlinear rheological response closely associated with biological materials such as blood clots, the cornea, and cytoskeletal networks.1 The phenomenon refers to an increase in the modulus (stiffness) of a material when it is strained beyond its linear regime of deformations. Such behavior is unusual because most classes of soft matter (polymeric or colloidal) tend to soften monotonically when deformed in shear under nonlinear conditions.2 A few examples of strain-stiffening in single-phase nonbiological fluids such as associating polymer solutions do exist,3,4 but the effects in these cases have tended to be quite weak. Currently, model studies on strain-stiffening are almost always conducted with biopolymer gels, such as those of actin, keratin, or fibrin, which are networks of semiflexible filaments.1,5,6 Indeed, the ubiquity of strain-stiffening in biology has led researchers to speculate if this property may have physiological relevance, since it could prevent biological materials from experiencing high deformations.1

Two different theories have recently been offered for strain-stiffening in filamentous networks.1,7 The first is based on the nonlinear stretching of semiflexible filaments.1 A filament is considered semiflexible when its persistence length \( L_p \) and contour length \( L_c \) are comparable.1 For such filaments, the force required to stretch out the thermal bending fluctuations diverges dramatically at large deformations, which is believed to cause the stiffening behavior.1 An alternate explanation has also been suggested,7 which attributes strain-stiffening to a transition from a bending-dominated response to a stretch-dominated response of the filamentous network as strain is increased. Both these theories, however, apply only to permanent networks of chains or filaments, with the bending or stretching being associated with chain segments between adjacent cross-link points in such networks.

In this paper, we report the occurrence of strain-stiffening for viscoelastic solutions containing reverse wormlike micelles. Reverse worms (also called polymer-like reverse micelles) are long, cylindrical filaments8 whose physical entanglement results in a transient network.9,10 The term “reverse” refers to the fact that the micelles are self-assembled in nonpolar solvents, unlike “normal” micelles that form in water. Our observation of strain-stiffening in transient self-assembled networks of reverse worms is interesting because these are very different from the “permanent” biopolymer networks in which strain-stiffening is generally studied. Moreover, we will show that the reverse worms studied here have a low persistence length; that is, they are quite flexible (at least in bending modes) compared to the rigid or semiflexible biopolymer filaments. In other words, neither a permanent network nor the presence of rigid filaments seems to be a necessary condition for strain-stiffening to occur in complex fluids. An alternate explanation for this phenomenon will be suggested later in this paper.

The reverse worm samples in which we find strain-stiffening are mixtures of the phospholipid, lecithin with a small amount of the bile salt, and sodium deoxycholate (SDC) in a nonpolar organic solvent such as cyclohexane or n-decane.10,11 The lecithin/SDC system represents a new class of reverse worms, which we have recently characterized using rheology and small-angle neutron scattering (SANS).10,11 For comparison, we also study reverse worms based on the original and widely studied recipe, which is to combine lecithin with a small amount of water in organic solvents.9 Both water and SDC are believed to induce growth of reverse spherical micelles of lecithin into reverse worms by an identical mechanism, which involves the formation of hydrogen bonds with the headgroups of lecithin.9,10 However, a significant finding from the present study is that lecithin/water

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reverse worm samples do not exhibit strain-stiffening, while lecithin/SDC ones do. Possible reasons for these differences will be discussed later in the paper.

2. Experimental Section

Materials. The bile salt, SDC (97%), and the solvent, cyclohexane, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich, while the zwitterionic lipid, soybean lecithin (95%), was purchased from Avanti Polar Lipids, Inc. Deuterated cyclohexane (99.5% D) for the SANS experiments was obtained from Cambridge Isotopes.

Sample Preparation. Lecithin/water reverse worms in cyclohexane were prepared by adding the organic solvent into dry lecithin (dried in a vacuum oven at room temperature for 48 h), followed by stirring until the lecithin was completely dissolved. Deionized water was then added to the lecithin solutions, followed by heating and stirring until the sample became homogeneous.

Lecithin/SDC reverse worms in cyclohexane were prepared by the procedure described in our earlier papers.\(^\text{10,11}\) First, stock solutions of lecithin and SDC were made in methanol, and then samples of desired composition were prepared by mixing these stock solutions. Methanol was removed by drying the samples in a vacuum oven at room temperature for 48 h. The final samples with desired concentrations were obtained by adding cyclohexane, followed by stirring until the solutions became transparent and homogeneous. The above procedure ensured the removal of any residual water from the sample and thereby facilitated reproducible sample preparation.

Rheology. Rheological experiments were conducted at 25 °C on a Rheometrics RDA-III strain-controlled rheometer using a couette geometry with a solvent trap to prevent evaporation of cyclohexane. The experiments were also reproduced on an AR2000 stress-controlled rheometer (TA Instruments) using either parallel-plate or couette geometries. The key experiments in this work are nonlinear rheological experiments, and these are analyzed in the conventional manner via the rheometer software. Alternate approaches in terms of Lissajous curves have been applied by some researchers.\(^\text{12}\)

Figure 1 compares the linear and nonlinear rheological behavior of lecithin/water and lecithin/SDC reverse worms under oscillatory shear. The samples being compared have the same concentration of lecithin (35 mM) and are combined with either 315 mM water or 15 mM SDC. Lecithin/water samples exhibit a strain-softening response at high strains, as typified by Figure 1b; here, both \(G'\) and \(G''\) decrease at high \(\gamma\) (above 30%) relative to their values in the linear regime at low \(\gamma\). Similar strain-softening is observed for all lecithin/water reverse worms irrespective of the imposed frequency. In contrast, lecithin/SDC reverse worms exhibit strain-stiffening; that is, their moduli increase over a range of strains. The strain sweep at 10 rad/s is shown in Figure 1c and at 0.56 rad/s in Figure 1d. Note from

the linear response of this sample in Figure 1a that there is a
crossover of $G$ and $G''$ around 7 rad/s. Thus, at 10 rad/s, the
behavior is elastic ($G' > G''$), reflecting the unrelaxed reverse
worm network, whereas at 0.56 rad/s the reverse worms have
relaxed and the behavior is viscous ($G'' > G'$). Interestingly,
however, strain-stiffening is seen at both the above frequencies.
The increase in moduli is more pronounced at 10 rad/s: in this
case, $G'$ and $G''$ are constant until $\gamma \approx 20\%$, whereupon they
show a sharp increase up to a maximum. The highest value
reached by $G'$, that is, $G_{\text{max}}$, is about 50% higher than its linear
value $G_0$. At the lower frequency of 0.56 rad/s, the onset of
strain-stiffening occurs at a higher $\gamma$ ($\sim 300\%$).

From our studies of numerous lecithin/SDC reverse worm
samples, we have found that strain-stiffening is ubiquitous for
these samples, regardless of the experimental conditions. To
verify that the stiffening is real and not an artifact, we have
reproduced the same behavior on different rheometer geometries
as well as on a stress-controlled rheometer. A few systematic
trends in the strain-stiffening response are evident from our data.
As suggested by Figure 1c and d, the critical strain at the onset
of stiffening $\gamma_{\text{crit}}$ is a monotonically decreasing function of
frequency. Also, the extent of stiffening, that is, the ratio $G_{\text{max}}/
G_0$, weakly increases with increasing frequency.

We have also studied variations in the stiffening response as
a function of the total amphiphile (lecithin + SDC) concentration.
Results for $G'$ versus $\gamma$ (at $\omega = 10$ rad/s) are shown in Figure
2 for samples at different lecithin concentrations and a constant
molar ratio of SDC/lecithin of 0.37. All samples show strain-
stiffening, and the data clearly exhibit three regimes: first, $G'$ is
constant at low $\gamma$; next, it increases to a maximum over a range
of $\gamma$; and finally it decreases. The onset strain $\gamma_{\text{crit}}$ and the strain
$\gamma_{\text{max}}$ at which $G''$ shows a maximum both shift to lower values
with increasing concentration. Also, the stiffening ratio $G_{\text{max}}/G_0$
slightly decreases with increasing concentration. These trends
are consistent with those reported previously for biopolymer
gels.$^{1,5,6}$ The extent of strain-stiffening in the present system is
comparable to that reported by Storm et al.$^{1}$ for F-actin but less
than those for vimentin or collagen.

Why does strain-stiffening occur for lecithin/SDC reverse
worms and not for lecithin/water reverse worms? If this
phenomenon is indeed associated with stiff filaments as suggested
by theory, one might expect the SDC-based worms to be stiffer
(i.e., have higher persistence lengths $l_p$) than the water-based
ones. To test this hypothesis, we have used SANS to extract $l_p$
for the two types of reverse worms. Figure 3 shows typical SANS
data ($I$ vs $q$) for reverse worms based on 10 mM lecithin in
deuterated cyclohexane with 90 mM water or 4 mM SDC (we
used a low lecithin concentration to minimize structure factor
effects). To analyze the SANS data, we used a flexible cylinder
model, detailed by Magid et al.$^{13}$ The corresponding fits are
shown as solid lines through the data. From the fits, we obtain a
shorter $l_p$ of 91 Å for SDC-induced worms compared with 378
Å for water-induced worms. This suggests that the SDC-based
worms are more flexible structures. To corroborate this result,
we also replot the $I(q)$ data in a plot of $qI(q)$ versus $q$ (called a
Holtzer or bending rod plot) that is shown as the inset of Figure
3. Here, each curve goes through a maximum at low $q$ and then
exhibits a plateau (indicating the $I \sim q^{-1}$ scaling that is typical
of cylinders$^{13}$). The onset of the plateau region is expected to
occur at $q l_p \sim 1.9$ for semiflexible chains.$^{13,14}$ Clearly, the
transition to the plateau is broader and shifted to higher $q$ for the
SDC-based worms, indicating that they have a lower value of $l_p$.

The above results and analysis imply that neither a permanent
network nor rigid filaments are necessary for strain-stiffening.
How then can we account for this unusual phenomenon? One
suggestive point that we had observed earlier in Figure 1a is that
the plateau modulus $G_p$ was much higher for the lecithin/SDC
sample over the lecithin/water one at the same lecithin concen-
tration. In fact, this difference is seen over the entire range of
lecithin concentrations. Also, the power-law exponent for the
variation of $G_p$ with volume fraction is higher for lecithin/SDC
worms over lecithin/water worms (3.9 compared to 2.3; data not
shown).$^{10}$ Generally, a higher $G_p$ implies that the filaments in
the network are more rigid: for example, actin solutions have
much higher $G_p$ values than polystyrene solutions at the same
concentration.$^{15}$ However, a higher rigidity of lecithin/SDC
filaments would be inconsistent with our SANS data. While this
aspect needs resolution, the $G_p$ data show that lecithin/SDC
networks are stiffer than those of lecithin/water. It is therefore
plausible that the previous theories for strain-stiffening might
still apply to the transient, but stiff, networks of lecithin/SDC
worms.

We also wish to discuss an alternate mechanism for strain-
stiffening, and this is one in which filament stiffness does not

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(14) Kirste, R. G.; Oberthur, R. C. In Small-Angle X-ray Scattering; Glatter,
The occurrence of both strain-stiffening and shear-thickening for lecithin/SDC networks suggests a common mechanism for the two phenomena, a likely candidate for which would be the shear/strain-induced clustering of micelles. It is known that a population of worms is always highly polydisperse, with an exponential distribution of filament lengths. Thus, some worms would be too short to fully entangle with the rest of the chains in the transient network. We speculate that, at high strains, these “free” worms become incorporated into the network, leading to the increase in moduli (i.e., strain-stiffening). The free worms may connect either with other free worms and thus increase their overall length substantially, or they might connect with worms that are already part of the entangled network.\textsuperscript{16–19} In either case, the density of physical entanglements in the network will be enhanced at high strains.

How can this second mechanism explain the differences between lecithin/SDC and lecithin/water samples? Note that high strains not only can connect free worms but also can act to disentangle them from the network. If the dominant effect is to break up network connections, we speculate that strain-softening would occur, which is presumably the case for lecithin/water worms. On the other hand, if the balance is tilted in favor of induced clustering of free worms, the result would be strain-stiffening (and likewise, shear-thickening). The latter may predominate in lecithin/SDC samples, perhaps because a higher fraction of free worms exist in these samples. Alternatively, the higher stiffness of the lecithin/SDC network may help to ensure that existing connections are maintained and thereby help tilt the balance toward strain-stiffening.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, we have described the unusual nonlinear rheology exhibited by viscoelastic networks of lecithin/SDC reverse worms. The samples show strain-stiffening (increase in \( G' \) and \( G'' \) with strain) in dynamic rheology as well as shear-thickening (increase in \( \eta \) with shear rate) in steady-shear rheology. We propose that these phenomena are caused by increases in connectivity of the micelles at high strain amplitudes or shear rates. Our studies also suggest that strain-stiffening is not unique to biopolymer networks but may be exhibited by a variety of self-assembled molecular networks. Since lecithin/SDC samples can be easily prepared from widely available and inexpensive precursors, they may serve as a convenient model system for future studies into this unusual phenomenon.

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