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# Stochastic modeling of a gene regulatory network driving B cell development in germinal centers

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## Abstract

Germinal centers (GCs) are the key histological structures of the adaptive immune system, responsible for the development and selection of B cells producing high-affinity antibodies against antigens. Due to their level of complexity, unexpected malfunctioning may lead to a range of pathologies, including various malignant formations. One promising way to improve the understanding of malignant transformation is to study the underlying gene regulatory networks (GRNs) associated with cell development and differentiation. Evaluation and inference of the GRN structure from gene expression data is a challenging task in systems biology: recent achievements in single-cell (SC) transcriptomics allow the generation of SC gene expression data, which can be used to sharpen the knowledge on GRN structure. In order to understand whether a particular network of three key gene regulators (BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1), influenced by two external stimuli signals (surface receptors BCR and CD40), is able to describe GC B cell differentiation, we used a stochastic model to fit SC transcriptomic data from a human lymphoid organ dataset. The model is defined mathematically as a piecewise-deterministic Markov process. We showed that after parameter tuning, the model qualitatively recapitulates mRNA distributions corresponding to GC and plasmablast stages of B cell differentiation. Thus, the model can assist in validating the GRN structure and, in the future, could lead to better understanding of the different types of dysfunction of the regulatory mechanisms.

# 1 Introduction

Adaptive immune response is a complex mechanism, relying on B and T lymphocytes, which protects the organism against a range of pathogens. Crucial elements of adaptive immune response, the germinal centers (GCs) are the structures in lymphoid organs where activated naive B cells are expanded (in a dark zone, DZ) and selected (in a light zone, LZ) and can have multiple exit fates, such as antibody production (plasmablasts and plasma cells, PB\_PC), long term storage of antigen information (memory B cells, MC), or death via apoptosis [1, 2].

It is currently thought that B cell differentiation in GC is controlled by a small network of transcription factors (TFs) constituted by B-cell lymphoma 6 (BCL6), interferon regulatory factor 4 (IRF4) and PR domain zinc finger protein 1 (BLIMP1) [3]. BCL6 controls formation of GC, terminal differentiation of B cells and lymphomagenesis [4, 5]. BCL6 disturbance can be triggered by several mechanisms, including proteasome degradation by BCR, T-cell-mediated CD40-induced IRF4 repression of BCL6 [6, 5], or disruption of BCL6 autoregulation loop [5, 7]. Transcription factor IRF4 is involved in the termination of GC B cell differentiation, in immunoglobulin class switch recombination (CSR) and plasma cell development [8]. Impairment of IRF4 expression is tightly connected with the appearance of multiple malignancies [8]. BLIMP1 regulates pathways responsible for B cell lineage (e.g., PAX5) and GC proliferation and metabolism (e.g., MYC) [9, 10]. BLIMP1 is also involved in the induction of genes (e.g., XBP-1, ATF6, Ell2) facilitating antibody synthesis [11, 12, 13]. These three TFs interact, through various activation/inhibition processes: IRF4 represses BCL6 and activates BLIMP1 [14] (hence being essential for GC maturation and B cell differentiation into plasmablast), BLIMP1 and BCL6 mutually repress each other [15, 16, 17, 18].

Martinez et al. [3] developed a deterministic kinetic ODE model capable of simulating normal and malignant GC exits using a GRN based on these three transcription factors. For the normal differentiation of GC B cells towards PB\_PC stage, the kinetic ODE model fits microarray data at two steady-states: the first one associated with the GC stage of B cell differentiation (with high levels of BCL6 and low levels of IRF4 and BLIMP1), and the second one associated with PB\_PC stage (with low levels of BCL6 and high levels of IRF4 and BLIMP1).

Recently, multiple protocols for SC RNA-seq data generation have been developed and used to answer various questions in biology [19, 20]. At the same time, different groups showed that gene transcription in eukaryotes is a discontinuous process and follows bursting kinetics [21, 22, 23, 24]. Such results suggest that the stochastic nature of gene expression at the single cell (SC) level can be partly responsible for the phenotype variation in living organisms [25]. Thus, by gaining access to a stochastic behavior of gene expression, the SC viewpoint may lead to further improvement of the understanding of the biological systems and their variability.

Nevertheless, stochastic modeling of GRNs using SC gene expression data is still in its early stage [26, 27] and has never been studied for GC B cells. Here, we apply a particular class of stochastic models combining deterministic dynamics and random jumps, called

43 piecewise-deterministic Markov processes (PDMPs) [28], to the description of GC B cell  
44 differentiation. It is a two-state model of gene expression introduced in [29] that allows a  
45 description of the system's dynamics at the promoter, transcription and translation levels  
46 for a given GRN. We apply this model to the GRN made of the three key genes, BCL6,  
47 IRF4 and BLIMP1, and simulate single B cell mRNA data [30]. We show that the model  
48 can qualitatively simulate the SC mRNA patterns for normal B cell differentiation at GC  
49 and PB\_PC stages.

## 50 2 Material, Methods and Models

### 51 2.1 Single-cell data

52 We used the B cell dataset from human lymphoid organs published by Milpied et al. [30].  
53 The authors studied normal B cell subsets from germinal centers of the human spleen and  
54 tonsil and performed integrative SC analysis of gene expression. They used an adapted  
55 version of the integrative single-cell analysis protocol [31]. In short, the authors prepared  
56 cells for flow cytometry cell sorting. Then in every 96-well plate the authors sorted  
57 three to six ten-cell samples of the same phenotype as a single-cell. They performed  
58 multiplex qPCR analysis using the Biomark system (Fluidigm) with 96x96 microfluidic  
59 chips (fluidigm) and Taqman assays (Thermofisher) [30]. They obtained results in the  
60 form of fixed fluorescence threshold to derive  $Ct$  values. We used  $Ct$  values to derive  
61 Expression threshold ( $Et$ ) values:  $Et = 30 - Ct$ . When there was an unreliably low or  
62 undetected expression ( $Ct > 30$ ),  $Et$  was set to zero [30]. Using SC gene expression  
63 analysis of a panel of 91 preselected genes and pseudotime analysis (based on the cartesian  
64 coordinates of SC on the first and second principal components of the PCA), the authors  
65 separated GC DZ cells, GC LZ cells, memory cells and PB\_PC cells.  
66 Here we focused on three genes, BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1. We selected the SC gene  
67 expression values for BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 for GC DZ cells (317 SC) and for PB\_PC  
68 (104 SC) (see Figure 5). The experimental dataset includes at the GC B cell stage 30 cells  
69 with zero BCL6 mRNA amount, 292 cells with zero IRF4 mRNA amount and 292 cells  
70 with zero BLIMP1 mRNA amount. For the end of the B cell differentiation (PB\_PC),  
71 there were 25 cells with zero BCL6 mRNA amount, 79 cells with zero IRF4 and 5 cells  
72 with zero BLIMP1 mRNA amount.

### 73 2.2 Kinetic ODE model

74 Martinez et al. [3] derived an ODE model that simulates B cell differentiation from mature  
75 GC cells towards PB\_PC. Dynamics of each protein (BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1) are  
76 defined by a production rate ( $\mu$ ), a degradation rate ( $\lambda$ ), a dissociation constant ( $k$ ) and  
77 a maximum transcription rate ( $\sigma$ ). Dynamics are described by System (1)-(3), where  $p$ ,  $b$

Index	Gene/Stimulus
1	BCL6
2	IRF4
3	BLIMP1
4	BCR
5	CD40

**Table 1.** Correspondence between gene or stimulus names and model index.

78 and  $r$  account for proteins BLIMP1, BCL6 and IRF4, respectively:

$$\frac{dp}{dt} = \mu_p + \sigma_p \frac{k_b^2}{k_b^2 + b^2} + \sigma_p \frac{r^2}{k_r^2 + r^2} - \lambda_p p, \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{db}{dt} = \mu_b + \sigma_b \frac{k_p^2}{k_p^2 + p^2} \frac{k_b^2}{k_b^2 + b^2} \frac{k_r^2}{k_r^2 + r^2} - (\lambda_b + BCR)b, \quad (2)$$

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = \mu_r + \sigma_r \frac{r^2}{k_r^2 + r^2} + CD40 - \lambda_r r. \quad (3)$$

79 In this model, CD40 and BCR act as stimuli on genes: BCR temporary represses BCL6  
80 and CD40 temporary activates IRF4.

### 81 2.3 Stochastic model

82 The stochastic model that describes the coupled dynamics of gene  $i$  and the other genes  
83 of the GRN is defined by the series of equations:

$$\begin{cases} E_i(t) : 0 \xrightarrow{k_{\text{on},i}(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s)} 1, 1 \xrightarrow{k_{\text{off},i}(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s)} 0, \\ M'_i(t) = s_{0,i} E_i(t) - d_{0,i} M_i(t), \\ P'_i(t) = s_{1,i} M_i(t) - d_{1,i} P_i(t), \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

84 where  $E_i(t)$ ,  $M_i(t)$  and  $P_i(t)$  are, respectively, the activation status of the promoter, the  
85 quantity of mRNA and the quantity of proteins of gene  $i$ , for  $i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ . For  $s \in \{4, 5\}$ ,  
86  $Q_s$  accounts for external stimuli intensity. Each index  $i$  refers to one of the gene in the  
87 GRN, either BCL6, IRF4, or BLIMP1, and each index  $s$  to stimuli BCR and CD40 (see  
88 Table 1).

89 For each gene  $i$ , System (4) is defined by the promoter state switching rates  $k_{\text{on},i}$  ( $h^{-1}$ ) and  
90  $k_{\text{off},i}$  ( $h^{-1}$ ), by a degradation rate of mRNA ( $d_{0,i}$ ,  $h^{-1}$ ), a protein degradation rate ( $d_{1,i}$ ,  
91  $h^{-1}$ ), a transcription rate ( $s_{0,i}$ , mRNA  $\times h^{-1}$ ), a translation rate ( $s_{1,i}$ , protein  $\times$  mRNA $^{-1} \times$   
92  $h^{-1}$ ), and interaction parameters  $\theta_{j,i}$  with either gene or stimulus  $j$ . Interactions between  
93 genes are based on the assumption that  $k_{\text{on},i}$  is a function of the proteins  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ ,  $P_3$  and  
94 stimuli  $Q_s$  and is given by:

$$k_{\text{on},i}(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s) = \frac{k_{\text{on},i}^{\text{min}} + k_{\text{on},i}^{\text{max}} \beta_i \Phi_i(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s)}{1 + \beta_i \Phi_i(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s)} \quad (5)$$

95 where

$$\Phi_i(P_1, P_2, P_3, Q_s) = \prod_{s=\text{BCR}}^{\text{CD40}} \frac{1 + e^{\theta_{s,i}} Q_s}{1 + Q_s} \prod_{j=1}^3 \frac{1 + e^{\theta_{j,i}} (P_j/H_{j,i})^\gamma}{1 + (P_j/H_{j,i})^\gamma}. \quad (6)$$

96 In (6),  $H_{j,i}$  represents an interaction threshold for the protein  $j$  on gene  $i$ , while  $\beta_i$  is a  
97 scaling parameter. The structure of System (4)-(6) for the particular network considered  
98 in this paper is illustrated in Figure 1.

99 A detailed derivation of the model is presented in the supplementary material of [29].  
100 Starting from a simple biochemical model of gene expression, the authors described  
101 higher-order interactions and took into consideration possible auto-activations. After  
102 normalization and simplification steps, Herbach et al. [29] and Bonnaffoux et al. [32]  
103 described the promoter switching rates  $k_{\text{on},i}$  and  $k_{\text{off},i}$  in the form of (5) and (6) by  
104 introducing the scaling parameter  $\beta_i$ .

105 It can be noted that the promoter state evolution of gene  $i$  between time  $t$  and  $t + \delta t$  in  
106 System (4)-(6) is defined, for small  $\delta t$ , as a Bernoulli-distributed random variable [29, 32]:

$$E_i(t + \delta t) \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\pi_i(t)),$$

107 where probability  $\pi_i(t)$ , derived by solving the master equation [29, 33], is given by

$$\pi_i(t) = E_i(t) e^{-\delta t(k_{\text{on},i} + k_{\text{off},i})} + \frac{k_{\text{on},i}}{k_{\text{on},i} + k_{\text{off},i}} \left(1 - e^{-\delta t(k_{\text{on},i} + k_{\text{off},i})}\right).$$

108 It follows that the promoter state of gene  $i$  averages to  $k_{\text{on},i}/(k_{\text{on},i} + k_{\text{off},i})$  in the fast  
109 promoter regime ( $k_{\text{on},i} + k_{\text{off},i} \gg 1/\delta t$ ). This quantity will be used to reduce System  
110 (4)-(6) into an ordinary differential equation (ODE) system in Section 3.1.

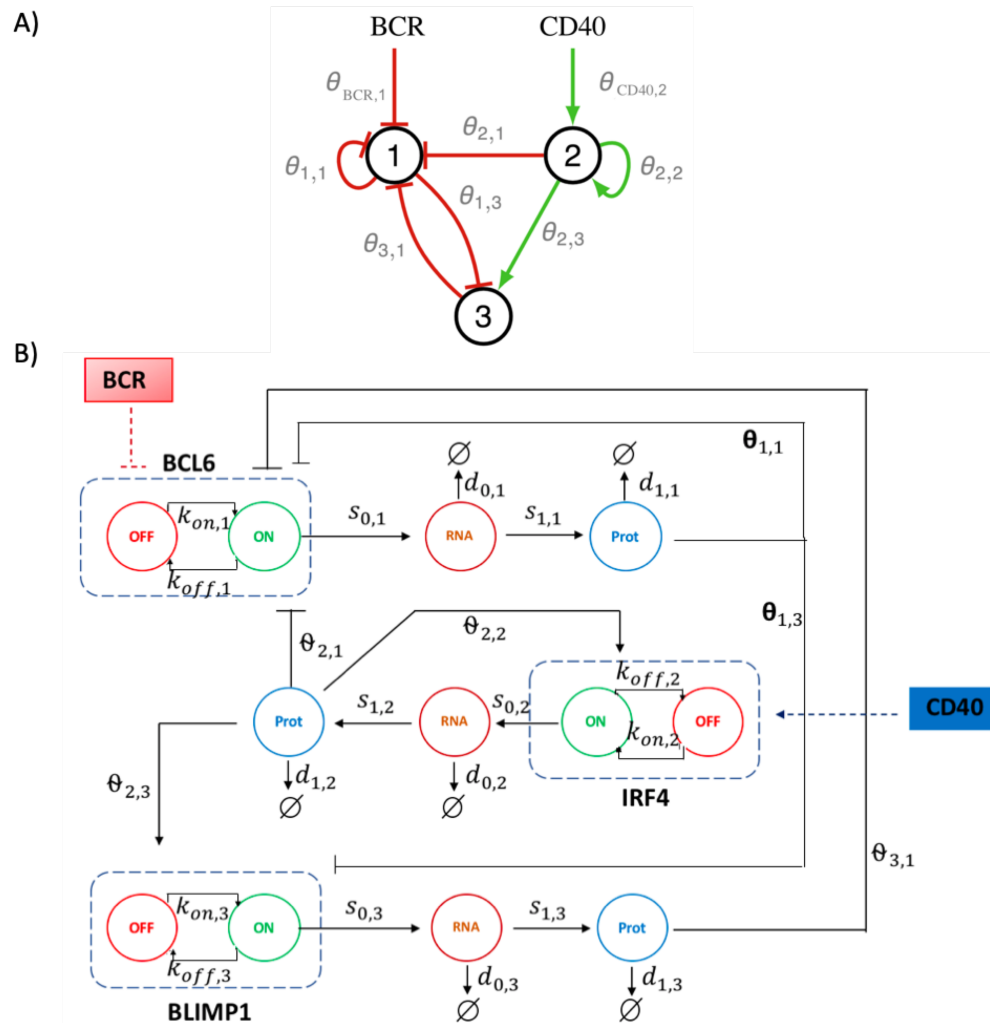
## 111 2.4 Simulating the stochastic model

112 During B cell differentiation in GC, B cells first receive BCR signal, through follicular  
113 dendritic cells interaction, that represses BCL6. Then, B cells integrate CD40 signals,  
114 through T follicular helper, that activate IRF4 [3, 6, 34].

115 In order to simulate these interactions, we assumed that BCR was acting on BCL6  
116 from 0h until 25h, and CD40 was acting on IRF4 from 35h until 60h. Stimuli were  
117 implemented in three steps: first a linear increase ( $t_{\text{BCR}} \in [0.5h; 1.5h]; t_{\text{CD40}} \in [35h; 36h]$ ),  
118 then a stable stimulus ( $t_{\text{BCR}} \in [1.5h; 24h]; t_{\text{CD40}} \in [36h; 60h]$ ), finally a linear decrease  
119 ( $t_{\text{BCR}} \in [24h; 25h]; t_{\text{CD40}} \in [60h; 61h]$ ) (see Supplementary Figure S1).

120 In all simulations, the system evolves for 500h so it can reach a steady state before  
121 applying the stimuli (at time  $t = 0h$ ). After the first stimulus (BCR) is applied, the  
122 system is simulated for an additional 500h. For each simulation, the amounts of mRNA  
123 counts have been collected every 0.5h.

124 The stochastic system (4)-(6) is defined by 40 parameters, whose values are given in  
125 Tables 2 to 5.



**Figure 1.** A) Schematic representation of the three-gene GRN involved in B cell differentiation. It consists of BCL6 (gene 1), IRF4 (gene 2) and BLIMP1 (gene 3), and with stimuli BCR and CD40 acting on the network. The interaction  $j \rightarrow i$  between a regulating protein  $j$  and a target gene  $i$  is represented by the interaction parameter  $\theta_{j,i}$ . B) Schematic representation of the associated stochastic model. A gene is represented by its promoter state (dashed rectangle), which can switch randomly from on to off (and vice versa), with rates  $k_{on,i}$  ( $k_{off,i}$ ). When promoter state is on, mRNA molecules are continuously produced at  $s_{0,i}$  rate. Proteins are constantly translated from mRNA at  $s_{1,i}$  rate. Parameters  $d_{0,i}$  and  $d_{1,i}$  are degradation rates of mRNA and proteins. The interaction between a regulator gene  $j$  and a target gene  $i$  is defined by the dependence of  $k_{on,i}$  and  $k_{off,i}$  on the protein level  $P_j$  and the interaction parameter  $\theta_{j,i}$ . IRF4 gene exhibits an autoactivation loop ( $\theta_{2,2}$ ). Additionally, two external stimuli, BCR and CD40, act on the GRN.

## 126 2.5 Model execution in a computational center

127 All models were established as part of the WASABI pipeline [32] and were implemented  
128 in Python 3. All computations were performed using the computational center of IN2P3  
129 (Villeurbanne/France).

## 130 2.6 Tuning of the PDMP model

### 131 2.6.1 Parameters estimation for the ODE-reduced model

132 In Section 3.1, we use a reduced, deterministic version of System (4)-(6), namely System  
133 (11). Initial guess of each parameter has been chosen randomly in the same order of  
134 magnitude as in Bonnaffoux et al. [32]. Specifically, the initial value of  $k_{on}$  for IRF4  
135 ( $k_{on,init,IRF4}$ ) has been estimated by comparison with values of the kinetic model from  
136 Martinez et al. [3]. Initial values of  $k_{on}$  for BCL6 and BLIMP1 were selected in the same  
137 order of magnitude as  $k_{on,init,IRF4}$ .

### 138 2.6.2 Estimation of the parameters for the stochastic model: Automated 139 approach

140 After we have established the parameters for the reduced model (11), and we have shown  
141 that (11) has two steady states, we used these values as initial guess for the stochastic  
142 model (4)-(6). The goal was then to further tune parameter values so the stochastic  
143 model (4)-(6) fits the experimental SC data.

144 We investigated a possible effect of  $H_{j,i}$  values,  $\theta_{j,i}$  values and  $k_{on,init}$  values on the  
145 quality of the fitting (for each parameter combination, simulation was performed for  
146 200 SC). We tested the values of interaction threshold  $H_{j,i}$  within the set  $\{0.01, 0.1, 1\}$   
147 for  $j, i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ , ( $i \neq j$ ), and the set  $\{0.0001, 0.001, 0.1, 1, 100\}$  for BCR repression  
148 stimuli on BCL6 node, CD40 activation stimuli on IRF4 and for  $H_{2,2}$ . We also tested  
149 the values of  $\theta_{j,i}$  by multiplying by a factor  $f_\theta \in \{1, 5\}$  for  $j, i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ , ( $i \neq j$ ), and  
150 by multiplying by a factor  $f_\theta \in \{1, 10\}$  for BCR repression stimuli on BCL6 node, CD40  
151 activation stimuli on IRF4 and for  $\theta_{2,2}$  (IRF4 autoactivation loop). In total we tested two  
152 different values of  $\theta_{j,i}$  for 8 interactions ( $2^8$ ), 3 values of  $H_{j,i}$  for 5 interactions ( $3^5$ ), and 5  
153 values of  $H_{j,i}$  for 3 interactions ( $5^3$ ), generating  $2^8 \times 3^5 \times 5^3 \approx 7.8 \times 10^6$  combinations of  
154 parameters.

155 During this automatized tuning procedure, we selected a set of parameter values that  
156 allows the system to provide the best fit of the experimental mRNA values for BCL6,  
157 IRF4 and BLIMP1 at the GC stage, based on a quality-of-fit criterion. This criterion was  
158 defined as a comparison between the average model-derived values ( $\Upsilon$ ) and the average  
159 experimental values ( $\Omega$ ), with an objective function ( $OF$ ) to minimize for the set of genes  
160  $G = \{BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1\}$  and stages  $ST = \{GC, PB\_PC\}$  defined by

$$OF = \sum_{\delta'=1}^{|G|} \sum_{\delta''=1}^{|ST|} \left| \frac{\Omega_{\delta',\delta''} - \Upsilon_{\delta',\delta''}}{\Omega_{\delta',\delta''}} \right|. \quad (9)$$



Parameter	Version I, II, III
$H_{12}$	1
$H_{32}$	1
$H_{33}$	1
$\theta_{11}$	-0.2
$\theta_{12}$	0
$\theta_{32}$	0
$\theta_{13}$	-1
$\theta_{33}$	0
$d_{0,\text{BCL6}}$	0.05
$d_{0,\text{IRF4}}$	0.05
$s_{1,\text{BCL6}}$	100
$s_{1,\text{IRF4}}$	160
$s_{1,\text{BLIMP1}}$	40
$d_{1,\text{BCL6}}$	0.138
$d_{1,\text{IRF4}}$	0.173
$d_{1,\text{BLIMP1}}$	0.173
$k_{\text{off, init, BCL6}}$	1
$k_{\text{off, init, IRF4}}$	1
$k_{\text{off, init, BLIMP1}}$	1

**Table 2.** Parameter set of the stochastic model (4)-(6) and reduced model (11). Version I - initial parameter set. Version II - parameter set obtained from the automatized approach. Version III - parameter set obtained after semi-manual tuning. Parameters are defined in the text.

161 The quality-of-fit criterion is then

$$\min_{PS} OF, \quad (10)$$

162 where  $PS$  is the set of parameter values from Tables 2 to 5.

### 163 **2.6.3 Estimation of the parameters for the stochastic model: Semi-manual** 164 **tuning**

165 The automatized estimation procedure was followed by a semi-manual tuning of the  
166 parameters of the stochastic model (4)-(6) to improve the quality of the fit.

167 Values of candidate parameters have been tested in an interval of interest and the rest  
168 of the parameter values have been fixed at this stage. After model execution, model-  
169 simulated SC values of gene expression were collected. Then we selected the values  
170 of the parameters that provided the best qualitative fitting (see Equation (10)) of the  
171 experimental SC data. Ranges of tested values are summarised in Table 6.

## 172 **2.7 Evaluation of model variability using Kantorovich distance**

173 To compare distributions and to evaluate model variability, we used the Kantorovich  
174 distance (KD, particular case of Wasserstein distance, WD), as defined by Baba et al. [35]  
175 and implemented in Python 3 by Bonnaffoux et al. [32].

Parameter	Version I	Version II	Version III
$H_{11}$	1	0.001	0.1
$H_{13}$	0.1	1	0.01
$H_{\text{BCR},1}$	0.01	1	0.001
$H_{\text{CD}40,2}$	1	0.001	1
$\theta_{21}$	-10	-100	-50
$\theta_{31}$	-2	-20	-0.5
$\theta_{22}$	8	5	11
$\theta_{\text{BCR},1}$	-200	-20	-200
$\theta_{\text{CD}40,2}$	10	40	10
$s_{0,\text{IRF}4}$	2	1	2.1
$s_{0,\text{BLIMP}1}$	6.5	1	100

**Table 3.** Parameter set of the stochastic model (4)-(6) and reduced model (11), presented parameters are different between all versions. Version I - initial parameter set. Version II - parameter set obtained from the automatized approach. Version III - parameter set obtained after semi-manual tuning. Parameters are defined in the text.

Parameter	Version I, II	Version III
$H_{22}$	0.01	0.001
$H_{23}$	0.001	0.1
$\theta_{23}$	40	50
$d_{0,\text{BLIMP}1}$	0.1733	0.007

**Table 4.** Parameter set of the stochastic model (4)-(6) and reduced model (11), presented parameters are equal between versions I and II. Version I - initial parameter set. Version II - parameter set obtained from the automatized approach. Version III - parameter set obtained after semi-manual tuning. Parameters are defined in the text.

Parameter	Version I	Version II, III
$H_{21}$	0.1	0.01
$H_{31}$	1	0.01
$s_{0,\text{BCL}6}$	6.5	100
$k_{on,\text{init},\text{BCL}6}$	0.1	0.15
$k_{on,\text{init},\text{IRF}4}$	0.0017	0.007
$k_{on,\text{init},\text{BLIMP}1}$	0.1	0.001

**Table 5.** Parameter set of the stochastic model (4)-(6) and reduced model (11), presented parameters are equal between versions II and III. Version I - initial parameter set. Version II - parameter set obtained from the automatized approach. Version III - parameter set obtained after semi-manual tuning. Parameters are defined in the text.

Parameter	Definition	Tested values	Selected value
$\theta_{11}$	Interaction parameter	$[-200; -10^{-2}]$	-0.2
$\theta_{21}$	Interaction parameter	$[-200; -10^{-2}]$	-50
$\theta_{31}$	Interaction parameter	$[-200; -10^{-2}]$	-0.5
$\theta_{22}$	Interaction parameter	$[0.1; 200]$	11
$\theta_{13}$	Interaction parameter	$[-200; -0.1]$	-1
$\theta_{23}$	Interaction parameter	$[0.1; 200]$	50
$\theta_{\text{BCR},1}$	Interaction parameter	$[0.1; 200]$	200
$\theta_{\text{CD40},2}$	Interaction parameter	$[0.1; 200]$	10
$s_{0,\text{BCL6}}$	Transcription rate	$[0.1; 625]$	100
$s_{0,\text{IRF4}}$	Transcription rate	$[0.1; 625]$	2.1
$s_{0,\text{BLIMP1}}$	Transcription rate	$[0.1; 625]$	100
$d_{0,\text{BCL6}}$	Degradation rate of mRNA	$[10^{-3}; 10]$	0.05
$d_{0,\text{IRF4}}$	Degradation rate of mRNA	$[10^{-3}; 10]$	0.05
$d_{0,\text{BLIMP1}}$	Degradation rate of mRNA	$[10^{-3}; 10]$	0.007
$s_{1,\text{BCL6}}$	Translation rate	$[1; 1000]$	100
$s_{1,\text{IRF4}}$	Translation rate	$[1; 1000]$	160
$s_{1,\text{BLIMP1}}$	Translation rate	$[1; 1000]$	40
$d_{1,\text{BCL6}}$	Degradation rate of protein	$[0.1; 10]$	0.138
$d_{1,\text{IRF4}}$	Degradation rate of protein	$[0.1; 10]$	0.173
$d_{1,\text{BLIMP1}}$	Degradation rate of protein	$[0.1; 10]$	0.173
$k_{\text{on,init},\text{BCL6}}$	Initial value of $k_{\text{on},\text{BCL6}}$	$[10^{-5}; 10]$	0.15
$k_{\text{on,init},\text{IRF4}}$	Initial value of $k_{\text{on},\text{IRF4}}$	$[10^{-5}; 10]$	0.007
$k_{\text{on,init},\text{BLIMP1}}$	Initial value of $k_{\text{on},\text{BLIMP1}}$	$[10^{-5}; 10]$	0.001

**Table 6.** Parameters tested during the semi-manual tuning of the stochastic model.

176 Consider two discrete distributions  $p$  and  $q$ , defined on  $N$  bins of equal sizes, and denote  
177 by  $x_k$  the center of the  $k$ -th bin. Then the Kantorovich distance between  $p$  and  $q$  is  
178 given by

$$\text{KD} = \sum_{n=1}^N \left| \sum_{k=1}^n p(x_k) - \sum_{k=1}^n q(x_k) \right|.$$

179 We chose WD because it suggested to be preferable over alternative methods such  
180 as Kullback-Leibler (KL) divergence or Jensen-Shannon (JS) divergence [36]. More  
181 specifically, WD does not require that distributions belong to the same probability space.  
182 At the same time, WD is more tractable and has higher performance compared to KL  
183 divergence [37]. JS divergence, in turn, does not provide a gradient for the distributions  
184 of non-overlapping domains, compared to WD [36]. Also, because WD is a metric and  
185 accounts both for the "cost" for the transfer (distance) and "the number of counts" to  
186 transfer, we selected its 1D case of WD (Kantorovich Distance, KD) for comparison of  
187 discrete experimental distributions versus model-derived distributions [38].

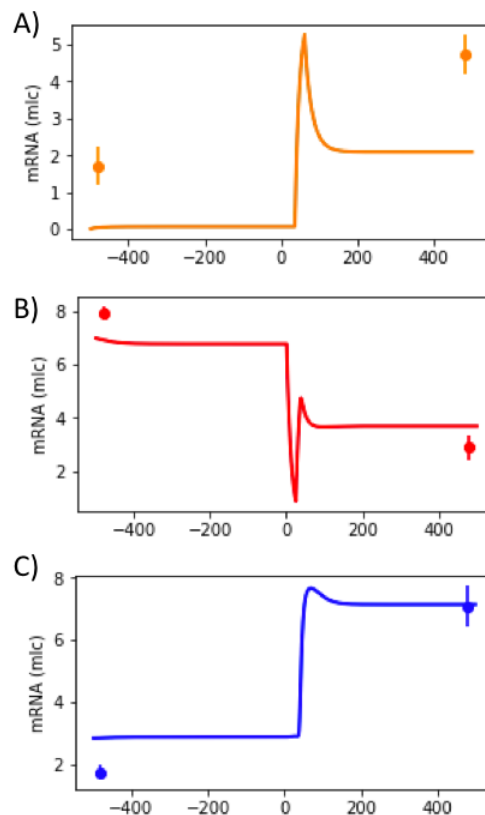
## 188 3 Results

### 189 3.1 Reduced model

190 In [3], Martinez et al. applied the kinetic ODE model (1)-(3) to the BCL6-IRF4-BLIMP1  
191 GRN associated with B cell differentiation and successfully simulated GC B cell dynamics  
192 based on microarray data. Before using the complex, stochastic model (4)-(6) to fit SC  
193 data, we considered a reduced version of System (4)-(6) that can be compared to model  
194 (1)-(3), hence providing an initial guess for a key parameter of the model.  
195 Since model (1)-(3) is deterministic, it is necessary to simplify the stochastic model (4)-(6)  
196 to perform a comparison of both models dynamics. We assume, in this section, that the  
197 stochastic process  $E(t)$  (promoter status) in (4)-(6) equals its mean value,  $\langle E(t) \rangle$ , given  
198 by  $k_{\text{on}}/(k_{\text{on}} + k_{\text{off}})$ . System (4)-(6) then reduces to

$$\begin{cases} \langle E(t) \rangle = \frac{k_{\text{on}}(t)}{k_{\text{on}}(t) + k_{\text{off}}(t)}, \\ \frac{dM}{dt} = s_0 \langle E(t) \rangle - d_0 M(t), \\ \frac{dP}{dt} = s_1 M(t) - d_1 P(t). \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

199 Comparing mathematical formulations of systems (1)-(3) and (11), one can see that it is  
200 possible to identify an initial value of the promoter state  $E(t)$  for IRF4 gene in System  
201 (11) that will correspond to GC differentiation stage (see Supplementary Material A.1).  
202 Indeed, after rewriting System (11) in terms of System (1)-(3), we obtained the candidate  
203 value of  $k_{\text{on,init,IRF4}} = 1.7 \times 10^{-3}$ . Using this value of  $k_{\text{on,init,IRF4}}$ , System (11) successfully  
204 simulates two steady states for IRF4, i.e. it recapitulates the qualitative dynamics of  
205 System (1)-(3) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Temporal evolution of mRNA counts of IRF4 (A), BCL6 (B) and BLIMP1 (C) (see Figure 1), generated by the reduced model (11). BCR stimulus was applied from 0h until 25h and CD40 stimulus from 35h until 60h. Microarray gene expression dataset from GEO accession no. GSE12195 was used to estimate model's parameters (see Tables 2 to 5, version I) and are shown as dots with error bars.

206 Before application of BCR and CD40 stimuli, the system is at a steady state (simulating  
207 GC B cell stage) that corresponds to a low amount of IRF4 and BLIMP1 and a high  
208 amount of BCL6 mRNA molecules. After application of both stimuli, the system has  
209 transitioned to a second steady state that corresponds to a high number of IRF4 and  
210 BLIMP1 mRNA molecules and a low number of BCL6 mRNA molecules. However, it  
211 can be noted that for the current parameter set (see Tables 2-5, version I), System (11)  
212 underestimates the amount of IRF4 mRNA at both steady states (see Figure 2).

213 Dynamics of System (11) shows the existence of two steady-states for the parameter set  
214 from Tables 2-5, version I. Notably, if we test a random value of  $k_{on,init,IRF4}$  in combination  
215 with the parameters from Tables 2-5, version I (see Supplementary Table S1), System (11)  
216 has only one steady-state (see Supplementary Figure S2). To our knowledge, there may  
217 be more than one set of parameter values associated with two steady states of System  
218 (11).

219 We showed that for the parameter set from Tables 2-5, version I, the reduced model (11) is  
220 capable to qualitatively recapitulating the expected behavior of GC B cell differentiation

**Figure 3.** Model-to-model distributions of KD for GC and PB\_PC stages and the three genes, BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1. Model (4)-(6) was simulated with parameter values from Tables 2-5, version I. The violin plots show the shapes of the distributions, median value, interquartile range and 1.5x interquartile range of the KD values.

221 GRN (see Figure 2). Next we wanted to understand if the stochastic system (4)-(6) can  
222 fit the experimental SC data.

## 223 **3.2 Stochastic modeling of B cell differentiation**

### 224 **3.2.1 Assessing the variability of the stochastic model**

225 Due to the stochastic nature of the stochastic system (4)-(6), it is important to first  
226 evaluate the variability of the model-generated SC data, that is of model's outputs. Indeed,  
227 when one repeatedly simulates a finite number of cells from the stochastic system (4)-(6)  
228 for the same parameter value set (Tables 2-5, version I), the resulting model-derived  
229 empirical distributions are slightly different between each run due to the stochasticity of  
230 the model. We investigated how strongly shapes of distributions of simulated SC mRNA  
231 molecules vary for different executions of model (4)-(6).

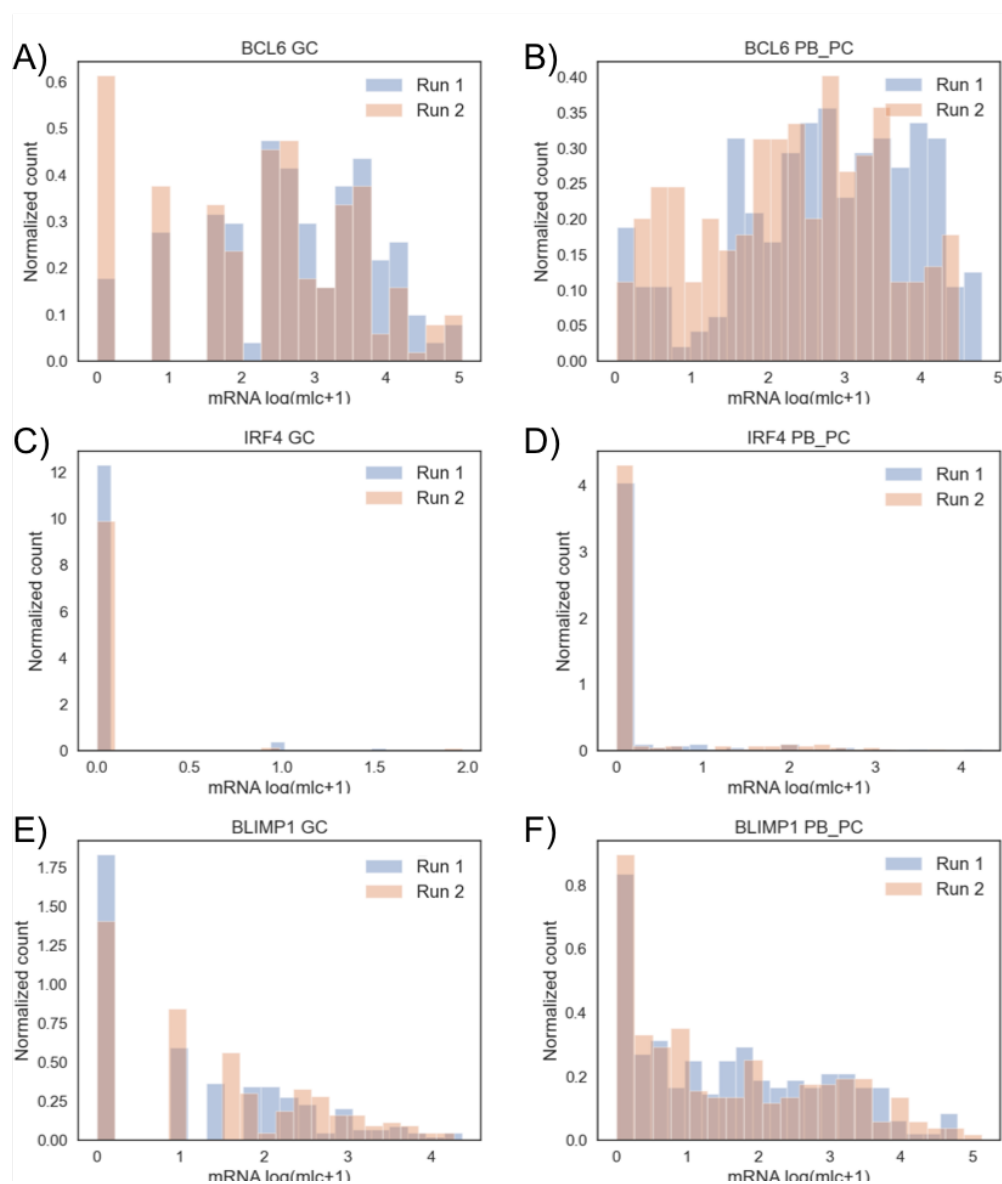
232 We evaluated the level of variability of model (4)-(6) using the Kantorovich distance  
233 (KD, see Section 2.7). We simulated 200 datasets, each containing 200 single cells, of  
234 System (4)-(6) with a fixed parameter set (see Tables 2-5, version I). We estimated  
235 the KD between pairs of simulated datasets (mRNA counts for three genes at GC and  
236 PB\_PC stages for 200 simulated cells), and obtained a distribution of all KD that we  
237 call the model-to-model (m-t-m) distribution (Figure 3). Shapes of m-t-m distributions  
238 are different for each gene and stage of differentiation. For instance, for BLIMP1, long  
239 tails are observed. We can also notice that the mean value of IRF4 at GC stage is low  
240 compared to other genes.

241 In order to get a more accurate evaluation of the variability in model's outputs, we plotted  
242 distributions of the number of mRNA molecules (model's outputs) for each node of the  
243 GRN with the highest m-t-m distribution at both GC and PB\_PC stages (Figure 4).  
244 Qualitatively, no difference is detected in the shapes of model-generated distributions.  
245 For all 6 nodes, the shapes of distributions are remarkably similar.

246 These results suggest that it may be sufficient to perform parameter tuning of the  
247 stochastic model (4)-(6) using only one simulation run for each parameter value set.

### 248 **3.2.2 Initial estimation step based on an automatized approach**

249 Variability of the stochastic model being assessed, and comparison of experimental data  
250 and a single model's output in order to assess their closeness being validated, we now  
251 focus on the estimation of parameter values. Model (4)-(6) comprises 40 parameters,  
252 so we first apply a straightforward strategy, that we call automatized approach, which  
253 consists in solving the stochastic system (4)-(6) for a number of fixed parameter values



**Figure 4.** Histograms of two model-generated mRNA counts of BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 at GC and PB\_PC stages with the highest KD. The subgraphs A, C, E represent log<sub>2</sub> (molecule+1) transformed values for BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 at GC stage. The subgraphs B, D, F represent log (molecule+1) transformed values for BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 at PB\_PC stage (Parameters from Tables 2-5, version I).

254 and selecting the set of parameter values associated with the best fit (see Section 2.6.2)  
255 of experimental data [30].  
256 Approximately  $8 \times 10^6$  combinations of parameter values have been tested (see Section  
257 2.6.2), then the best set of parameter values has been selected based on the quality of  
258 BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 fitting at the GC and PB\_PC stages (see Equations (9)-(10)).  
259 Numbers of mRNA molecules estimated by the stochastic model (4)-(6) are in a similar  
260 range of magnitude as the experimental SC data (see Supplementary Figure S3). However,  
261 the selected parameter values (Tables 2-5, version II) generate model-derived mRNA  
262 distributions that have sufficient overlap with experimental data for GC stage but insuffi-  
263 cient overlap for PB\_PC stage (see Supplementary Figure S3). Indeed, distributions of  
264 numbers of mRNA molecules at PB\_PC stage mostly underestimate the experimental  
265 SC data (see Supplementary Figure S3B, D and F).  
266 Implementing an automatized approach for estimating parameter values helped to establish  
267 a set of parameter values that allows System (4)-(6) to correctly estimate the number of  
268 mRNA molecules for 3 out of 6 nodes of the GRN. In order to improve the quality of  
269 the fit, a more directed and sensitive tuning of the parameter set is then performed (see  
270 Section 2.6.3).

### 271 3.2.3 Generation of simulated distributions of mRNA counts describing B 272 cell differentiation

273 Due to the complexity of the stochastic model (4)-(6) that is made of 40 parameters,  
274 it is important to identify which parameters should be targeted to improve the quality  
275 of fit. To do so, we rely on the properties of the GRN (see Figure 1A). Thanks to the  
276 topological structure of the BCL6-IRF4-BLIMP1 GRN, where IRF4 activates BLIMP1 and  
277 autoactivates itself, we hypothesize that System (4)-(6) underestimates the experimental  
278 SC data at the PB\_PC stage due to low values of the parameters responsible for IRF4  
279 autoactivation ( $\theta_{22}$ , and to a lesser extent  $s_{0,IRF4}$ ) and BLIMP1 activation by IRF4 ( $\theta_{23}$ ).  
280 Further, we improved the quality of the fit, in particular of BLIMP1 distribution, by  
281 focusing on BLIMP1-related interaction parameters ( $\theta_{13}$ ,  $\theta_{31}$ ).  
282 Indeed, if IRF4 autoactivation reaction is not efficient enough, there are not enough IRF4  
283 molecules to affect BCL6 and BLIMP1 activity at PB\_PC stage. Because IRF4 activity  
284 is only impacted by its autoactivation loop, we first modulated values of the parameter  
285 related to this reaction ( $\theta_{22}$ ). During preliminary tests, we noticed that this reaction  
286 is crucial for the transition from GC towards PB\_PC stage and that when interaction  
287 parameter  $\theta_{22}$  and transcription rate  $s_{0,IRF4}$  have low absolute values then the system  
288 cannot reach PB\_PC stage, even after application of the stimuli. It can be explained by  
289 the insufficient amount of IRF4 molecules produced (see Supplementary Figure S3, C and  
290 D). On the other hand, when parameters  $\theta_{22}$  and  $s_{0,IRF4}$  have high values, model (4)-(6)  
291 transitions from GC towards PB\_PC stage even before application of stimuli, exhibiting  
292 an abnormal behavior.  
293 After comparison of the stochastic system (4)-(6) outputs for a range of different  $\theta_{22}$  and  
294  $s_{0,IRF4}$  values (described in Table 6), we selected the parameter set for which model (4)-(6)



295 correctly fits the IRF4 experimental data at both GC and PB\_PC stages. Such model-  
296 derived SC pattern is obtained using the values ( $\theta_{22} = 11$  and  $s_{0,IRF4} = 2.1$  molecule. $h^{-1}$ )  
297 We additionally performed simulations to improve the quality of the fitting of BLIMP1  
298 and BCL6 distributions by testing parameters that are directly responsible for the balance  
299 between BLIMP1 and BCL6, such as interaction parameters  $\theta_{13}$ ,  $\theta_{31}$  and  $\theta_{23}$ . We also  
300 tested parameters which can influence BCL6 and BLIMP1 indirectly, such as transcription  
301 rates ( $s_{0,BCL6}$  and  $s_{0,BLIMP1}$ ), and degradation rates of mRNA ( $d_{0,BCL6}$ ,  $d_{0,IRF4}$  and  
302  $d_{0,BLIMP1}$ ).

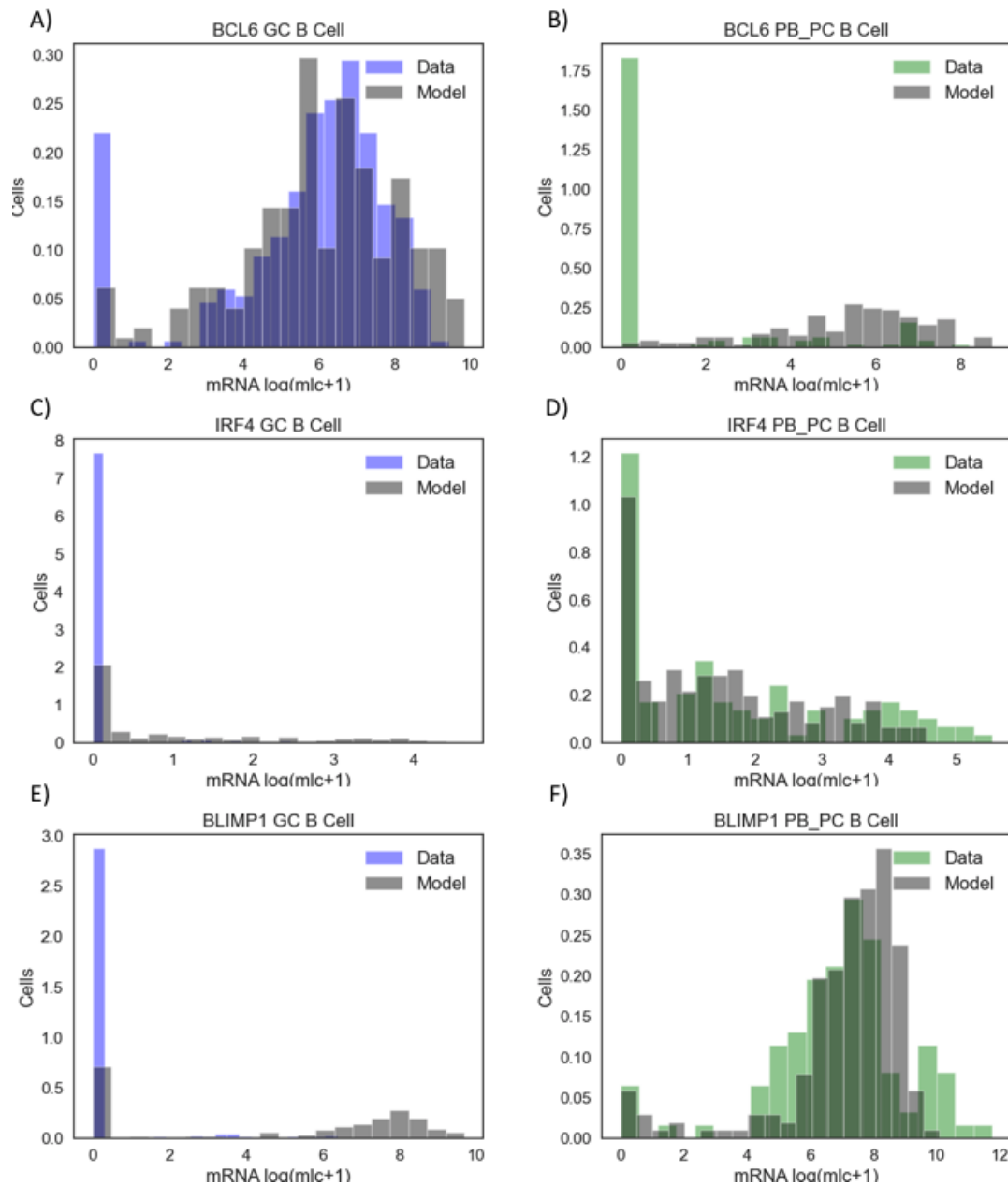
303 After comparison of the stochastic system (4)-(6) outputs, we selected the parameters  
304 which allow the model to have a qualitative fit of the experimental data for all nodes at GC  
305 and PB\_PC stages (see Figure 5, and Tables 2-5, version III). For this tuned parameter  
306 set, we see that the model (4)-(6) can have a good qualitative fitting of experimental data  
307 for all nodes. Results also show that for this parameter set (version III), the stochastic  
308 model (4)-(6) fits SC data at the GC stage for BCL6 (see Figure 5A). The model-derived  
309 empirical distribution of BLIMP1 was capable of showing overlap with experimental data  
310 at the PB\_PC stage (see Figure 5F), but it overestimated the number of BLIMP1 mRNA  
311 molecules at the GC stage (see Figure 5E).

312 The current parameter set (Tables 2-5, version III) has difficulties to correctly evaluate  
313 the number of zero values. The model (4)-(6) tends to overestimate the number of BCL6  
314 mRNA molecules at PB\_PC stage, as well as the number of IRF4 mRNA molecules at GC  
315 stage and number of BLIMP1 mRNA molecules at GC stage (see Figure 5). Nevertheless,  
316 this parameter set allowed the model to generate SC data with a similar level of magnitude  
317 of the amount of mRNA as experimentally observed.

## 318 4 Discussion

319 In this work, we applied a particular class of stochastic models combining deterministic  
320 dynamics and random jumps to the simulation of SC data from two stages of B cell  
321 differentiation in germinal centers.

322 We first defined a reduced model (11) whose dynamics were compared to the ones of the  
323 kinetic model (1)-(3) and we established an initial parameter value for the key parameter  
324  $k_{on,init,IRF4}$ . We then showed that for a given parameter set (Table 2-5, Version I),  
325 the reduced model (11) admits two steady states. Secondly, we evaluated the effect of  
326 stochasticity on multiple independent generations of the number of mRNA molecules by  
327 the stochastic model (4)-(6) and we confirmed that for the same parameter set there is  
328 no noticeable difference between each model-generated outputs for BCL6-IRF4-BLIMP1  
329 GRNs (see Figure 4). These results allow performing a combined parameter screening  
330 with the confidence that for each candidate parameter set, the algorithm needs to perform  
331 only one run of the model (4)-(6). Lastly, we showed that the model (4)-(6) can simulate  
332 distributions of the number of mRNA molecules for BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1 at GC and  
333 PB\_PC stages with the same order of magnitude as experimental data. However, as  
334 future scope of this work, a few strategies to improve the final parameter value set (Tables  
335 2-5, version III) can be investigated.



**Figure 5.** Histograms of model-generated and experimental mRNA counts of BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1 at GC and PB\_PC stages. The subgraphs A, C, E represent log (molecule+1) transformed SC values with BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 compared between the model estimations at GC stage (grey) vs the experimental data from GC B cells (blue). The subgraphs B, D, F represent log (molecule+1) transformed SC values with BCL6, IRF4 and BLIMP1 compared between the model estimations at PB\_PC stage (grey) vs the experimental data from PB\_PC cells (green). Simulation of 200 single cells were used based on the parameter set, selected after semi-automatized parameter screening (see Tables 2-5, version III). Performed based on the dataset from Milpied et al. [30]

336 Since in BCL6-IRF4-BLIMP1 GRN, IRF4 activity depends only on its autoactivation  
337 reaction, we have only succeeded, by writing the reduced model (11) in terms of the  
338 kinetic model (1)-(3), in estimating the value of  $k_{on,init,IRF4}$ . It would be advantageous to  
339 additionally estimate the values of  $k_{on,init,BCL6}$  and  $k_{on,init,BLIMP1}$ , using the same logic.  
340 However, because BLIMP1 depends on BCL6, IRF4 and BCL6 (see Equation (1)) and  
341 BCL6 depends on both IRF4 and BLIMP1 (see Equation (2)), the rewriting of system  
342 (4)-(6) in terms of (1)-(3) would require additional calculations and simplifications.  
343 The effect of mutual repression between BCL6 and BLIMP1 could be evaluated by  
344 performing a more extensive parameter value search. The current parameter value set  
345 (Tables 2-5, version III) makes model (4)-(6) overestimate the number of mRNA molecules  
346 of BLIMP1 at GC stage. Increasing BCL6 repression of BLIMP1 could potentially  
347 decrease the quantity of BLIMP1 at the GC stage.  
348 The effect of the duration of the BCR and CD40 stimuli on the differentiation from GC  
349 B cells towards PB\_PC could be investigated. Multiscale modeling of GCs performed  
350 by Tejero et al. [39] showed that CD40 signalling in combination with the asymmetric  
351 division of B cells results in a switch from memory B cells to plasmablasts. It would be  
352 relevant to evaluate a possible application of the stochastic model to study the effect  
353 of combined CD40 and BCR signaling with different intensities and durations at the  
354 SC level.  
355 Additionally, one can evaluate the impact of including additional genes into the BCL6-  
356 IRF4-BLIMP1 GRN on the quality of data fitting by the stochastic model. One of the  
357 possible candidates to incorporation in the GRN is PAX5, which plays an important  
358 role in directing lymphoid progenitors towards B cell development [40]. PAX5 positively  
359 regulates IRF8 and BACH2, which indirectly positively regulate IRF4 and negatively  
360 regulate BLIMP1 at an early stage of B cell differentiation. During further development,  
361 BLIMP1 starts to repress PAX5, consequently decreasing the expression of IRF8 and  
362 BACH2. The correct orchestration of PAX5-IRF8-BACH2 during B cell differentiation is  
363 important for the successful differentiation towards antigen producing cells (PB\_PC),  
364 while its malfunction can cause aberration in GC B cell development [41].  
365 CD40 stimulation of B cells initiates NF- $\kappa$ B signaling which is associated with cellular  
366 proliferation. In B cells, NF- $\kappa$ B activates IRF4, negatively regulates BACH2, what leads  
367 to positive regulation of BLIMP1 and consecutive repression of BCL6 [5, 34].  
368 Another important transcription factor in GC development is MYC, which regulates B  
369 cell proliferation [42] and the DZ B cell phenotype [43]. MYC indirectly activates the  
370 histone methyltransferase enhancer of zeste homologue 2 (EZH2), which is responsible for  
371 the repression of IRF4 and BLIMP1 [44, 45, 46, 47].  
372 The transcription factors mentioned above are present in the SC RT-qPCR dataset from  
373 Milpied et al. [30] that we used and could be used to extend the current GRN. Inclusion  
374 of additional transcription factors may have both positive and negative effects on the  
375 application of model (4)-(6). On one side, it can increase the computational time and the  
376 number of parameters required for simulating System (4)-(6). On the other side, because  
377 the inclusion of transcription factors can more precisely describe the biological system it  
378 could improve the quality of the fitting. However, any inclusion of new nodes to GRN

379 should be carefully evaluated and only essential transcription factors should be added.  
380 For instance, there are no advantages in adding a transcription factor that would only  
381 have one downstream output. As an example, MYC activates E2F1 and further activates  
382 EZH2. For this reason, incorporation of the chain MYC-E2F1-EZH2 should have a similar  
383 outcome, as the incorporation of the simplified MYC-EZH2 reaction. This is expected  
384 because in the modeling, intermediate elements of one-to-one redundant reactions can be  
385 omitted without significant changes in the quality of the simulations.  
386 To further continue our study, we could also use SC RNA-seq dataset from Milpied et.  
387 al [30]. The authors have produced SC RNA-seq dataset from GC B cells and analysed the  
388 similarities between SC RNA-seq and SC RT-qPCR dataset. Even though the gene-gene  
389 correlation levels were lower in SC RNA-seq compared to SC RT-qPCR, SC RNA-seq  
390 analysis confirmed the observation obtained by SC RT-qPCR [30]. From the stochastic  
391 modeling perspective, combining the data from SC RT-qPCR and SC RNA-seq should  
392 improve our understanding of the SC dataset variability and the quality of the fitting.  
393 To summarise, the stochastic model (4)-(6) is capable of qualitatively simulating and  
394 depicting the stochasticity of experimental SC gene expression data of human B cell  
395 differentiation at the GC and PB\_PC stages using a GRN made of three-key genes  
396 (BCL6, IRF4, BLIMP1). These results are encouraging, and suggest that our model may  
397 be used to test the different B cell exits from GC. Future steps may include testing of  
398 the model (4)-(6) on alternative SC datasets [48, 49, 50] and investigating the malignant  
399 formations, by evaluating differences of the associated GRN compared to the normal B  
400 cell differentiation from GC towards PB\_PC.

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