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Published in:
Journal of Animal Science

DOI:
[10.2527/jas.2015-0246](https://doi.org/10.2527/jas.2015-0246)

Print publication: 01/01/2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Englishby, TM., Banos, G., Moore, KL., Coffey, MP., Evans, RD., & Berry, DP. (2016). Genetic analysis of carcass traits in beef cattle using random regression models. *Journal of Animal Science*, *94*(4), 1354 - 1364. <https://doi.org/10.2527/jas.2015-0246>

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1 **Random regressions for carcass traits in beef cattle**

2
3 **Genetic analysis of carcass traits in beef cattle using random regression models**

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10
11 **Abstract**

12 Livestock mature at different rates depending in part on their genetic merit; therefore,
13 the optimal age at slaughter for progeny of certain sires may differ. The objective of the
14 present study was to examine sire-level genetic profiles for carcass weight, carcass
15 conformation and carcass fat, in cattle of multiple beef and dairy breeds, including
16 crossbreeds. Slaughter records from 126,214 heifers and 124,641 steers aged between
17 360 and 1200 days, and from 86,089 young bulls aged between 360 and 720 days, were
18 used in the analysis; animals were from 15,127 sires. Variance components for each
19 trait across age at slaughter were generated using sire random regression models that
20 included quadratic polynomials for fixed and random effects; heterogeneous residual
21 variances were assumed across ages. Heritability estimates across genders ranged from
22 0.08 (± 0.02) to 0.34 (± 0.02) for carcass weight, 0.24 (± 0.02) to 0.42 (± 0.01) for
23 conformation and 0.16 (± 0.03) to 0.40 (± 0.02) for fat score. Genetic correlations within
24 each trait across ages weakened as the interval between ages compared lengthened, but
25 were all >0.64 suggesting a similar genetic background for each trait across different

26 ages. Eigenvalues and eigenfunctions of the additive genetic covariance matrix revealed
27 genetic variability among animals in their growth profiles for carcass traits although
28 most of the genetic variability was associated with the height of the growth profile. At
29 the same age, a positive genetic correlation (0.60 to 0.78; standard errors ranged from
30 0.01 to 0.04) existed between carcass weight and conformation, whereas negative
31 genetic correlations existed between fatness and both conformation (-0.46 to 0.08;
32 standard errors ranged from 0.02 to 0.09) and carcass weight (-0.48 to -0.16; standard
33 errors ranged from 0.02 to 0.14) at the same age. The estimated genetic parameters in
34 the present study indicate genetic variability in growth trajectory in cattle which can be
35 exploited through breeding programmes and used in decision support tools.

36

37 **Keywords:** cattle, carcass weight, conformation, fat, Legendre polynomials, random
38 regression

39

40 **INTRODUCTION**

41 Animals develop and mature at different rates depending on their genetic merit
42 (Marshall, 1994; Robinson, 1996). Therefore progeny of some animals may reach the
43 desired carcass weight, conformation, and subcutaneous fat level specified by abattoirs
44 at different ages. As these traits are the most economically important in beef cattle
45 production, knowledge of the optimum age at which an animal is likely to be suitable for
46 slaughter is desirable. High heritability of various carcass characteristics in cattle have
47 been documented (Hickey et al., 2007; Pabiou et al., 2011a) and thus genetic merit of
48 the individual is likely to have a strong impact on such characteristics.

49 Random regression models (RRM) are widely used in the dairy industry to model
50 lactation profiles (Jamrozik et al., 1998; Cobuci et al., 2005). Random regressions have

51 also been used in the study of growth on a live weight basis, using multiple measures
52 recorded over time (Meyer, 2001; Coffey et al., 2006). Random regression models have
53 not, however, been used in the study of carcass traits since these are end-of-life traits
54 measured only once in an animal's lifetime. It is, nonetheless, possible to longitudinally
55 model a trait for different sires exploiting information on the relatedness among
56 progeny slaughtered at different ages, thereby providing several effective
57 measurements per sire across a time trajectory (Jones et al., 1999).

58 The objective of the present study was to examine sire genetic profiles for three carcass
59 traits namely carcass weight, carcass conformation and carcass fat across different ages
60 of progeny slaughtered. Knowledge of the genetic variability in the trajectory for carcass
61 traits could facilitate more informed selection and management decisions such as
62 penning of animals with expected similar growth patterns.

63

64 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

65 All data used in the present study were obtained from the Irish Cattle Breeding
66 Federation (ICBF) database.

67

68 ***Data***

69 Carcass weight (kg), carcass conformation (scale 1 to 15; Table 1) and carcass fat
70 score (scale 1 to 15; Table 1) records from 5,223,983 singleton animals from 101,171
71 Irish herds slaughtered between the years 2010 and 2013 were available. Carcass
72 weight is measured on average two hours after slaughter following the removal of the
73 head, legs, thoracic and abdominal organs, and internal fats and hide. In Ireland, carcass
74 conformation and fat scores are graded using Video Image Analysis (Pabiou et al.,

75 2011b). The resulting EUROP classification grades were transformed into a 15-point
76 numeric scale outlined in Table 1.

77 Records were removed for animals that moved herd more than once during their
78 lifetime. The remaining 1,319,863 records were restricted to animals slaughtered >360
79 days or <1200 days of age. Cows (i.e., females that had at least one recorded calving
80 date) and mature bulls >720 days of age at slaughter were not further considered, nor
81 were animals with no recorded sire or dam. Furthermore, records more than four
82 standard deviations from the within gender population mean carcass weight or age at
83 slaughter were also discarded. Only carcass weight records between 120 kg and 543 kg,
84 between 120 kg and 577 kg, and between 136kg and 577 kg were retained for heifers,
85 steers and young bulls, respectively. Dam parity was restricted to 1 to 10 and parity was
86 subsequently categorized as 1, 2, 3, 4, and ≥ 5 . Only progeny from sires with at least 5
87 paternal half-sibs with records were retained. Following these edits, 541,595 carcass
88 records remained.

89 Two contemporary groups were generated: 1) herd-year-season-gender of slaughter
90 and 2) abattoir-date of slaughter. Gender in the present study refers to heifer, steer, or
91 young bull. An algorithm was used to maximize the size of the herd-year-season-gender
92 of slaughter contemporary group while simultaneously minimizing the duration of the
93 contemporary group in time; this algorithm has been described in detail for genetic
94 analyses of other animal traits in Irish genetic studies (McHugh et al., 2011; Berry and
95 Evans, 2014). No contemporary group was longer than 60 days in duration and only
96 contemporary groups with at least five records were retained. Following edits, 336,944
97 animals from 27,417 herd-year-season-gender contemporary groups in 9,572 herds
98 remained. Of this dataset, 126,214 (37.5% of the data) were heifers, 124,641 (37% of
99 the data) were steers and 86,089 (25.5% of the data) were young bulls. Animals

100 included in the analysis were from 15,127 sires. The pedigree of each animal was traced
 101 back to founder populations which in turn were allocated to genetic groups. The
 102 pedigree file consisted of 88,324 animals.

103

104 **Data Analysis**

105 Variance components for carcass weight, conformation and fat score were estimated for
 106 each gender separately using sire RRM in AsReml (Gilmour et al., 2009). The data of
 107 young bulls were divided into nine groups based on age at slaughter as 360-400, 401-
 108 440, 441-480, ..., 681-720 days. Heifer and steer data was divided into 21 groups as
 109 360-400, 401-440, 441-480, ..., 1161-1200 days. Residual variances were assumed to
 110 be homogenous within each age class but heterogeneous between each age class. The
 111 number of animals in each residual class is in Table 2.

112 The fitted model was

$$\begin{aligned}
 113 \quad Y_{dhjklqz} &= Parity_d + Abattoir - DoS_j + \sum_{h=1}^9 c_h \cdot Dambreed_h + a_1 \cdot Het + a_2 \cdot Rec \\
 114 \quad &+ \sum_{i=1}^n b_n P_n Age + \sum_{i=1}^n Sire_{kn} P_n Age + \sum_{i=1}^n HY_{ln} P_n Age + HYS_q \\
 115 \quad &+ e_{dhjklqz} \\
 116 \quad & \quad \quad \quad (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

117

118

119

120 where $Y_{dhjklqz}$ = the observed carcass weight, carcass conformation class or carcass
 121 fatness class on animal z ; $Parity_d$ = the fixed effect of the d^{th} parity of the dam of animal
 122 z (5 levels); $Abattoir-DoS_j$ = fixed effect of date of slaughter j (12,251 levels); c_h = partial
 123 regression coefficients on proportion of breed of the dam (Dambreed) h summed over
 124 all breeds (sum of proportion across the 9 breeds equals to unity); a_1 = linear
 125 regression coefficients on heterosis (Het) in animal z ; a_2 = linear regression coefficients

126 on recombination loss (Rec) in animal z ; Age = age at slaughter; b_n = fixed regression
127 coefficient on age at slaughter; P_n = n^{th} order Legendre polynomial of age at slaughter;
128 $Sire_{kn}$ = random regression coefficient on age at slaughter associated with the genetic
129 effect of sire k of animal z ; HY_{ln} = random regression coefficient on age at slaughter
130 associated with the effect of gender finishing herd-year of slaughter l ; HYS_q = the
131 random effect of gender finishing herd-year-season of slaughter q ; n = the order of
132 Legendre polynomial; $e_{dhijklqnz}$ = the residual error term for age class modelled as
133 heterogeneous across age.

134 The most parsimonious fixed effect Legendre polynomial regression was based on both
135 the F-statistic of the higher order polynomial terms but also by visual comparison of the
136 resulting profile for the different model orders. In all instances a quadratic fixed effect
137 polynomial was most appropriate. Although a higher order polynomial fitted the data
138 better ($P < 0.05$), the profiles of the quadratic and higher order polynomials were
139 visually identical. The decision of the most parsimonious order of random Legendre
140 polynomial regression on sire was based on the Akaike's Information criterion (AIC)
141 with the fixed effects in the model being consistent across models compared.

142 Genetic covariance function coefficients were estimated as

$$143 \quad \delta^2 = \Phi'K\Phi$$

144 Where δ^2 is the variance (co)variance matrix for slaughter ages, Φ is the matrix of
145 Legendre polynomial age regression coefficients, and K is the estimated variance
146 covariance matrix of the random polynomial coefficients multiplied by four to transform
147 from a sire variance to a genetic variance (Huisman et al., 2002). Standard errors of the
148 heritability estimates were derived using a Taylor series expansion (Fischer et al.,
149 2004).

150 Genetic correlations between carcass weight, conformation and fat score at each age
 151 were estimated using a series of bivariate RRM analyses in AsReml (Gilmour et al.,
 152 2009). Fixed and random effects included in the models were as described for the
 153 univariate analyses (model 1). The inability of bivariate models to converge when a
 154 higher order of random regression was fitted necessitated the order of the fitted
 155 random regression to be linear. Residual variances were estimated within each age class
 156 as described for the univariate analysis, and a residual covariance between traits was
 157 assumed within residual age classes.

158 Standard errors of genetic correlations were estimated using (Falconer and
 159 MacKay, 1996):

$$160 \quad \sigma_{(r_A)} = \frac{1 - r_A^2}{\sqrt{2}} \sqrt{\frac{\sigma(h_x^2) \sigma(h_y^2)}{h_x^2 h_y^2}}$$

161 Where σ denotes the standard error, r_A is the genetic correlation between trait x and
 162 trait y , and h^2 is the heritability; the superscript x or y , represent the respective traits
 163 under investigation.

164 Eigenvalues and eigenvectors were calculated from singular value
 165 decomposition of the additive genetic covariance matrix, and eigenfunctions were
 166 subsequently calculated from the product of the eigenvectors and Legendre polynomial
 167 coefficients as:

$$168 \quad \Psi_i(x) = \sum_{j=0}^{p-1} [k_{\psi_i}]_j \Phi_j(x)$$

169

170

171 Where $[k_{\psi_i}]_j$ is the j^{th} element of the i^{th} eigenvector of K , Φ is the j^{th} polynomial relating
 172 to the p^{th} order of fit, and x is age of slaughter.

173

174 **RESULTS**

175 The frequency distribution at age of slaughter for young bulls, steers and heifers is in
176 Figure 1. A total of 96.6% per cent of the young bulls were slaughtered between the
177 ages of 420 and 720 days. A total of 84.8% of steers were slaughtered between 650 and
178 1010 days of age. Of the heifers slaughtered, 84.3% were slaughtered between the ages
179 of 530 and 900 days. Therefore, to minimize the influence of data at the extremities of
180 the parameter space on the fitted polynomials at the extremes, only (co)variance
181 components between 420 and 720 days, 650 and 1010 days and 530 and 900 days are
182 presented for young bulls, steers and heifers, respectively.

183 Descriptive statistics of carcass weight, conformation score, fat score and age at
184 slaughter in each gender are in Table 3. Young bulls were slaughtered at an average age
185 of 583 days and had a heavier mean carcass weight than steers and heifers. Young bulls
186 also had the best conformation and were the leanest of the three genders. For all
187 genders, carcass weight increased constantly as animals aged (Figure 2). Maximum
188 conformation (i.e., age at point of inflection) was reached in steers and heifers at a
189 similar age of 934 days and 938 days, respectively. In young bulls and steers, fat
190 deposition increased as age at slaughter increased albeit, at a declining rate, whereas fat
191 deposition reached maximum in heifers at 780 days.

192

193 ***Variance Components***

194 A quadratic random Legendre polynomial on sire fitted the data best for all traits and
195 genders. A quadratic random Legendre polynomial on herd-year also fitted the data
196 best for all traits and genders. Residual variances were heterogeneous across age

217 (Appendix 1). Young bulls had greater residual variation for all three traits, except for
218 fat score, where the residual variance was greatest in heifers.

219 Genetic variances followed similar trends for all traits and genders, increasing as age at
220 slaughter increased (Figure 3). The ranges of genetic variance estimates were similar
221 across gender for carcass weight and conformation. Average genetic variance estimates
222 were greatest for fat score in steers (0.57 ± 0.04 units²) whereas the least genetic
223 variation for fat score was observed among young bulls (0.16 ± 0.02 units²).

224 Heritability estimates for carcass weight across ages of slaughter were greater in heifers
225 (0.17 ± 0.02 to 0.34 ± 0.02) and steers (0.21 ± 0.01 to 0.27 ± 0.01) than in young bulls
226 (0.08 ± 0.02 to 0.16 ± 0.01). Peak heritability for carcass weight corresponded to the
227 greatest estimates of genetic variation (Figure 4). Fat score was more heritable in
228 heifers than in steers and young bulls, ranging from 0.28 (± 0.02) at 530 days of age at
229 slaughter to 0.39 (± 0.02) at 880 days of age at slaughter. Heritability estimates for
230 conformation across genders increased as age of slaughter increased (Figure 4). This
231 increase was greatest in heifers, where heritability of conformation increased from 0.24
232 (± 0.02) at 530 days of age at slaughter to 0.42 (± 0.02) at 871 days of age at slaughter.
233 On average, conformation across age at slaughter and genders was the most heritable
234 trait 0.36 (± 0.01), whereas carcass weight across age at slaughter and genders was the
235 least heritable trait 0.23 (± 0.01).

236 The largest eigenvalues explained 81%, 90% and 95% of the genetic variation for
237 carcass weight in heifers, steers and young bulls, respectively. In all the models, the
238 largest proportion of the genetic variation was explained by the intercept term of the
239 RRM. The eigenfunctions associated with the largest eigenvalues for carcass weight,
240 conformation and fat were of the same sign across ages of slaughter in all genders
241 (Figure 5). Similar to carcass weight, the intercept term explained the majority of the

222 genetic variance for conformation (82%, 96% and 93% for heifers, steers and young
223 bulls, respectively) and fat score (91%, 89% and 95% for heifers, steers and young
224 bulls, respectively). Eigenfunction estimates relating to the second largest eigenvalues
225 explained between 4% (conformation in steers) and 18% (carcass weight in heifers) of
226 the genetic variability. The eigenfunctions corresponding to the second eigenvalues for
227 carcass weight were the same sign across ages of slaughter in all genders except young
228 bulls. The second eigenfunctions associated with conformation and fat were positive at
229 early ages at slaughter and negative at older ages at slaughter in steers and young bulls
230 (Figure 5).

231

232 ***Genetic correlations within trait***

233 Within trait genetic correlations across different ages at slaughter ranged from 0.64 (\pm
234 0.02) to 1.00 (\pm 0.00) in heifers, from 0.94 (\pm 0.01) to 1.00 (\pm 0.00) in steers, and from
235 0.74 (\pm 0.01) to 1.00 (\pm 0.00) in young bulls (Figure 6). Within trait correlations were
236 strongest between adjacent ages, approaching unity, and weakened as the interval
237 between ages lengthened. Across genders, within trait genetic correlations between
238 youngest and oldest ages at slaughter were strongest for conformation scores and
239 weakest for fat scores (Figure 6). The weakest genetic correlation 0.64 (\pm 0.02) was
240 observed in heifers between carcass weight at 530 days and 900 days of age at
241 slaughter.

242

243 ***Genetic correlations between traits***

244 Irrespective of gender, genetic correlations between carcass weight and conformation
245 at the same age at slaughter were strongly positive reaching a maximum correlation of
246 0.78 (\pm 0.04) in young bulls at 420 days of age at slaughter (Figure 7). In contrast,

247 estimates of the genetic correlations between carcass conformation and fat score at the
248 same age were negative. Genetic correlations between carcass weight and fat score
249 were negative at younger slaughter ages and became weaker as age at slaughter
250 increased. The weakest genetic correlation between carcass weight and fat was -0.48
251 (± 0.02) at 597 days of age in heifers.

252 Strong positive to weak negative genetic correlations existed between carcass weight
253 and the two other carcass traits, while the genetic relationship between fat and
254 conformation varied around zero.

255

256 **DISCUSSION**

257 ***Modelling***

258 Growth curves that model both fixed and random effects are potentially a useful tool for
259 selective breeding but also for precision-based management. Carcass development has
260 mainly been modelled on a live weight basis using several different methods. These
261 approaches include non-linear growth functions such as von Bertalanffy (von
262 Bertalanffy, 1957), Gompertz (Winsor, 1932) and Brody (Brody, 1945), that describe
263 the relationship between weight and age (Berry et al., 2005) using parameters with
264 biological meaning. An additional approach includes multi-trait analyses considering
265 different ages as separate traits (Nobre et al., 2003). Random regression models have
266 previously been applied to growth studies where multiple live weight records
267 exist (Meyer, 2000; Legarra et al., 2004). Studies that use RRM in the analysis of carcass
268 growth are however, to our knowledge, non-existent. The present study used
269 covariance functions to model growth rather than the traditionally used growth
270 functions; an advantage of the former is that no prior assumptions about the shape of
271 the curve over time are required (Meyer and Hill, 1997). In addition, modelling the

272 covariance structure as a covariance function permits a gradual change in (co)variances
273 at different ages at slaughter. A benefit of this was that it facilitated the estimation of
274 covariance between ages for which no records necessarily existed (van der Werf et al.,
275 1998) but also between different carcass characteristics at different ages.

276 The RRM fitted in the present study used Legendre polynomials, a function that is
277 commonly used in the dairy industry to generate lactation profiles (Liu et al., 2003;
278 Mrode et al., 2003). Legendre polynomials are favoured because their orthogonal
279 properties assist with model convergence (Brotherstone et al., 2000; Bohmanova et al.,
280 2008); nonetheless, the fit may not be optimal at the extremes of the trajectory due to
281 the scarcity of data at the extremities and the mathematical properties of polynomials
282 (Legarra et al., 2004). The most parsimonious order of the polynomial term used,
283 however, varies across studies. Nobre et al. (2003) used cubic Legendre polynomials to
284 model growth curves in Nellore beef cattle, whereas, Arango et al. (2004) documented
285 that the additive genetic covariance structure of live weight in beef cows could be
286 described using linear random regression. The most parsimonious RRM in the present
287 study was third order (i.e., quadratic) Legendre polynomials for the fixed and both
288 random trajectories. Using equal orders of fixed and random effects have been
289 suggested in the literature (Pool et al., 2000). Furthermore the analysis of eigenvalues
290 of genetic covariance (Figure 5) for each trait, suggests the diminishing importance of
291 adding further polynomial terms in explaining the additive genetic variance effects.

292

293 ***Genetic parameters for carcass weight***

294 Carcass weight, which reflects lifetime growth, is a routinely evaluated trait in many
295 beef genetic evaluations (Pabiou et al., 2011b). The genetic parameter estimates
296 obtained in the present study using RRM corroborate those reported in other cattle

297 populations estimated using traditional linear models (Gregory et al., 1995; Kause et al.,
298 2015), including those from data on Irish cattle (Hickey et al., 2007; Pabiou et al., 2009;
299 Pabiou et al., 2011a). The average heritability for carcass weight across genders and age
300 at slaughter in the present study (0.23 ± 0.01) is similar to the estimate reported by
301 Hickey et al. (2007) in Irish beef cattle, estimated using a linear animal model with a
302 phenotypic adjustment for age. Hickey et al. (2007) reported varying direct heritability
303 estimates for carcass weight in cattle depending on breed composition, (0.17 for
304 Aberdeen Angus or Belgian Blue sired to 0.65 Simmental sired).

305 Eigenfunctions are continuous functions whose coefficients are formed by the
306 decomposition of the (co)variance matrices (Kirkpatrick and Heckman, 1989).
307 Eigenfunctions provide information on how growth trajectories may change in response
308 to selection (Meyer and Hill, 1997) and have previously been applied to live-weight
309 records in dairy cows (Berry et al., 2003). Analysis of the eigenvalues and
310 eigenfunctions of the additive genetic covariance matrices in the present study revealed
311 genetic variability does indeed exist among animals in their growth profiles for carcass
312 weight (Figure 5). Most of the genetic variance was however attributable to the
313 intercept which suggests that the greatest opportunity exists to alter the height of
314 growth profiles for carcass weight. This substantiates the strong positive genetic
315 correlation that existed for carcass weight across different ages or in other words,
316 selection for heavier carcass weights at any age would increase carcass weights at all
317 ages (Figure 6). The strong genetic correlations between carcass weight at different
318 ages corroborates documented genetic correlations from studies on live weight using
319 both RRM (Arango et al., 2004) and traditional linear models (McHugh et al., 2014),
320 where strong correlations existed between live weights at younger and older ages. The
321 change in sign of the second eigenfunctions for carcass weight across ages in steers and

322 young bulls, and in the third eigenfunctions in heifers and young bulls, provides
323 evidence that exploitable genetic variation also exists in the shape of the growth curve
324 (Figure 5). The genetic variation however was limited; therefore a greater weight would
325 have to be imposed on the second and third eigenfunctions to alter the shape of the
326 growth curves for carcass weight.

327 Generally in genetic evaluations of carcass traits, carcass weight at different ages is
328 treated as the same trait (i.e., genetic correlation of unity among different ages) and age
329 at slaughter adjustments are at the phenotypic level. The results in this present study
330 mostly support this. Nonetheless, the existence of some moderate genetic correlations
331 (i.e., as low as 0.64) between carcass weight in heifers between extreme ages suggests
332 that, in fact carcass weight at extremely different ages in heifers may indeed be
333 governed by different allelic variability. It has been proposed that genetic correlations
334 of less than 0.80 may be different traits due to the existence of genotype-by-
335 environment interactions and should therefore be treated as such (Robertson, 1959).
336 Nonetheless, due to high computational requirements, the gain in accuracy of genetic
337 evaluations may not justify the increased complexity of the genetic evaluation model
338 that incorporates RRM.

339

340 ***Genetic parameters for carcass conformation and fat***

341 While RRM have previously been used to model animal (live-) weight in cattle (Meyer,
342 2000; Coffey et al, 2006), the use of RRM to model animal conformation or fat are non-
343 existent in beef cattle although it has been undertaken in dairy cattle (Coffey et al,
344 2001). As with carcass weight, the heritability estimates for conformation and fat score
345 were within the ranges of those reported from traditional linear models in other
346 international beef populations (Utrera and Van Vleck, 2004) and in Irish populations

347 (Hickey et al., 2007; Crowley et al., 2011; Pabiou et al., 2011a). Pabiou et al. (2011a),
348 using data from Irish abattoirs, reported direct heritability estimates for conformation
349 and fat score ranging from 0.28 to 0.46 and from 0.27 and 0.40, respectively from an
350 animal linear mixed model. Similar to carcass weight, the constant positive
351 eigenfunctions relating to the largest eigenvalues of conformation and fat indicate an
352 opportunity to alter the height of conformation and fat profiles to suit specific breeding
353 objectives (Figure 5) and substantiates the strong genetic correlations that exist within
354 each trait at different ages. The change in sign of the second and third eigenfunctions
355 between younger and older ages at slaughter in steers and young bulls suggests the
356 presence of factors with opposing effects on conformation and fat across ages at
357 slaughter. Response to selection based on the second and third eigenvalues would be
358 slow as they account for only less than 18% of the additive genetic variation; therefore,
359 altering the shape of the profile through breeding may prove difficult as greater
360 selection pressure would have to be imposed on the second and third eigenfunctions for
361 conformation and fat.

362

363 ***Genetic correlation between traits at the same age***

364 Estimates in the literature (Gregory et al., 1995; Kause et al., 2015) of the genetic
365 correlations among carcass weight, conformation and fat vary widely among
366 populations. Such variability may be due to differences in breeds or analytical methods
367 used in the different studies. Based on results from the present study, these apparent
368 discrepancies among studies may also be due to differently aged animals being included
369 in the analysis. In the present study, increasing carcass weight was favourably related
370 to better shaped carcasses in all genders. These strong positive correlations are
371 consistent with those reported in the literature from traditional linear models (Van der

372 Werf et al., 1998; Bouquet et al., 2010), but stronger than those reported from other
373 Irish populations (Hickey et al., 2007; Pabiou et al., 2011a). Underlying genetic
374 correlations influence the potential for change in carcass traits at different ages and will
375 also impact the optimal age at which an animal should be slaughtered. In the present
376 study, correlations between traits across age at slaughter and gender were sufficiently
377 different from unity, suggesting that heavier animals may also be more muscular and
378 leaner at different ages at slaughter (Figure 7). The alleles affecting carcass weight and
379 muscularity are different to those influencing fatness across ages at slaughter and
380 therefore direct selection for heavier carcasses alone across all ages at slaughter does
381 not necessarily have to result in fatter carcasses. Random regression analyses provide
382 genetic information for carcass traits across all ages at slaughter and have the potential
383 to be used in routine genetic analysis of carcass traits. Based on the genetic correlation
384 structure between carcass traits across the trajectory, different emphasis may be placed
385 in an index using information from different ages to facilitate optimal selection for
386 combinations of carcass weight, conformation and fat levels at specific ages.

387

388 ***Implications***

389 This study shows the genetic relationships among carcass traits across varying ages at
390 slaughter in a population of Irish beef cattle using RRM. Results illustrate the potential
391 to select on carcass trait trajectories and to alter growth curves to meet specific
392 breeding objectives. Knowledge of the variability in genetic potential for carcass growth
393 and both muscle and fat deposition is important in order to achieve genetic gain. Such
394 information may also be useful in management decision support tools to align the
395 management of animals more closely with their growth potential. For example, in a
396 feedlot production system, grouping animals based on individual genetic growth

397 profiles, as opposed to breed, may facilitate better management of resources. In
398 addition, such grouping may aid in decisions on when best to slaughter pens of animals.

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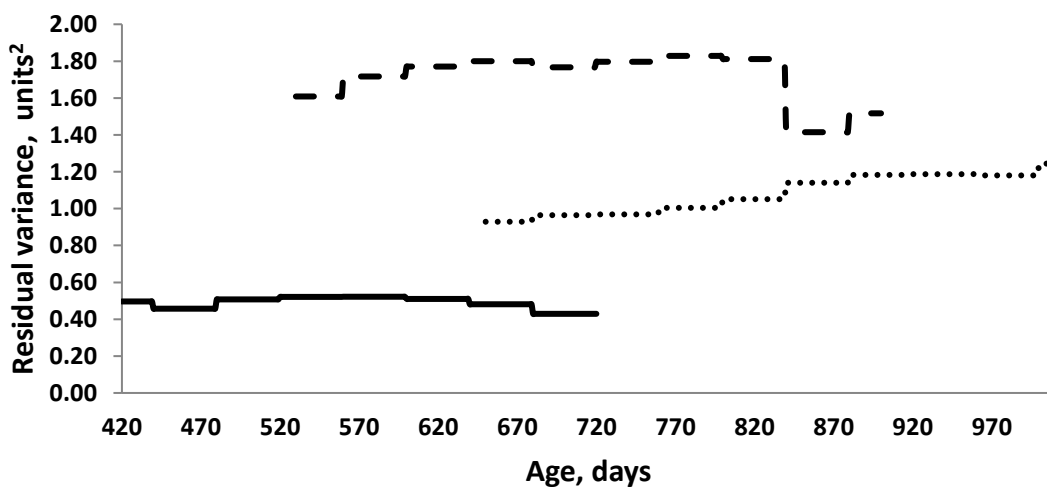
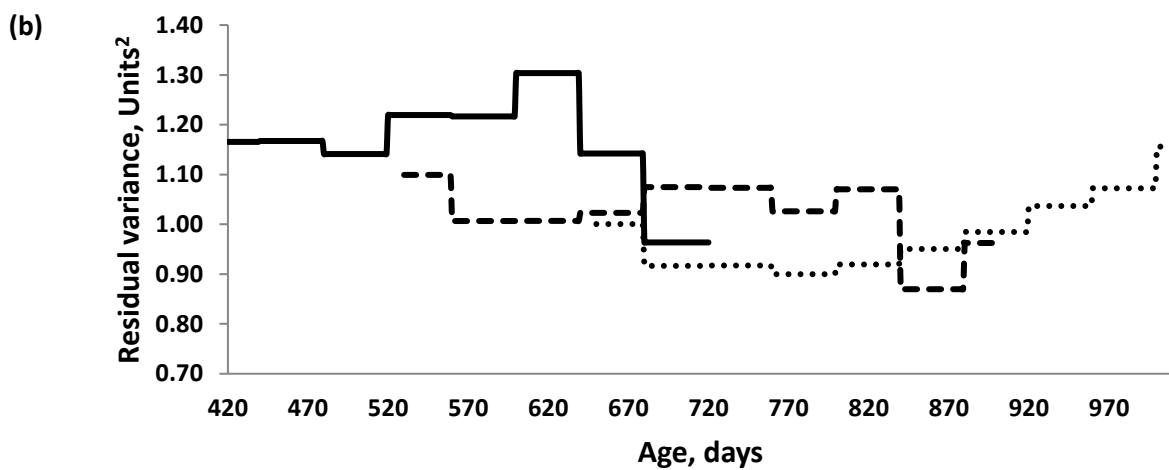
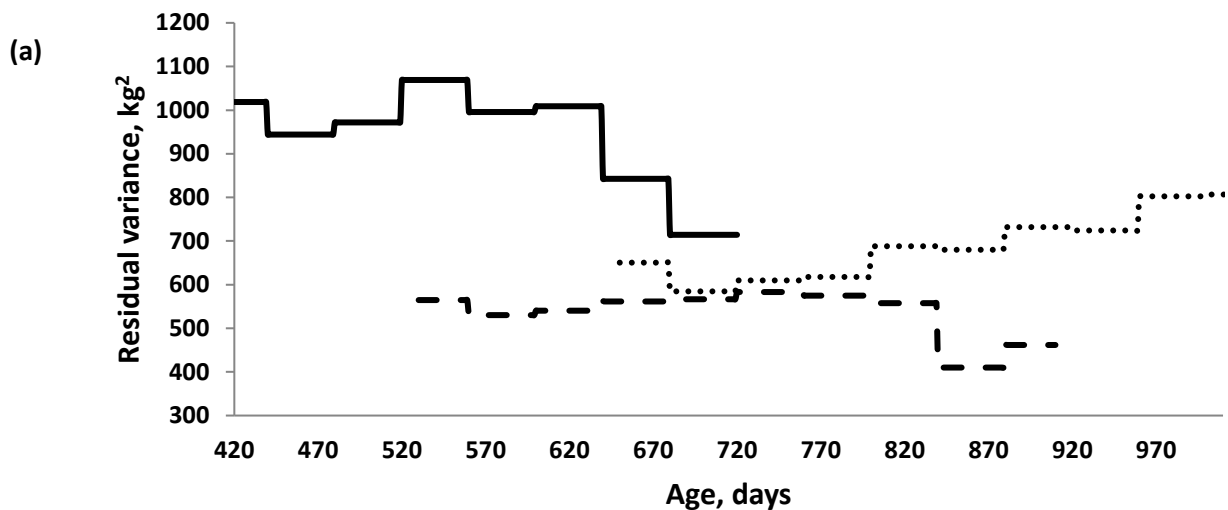
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APPENDIX 1 : RESIDUAL VARIANCE ESTIMATES



Estimates of residual variance for (a) carcass weight, (b) conformation, and (c) fat, in heifers (---), steers (•••) and young bulls (—). Standard errors of residual variance estimates ranged from 6.50 to 22.50 (kg²) for carcass weight, 0.02 to 0.03 (units²) for conformation and 0.01 to 0.03 (units²) for fat. Carcass conformation and fat scores were measured on a scale of 1-15.

Table 1. Numerical values on a 15-point scale in classification units given to carcass conformation class and carcass fatness class scores using a 15-, 7-, or 5-point scale*

Conformation class scale			Fatness class scale		
15 point scale ¹	5 point scale	Numeric value	15 point scale ²	7 point scale	Numeric value
E+		15	5+	5	15
E=	E	14	5=		14
E-		13	5-		13
U+		12	4+	4H	12
U=	U	11	4=		11
U-		10	4-	4L	10
R+		9	3+		9
R=	R	8	3=	3	8
R-		7	3-		7
O+		6	2+		6
O=	O	5	2=	2	5
O-		4	2-		4
P+	P+	3	1+		3
P=	P-	2	1=	1	2
P-	P-	1	1-		1

¹E+ is the best conformation; P- is the worst conformation.

²5+ is the fattest; 1- is the leanest.

* Hickey et al. (2007).

Table 2. Numbers of heifer, steer, and young bull records, in each residual variance class group.

<u>Class (days)</u>	<u>Heifers</u>	<u>Steers</u>	<u>Young Bulls</u>
360-400	566	162	1,399
401-440	1,293	374	3,979
441-480	1,937	582	8,051
481-520	2,790	753	9,724
521-560	4,700	1,293	10,288
561-600	7,791	1,936	12,316
601-640	11,202	3,058	13,083
641-680	16,414	6,460	13,405
681-720	20,151	13,113	13,844
721-760	17,552	19,681	N/A
761-800	11,718	18,329	N/A
801-840	8,069	13,202	N/A
841-880	6,665	10,821	N/A
881-920	5,719	12,096	N/A
921-960	2,637	7,027	N/A
961-1000	1,971	5,046	N/A
1,001-1,040	1,575	3,742	N/A
1,041-1,080	1,274	2,916	N/A
1,081-1,120	991	2,137	N/A
1,121-1,160	709	1,205	N/A
1,161-1,200	490	708	N/A

N/A= not applicable

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation (s.d.) and coefficient of variation (CV) for each gender for each carcass trait and age at slaughter.

Gender	Trait	Mean	s.d.	CV%
Heifers n=126,214	Carcass weight (kg)	297.65	45.27	15.20
	Conformation ¹	7.53	1.85	24.56
	Fat ²	7.26	1.85	25.48
	Age at slaughter (days)	725.20	134.51	18.55
Steers n=124,641	Carcass weight (kg)	346.72	53.15	15.41
	Conformation ¹	6.35	2.25	35.43
	Fat ²	6.67	1.85	27.73
	Age at slaughter (days)	810.26	129.45	15.98
Young bulls n=86,089	Carcass weight (kg)	368.71	64.84	17.58
	Conformation ¹	8.80	2.62	29.77
	Fat ²	5.27	0.99	18.77
	Age at slaughter (days)	583.12	87.61	15.02

¹Scored on a 15 point scale 1 (worst) to 15 (best).

²Scored on a 15 point scale 1 (lean) to 15 (fat).

n = number of animals in each gender.

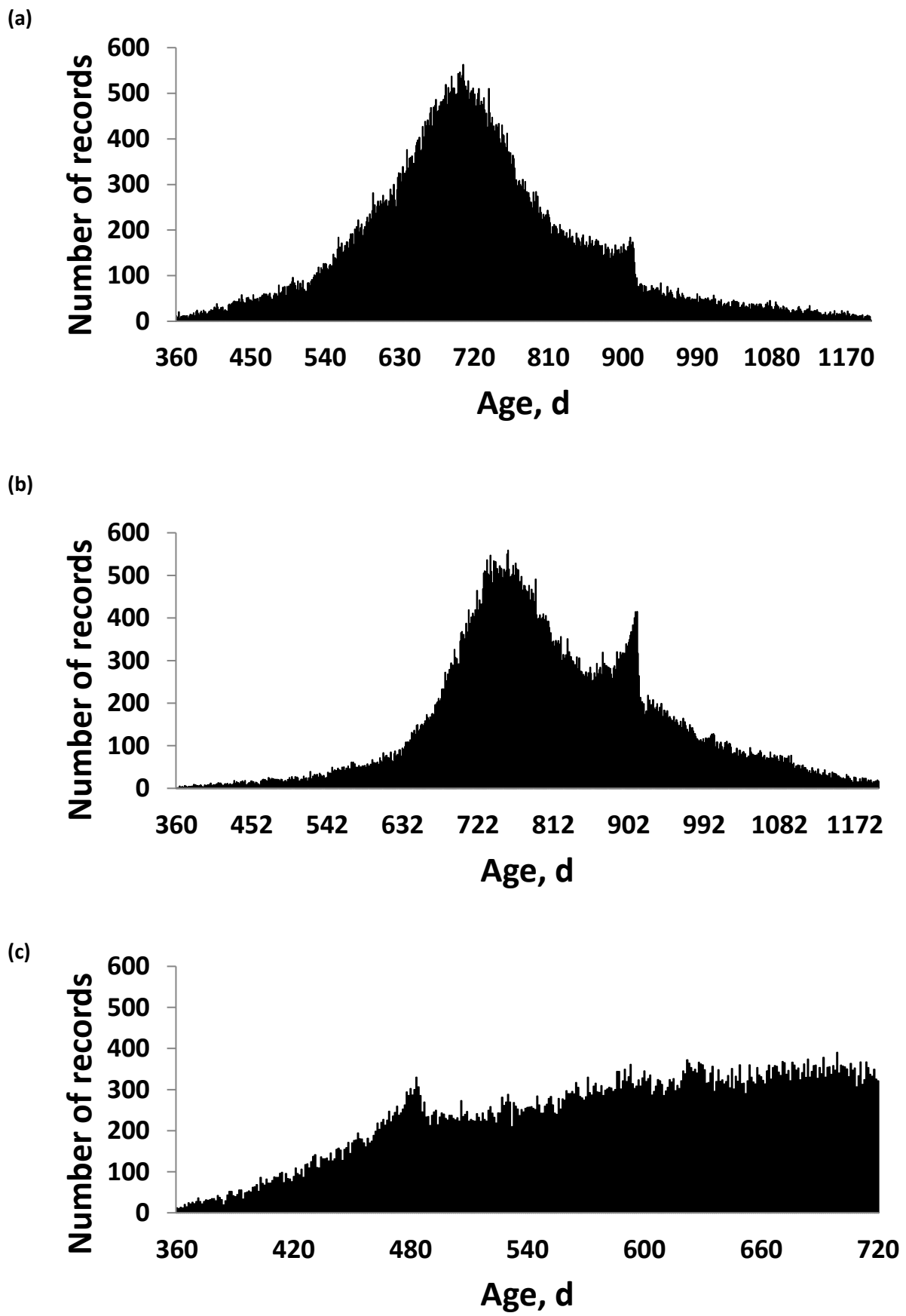
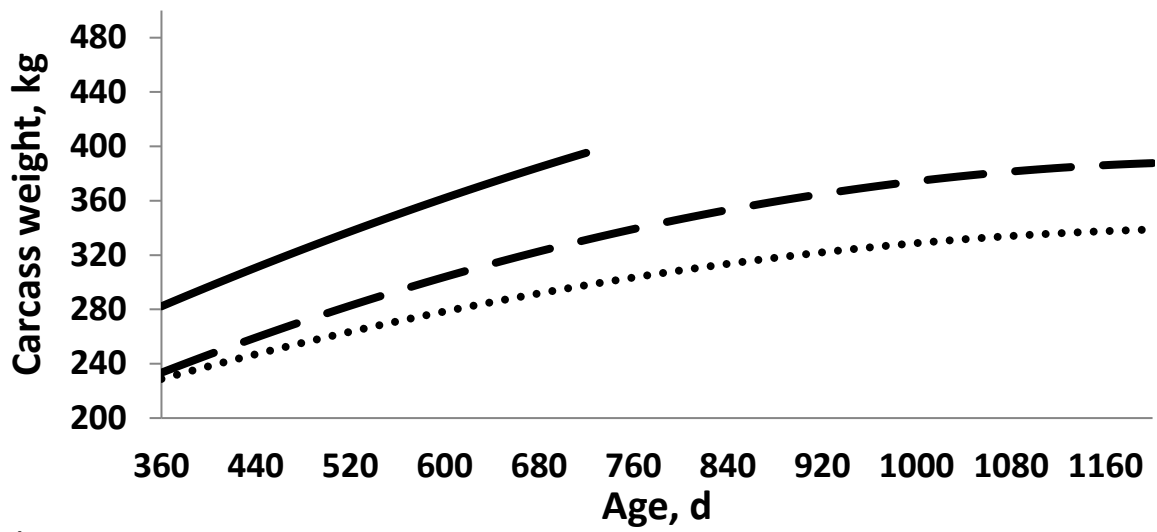
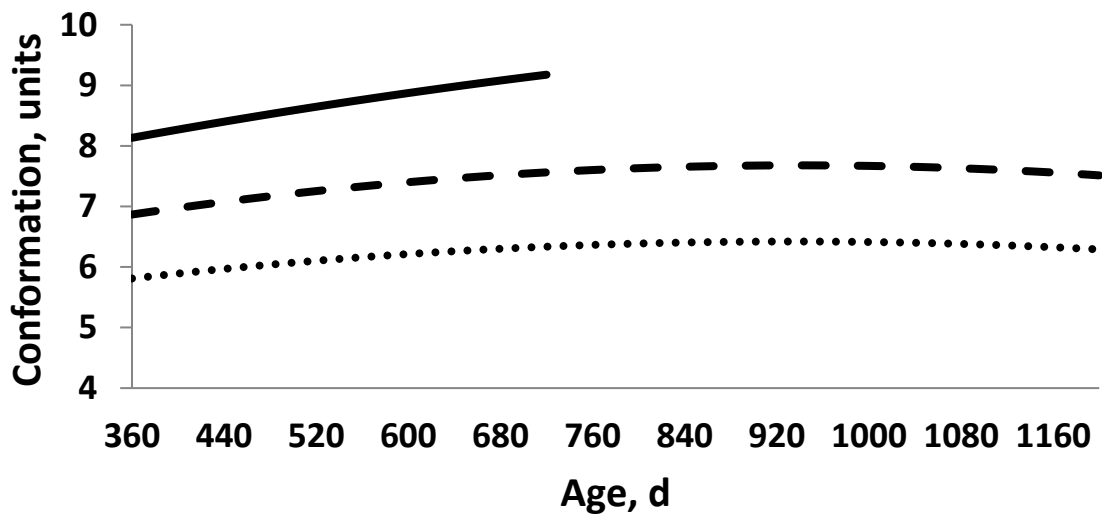


Figure 1.

(a)



(b)



(c)

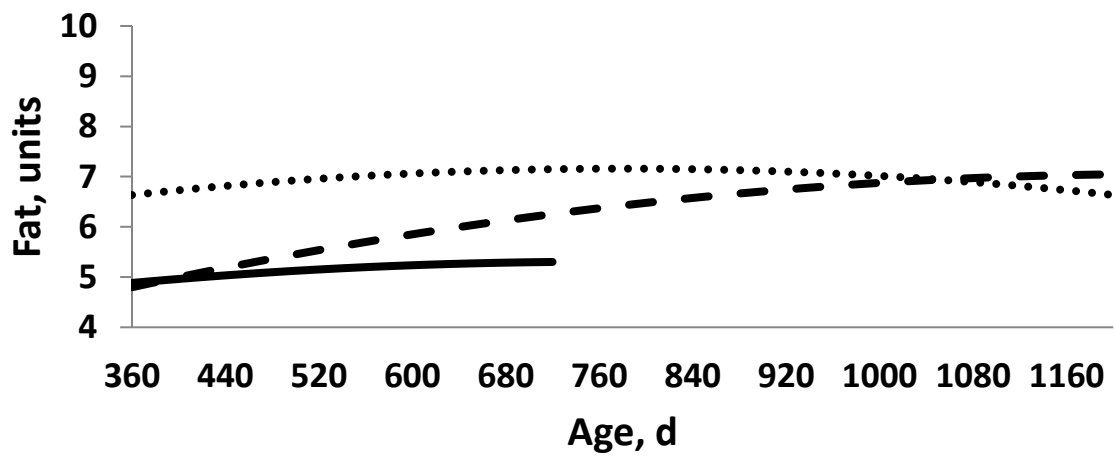


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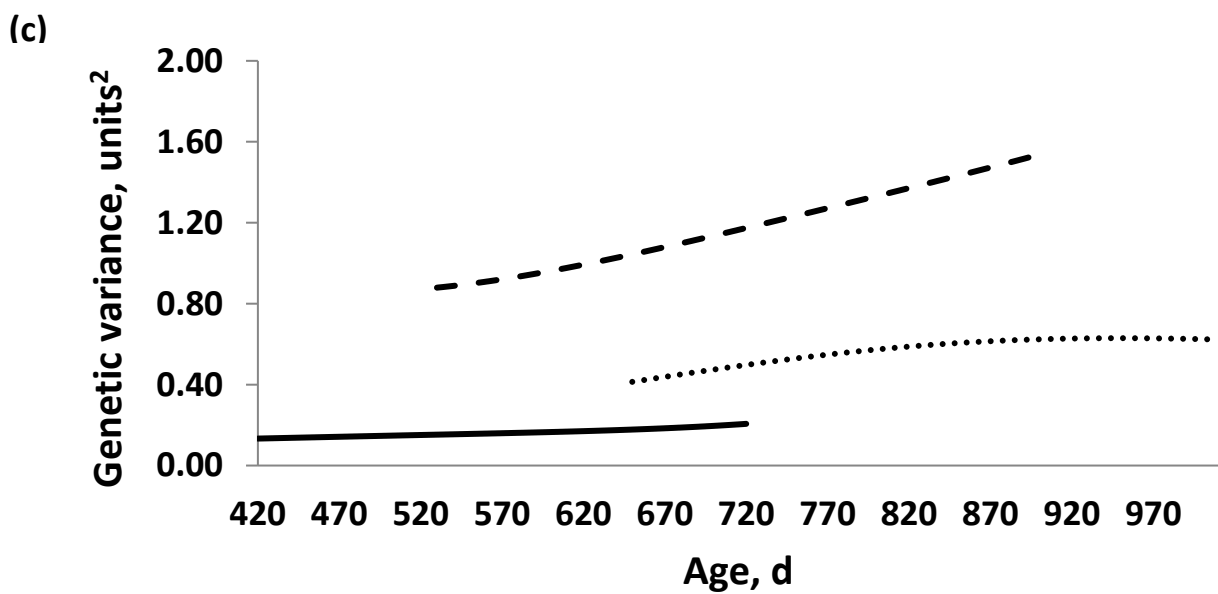
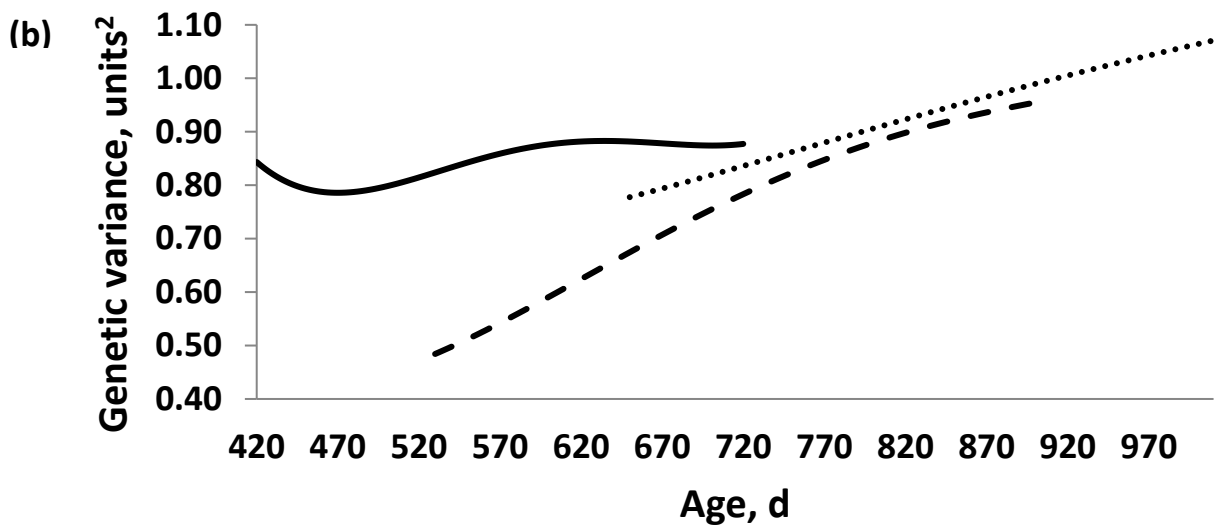
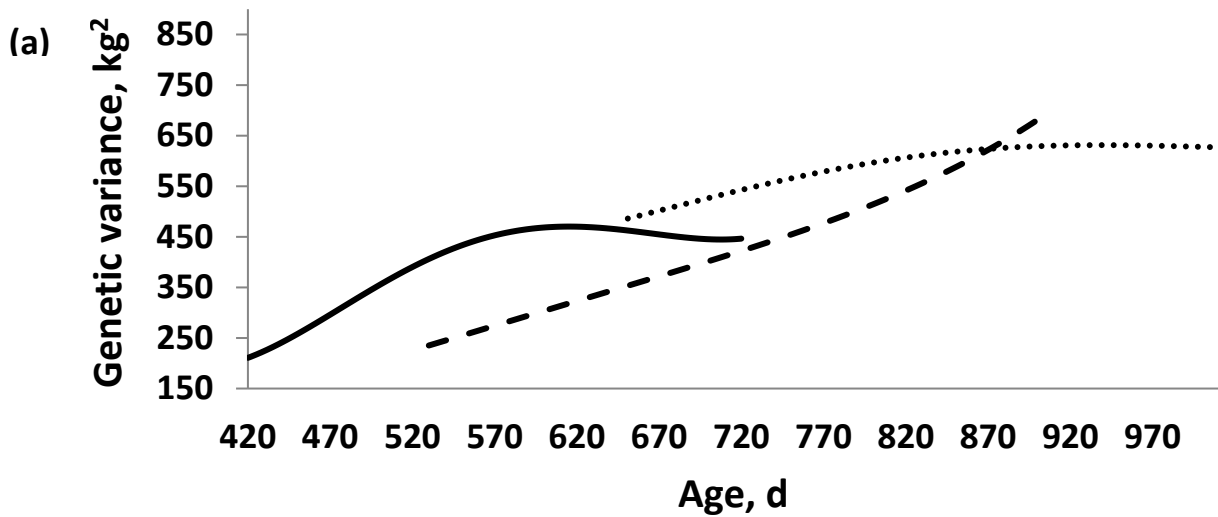


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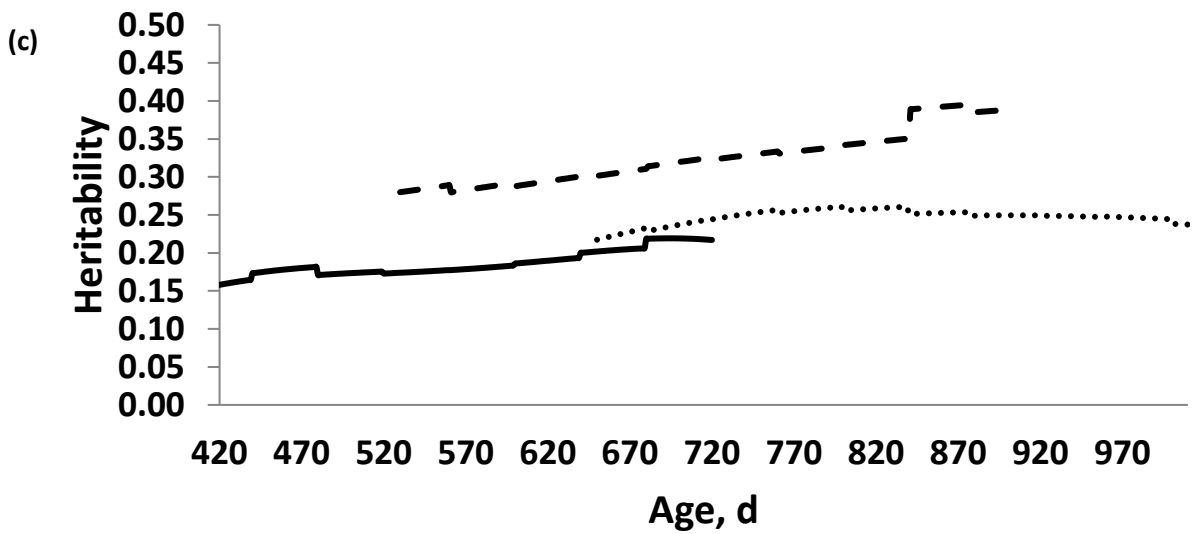
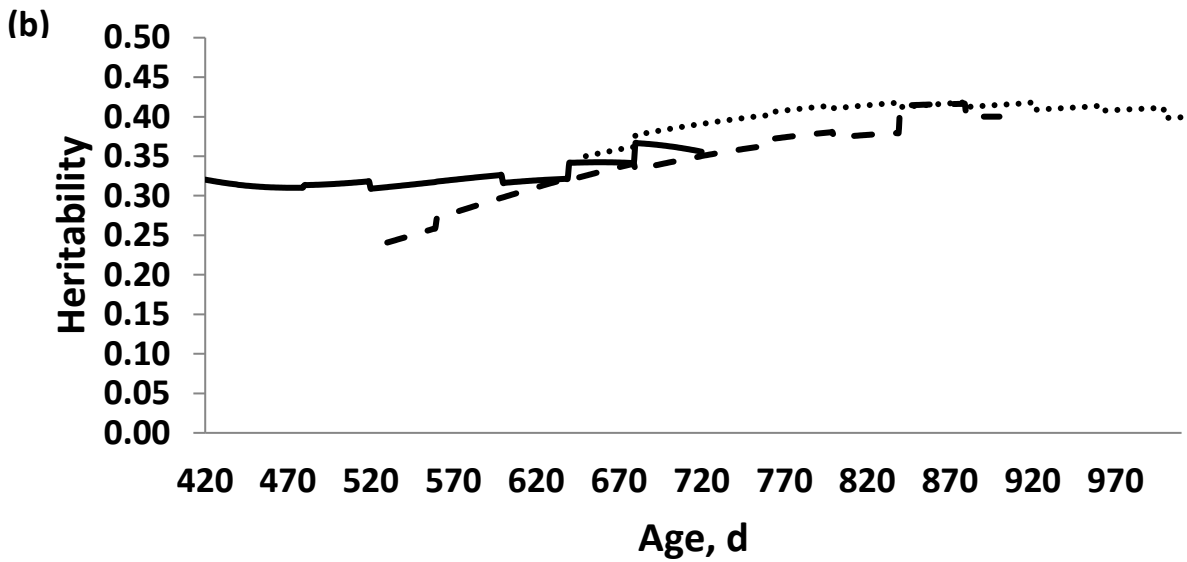
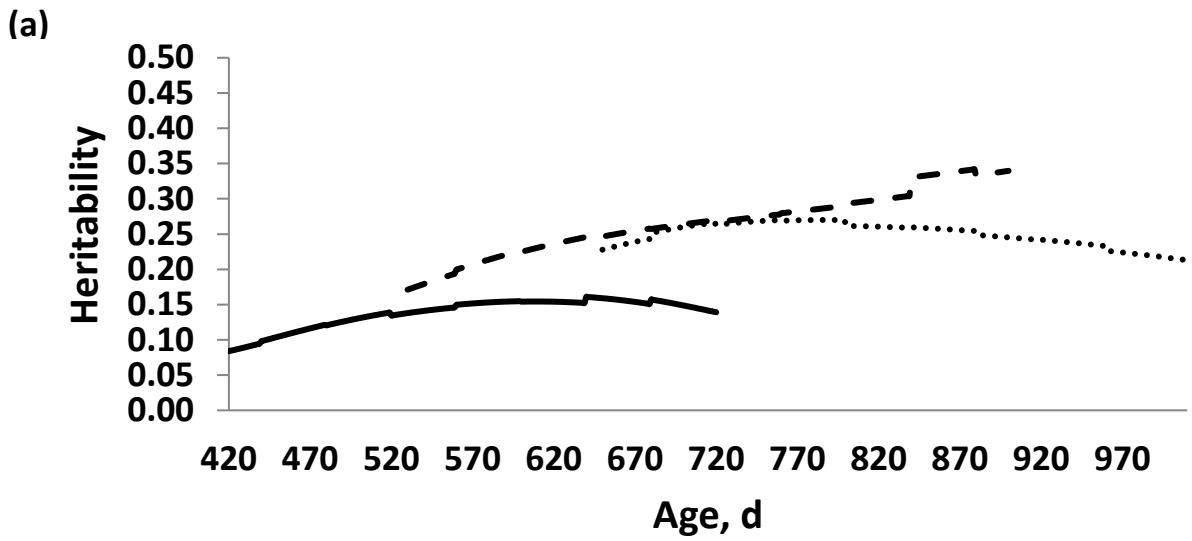
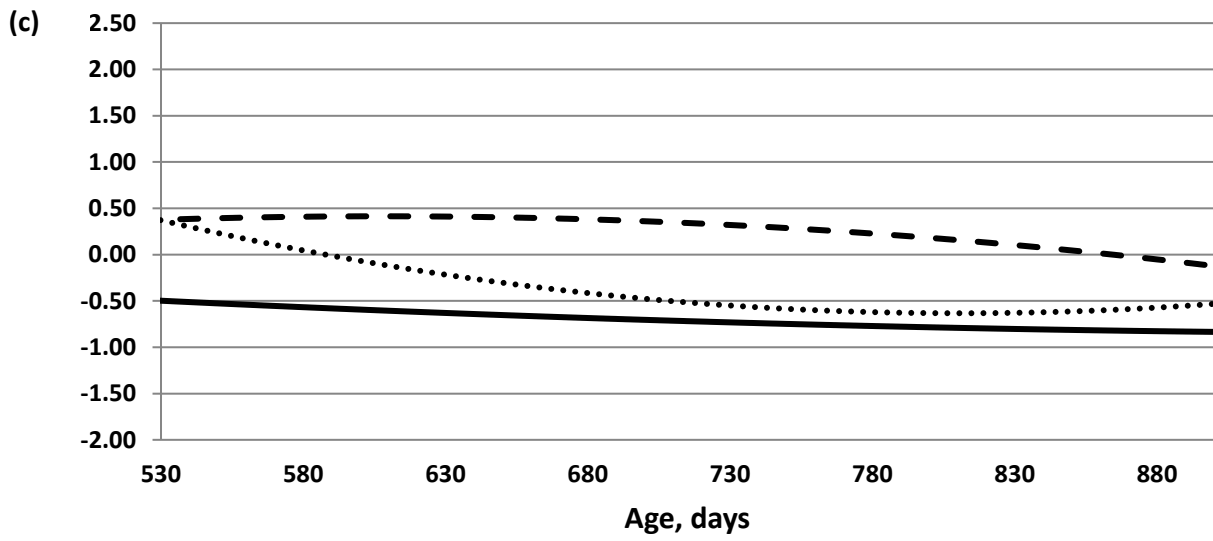
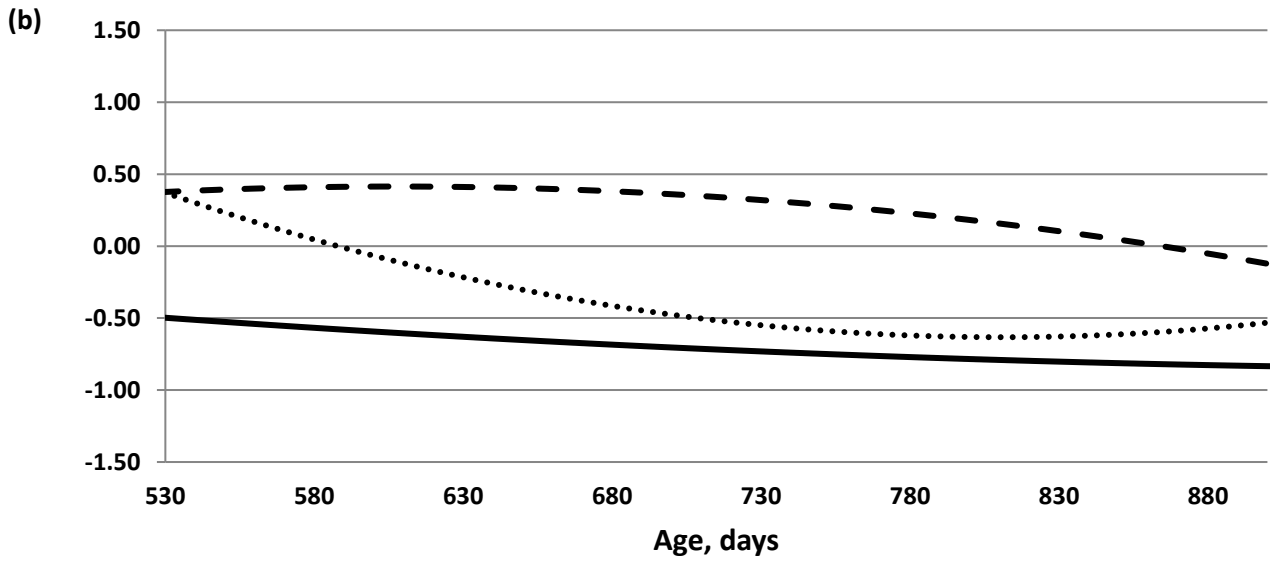
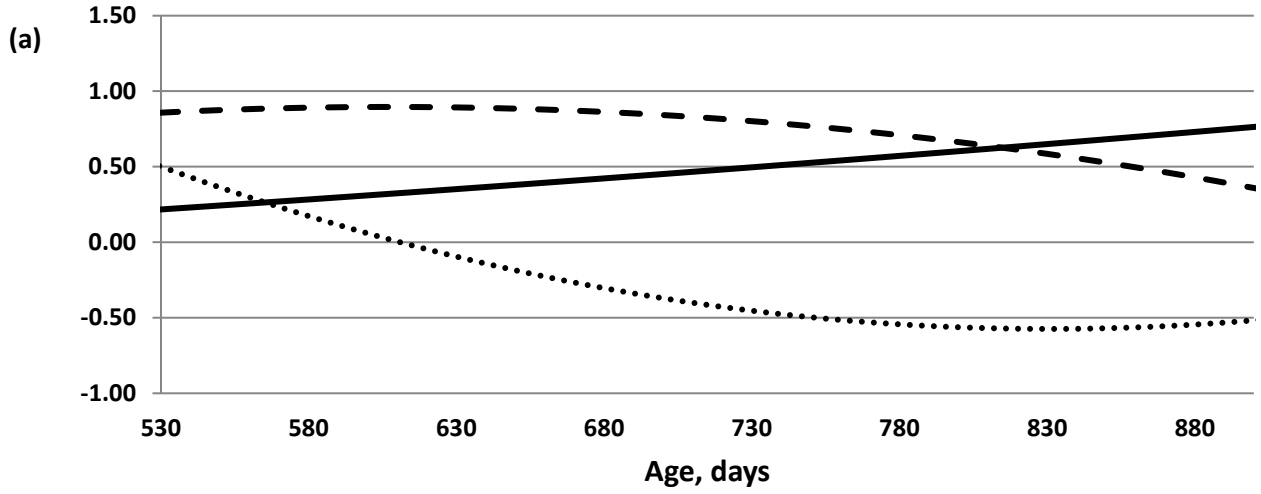
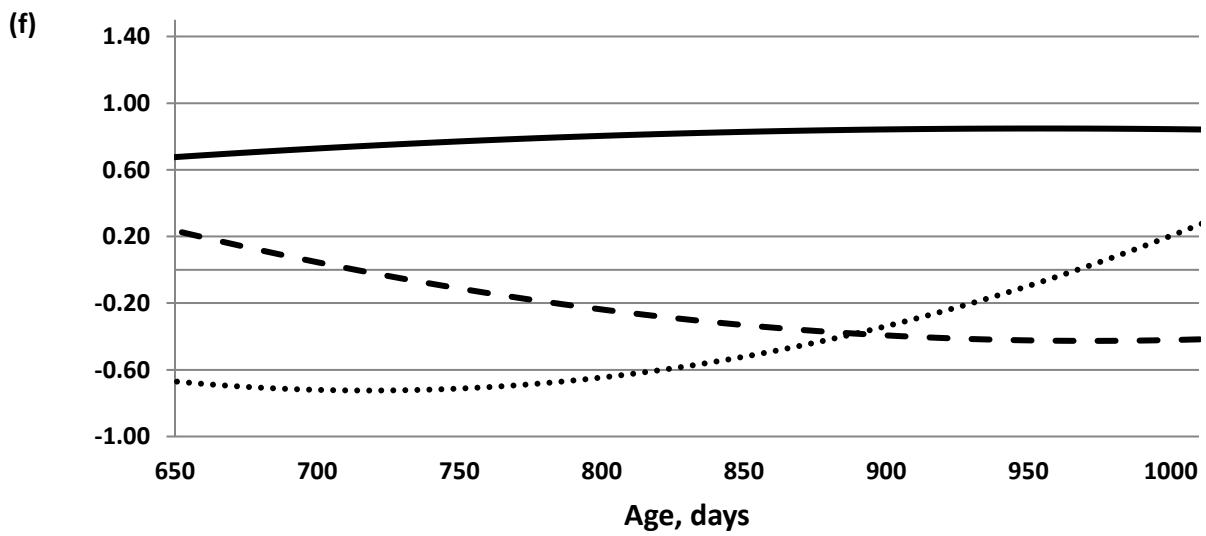
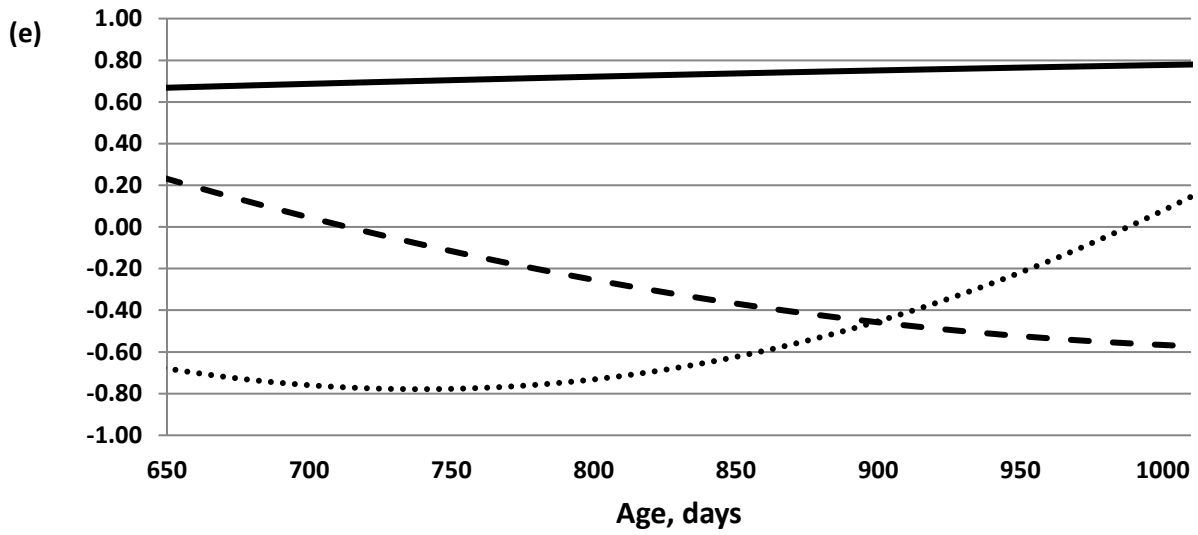
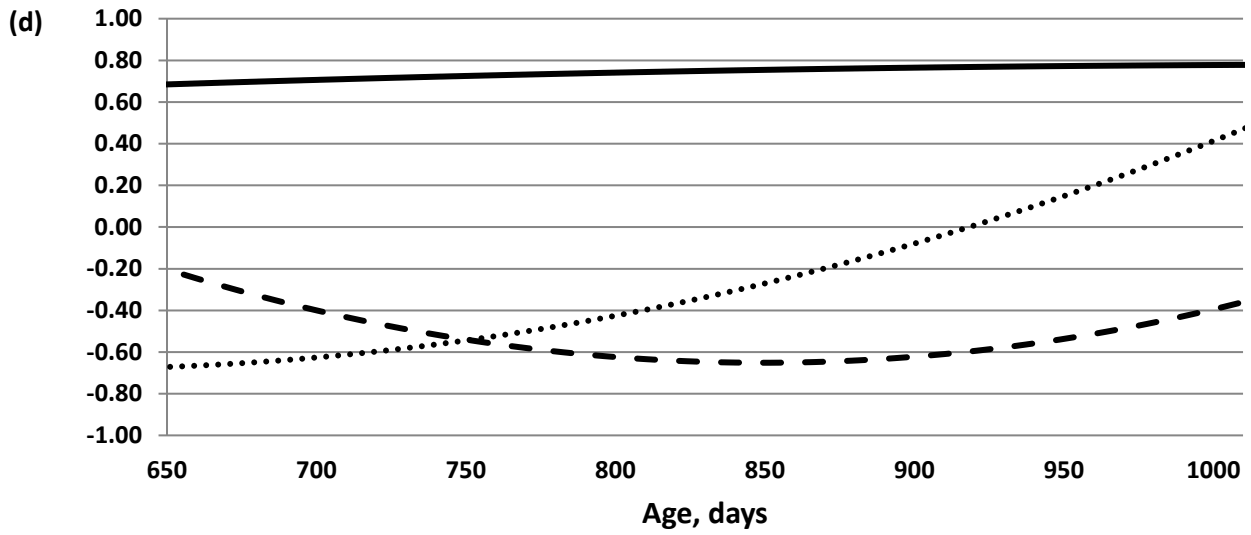


Figure 4.





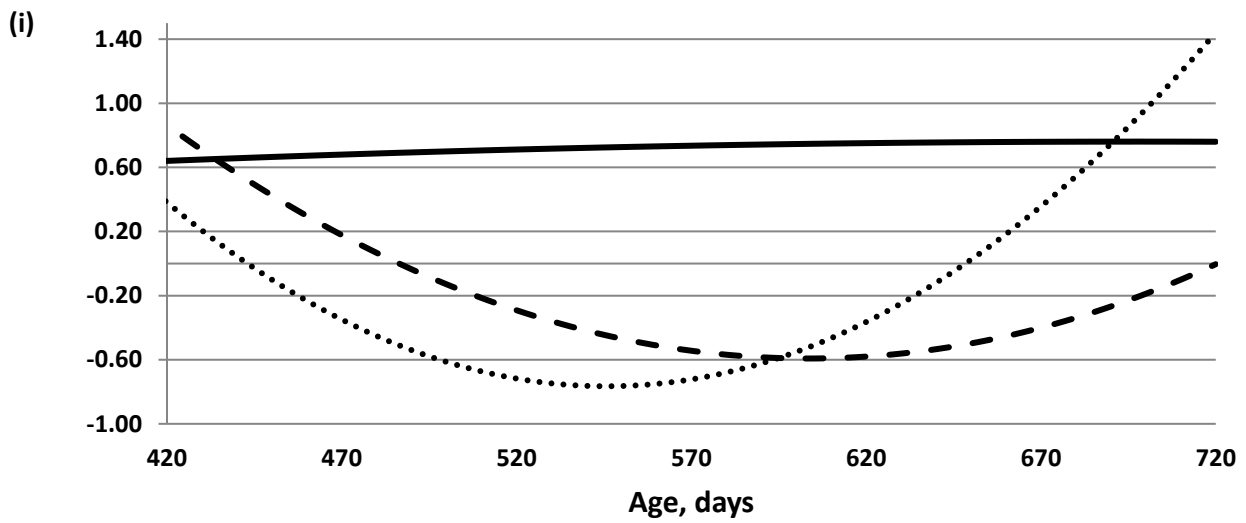
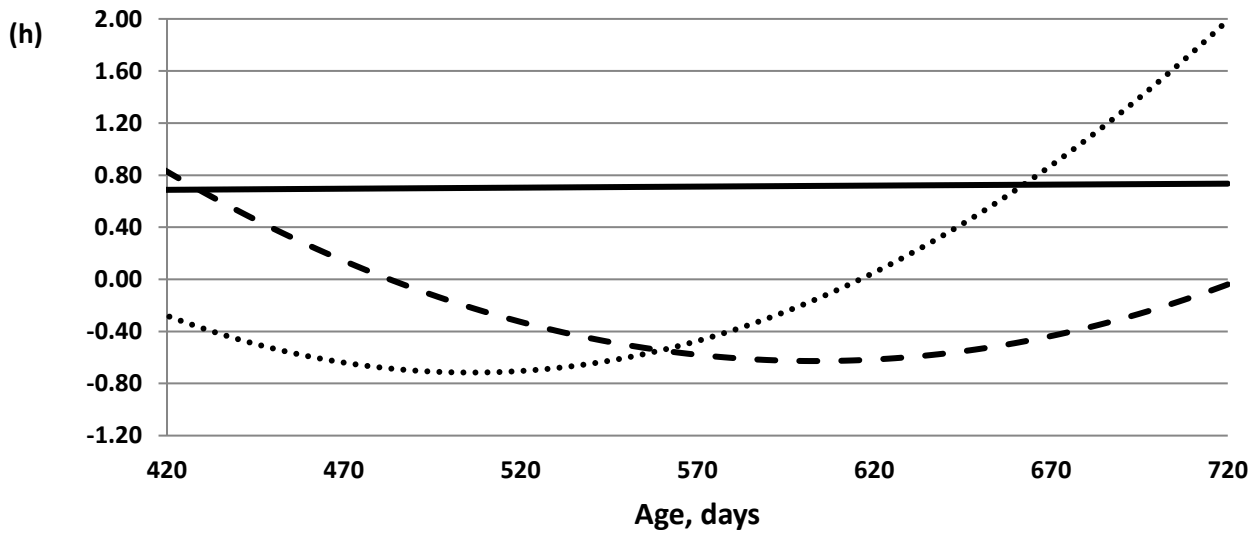
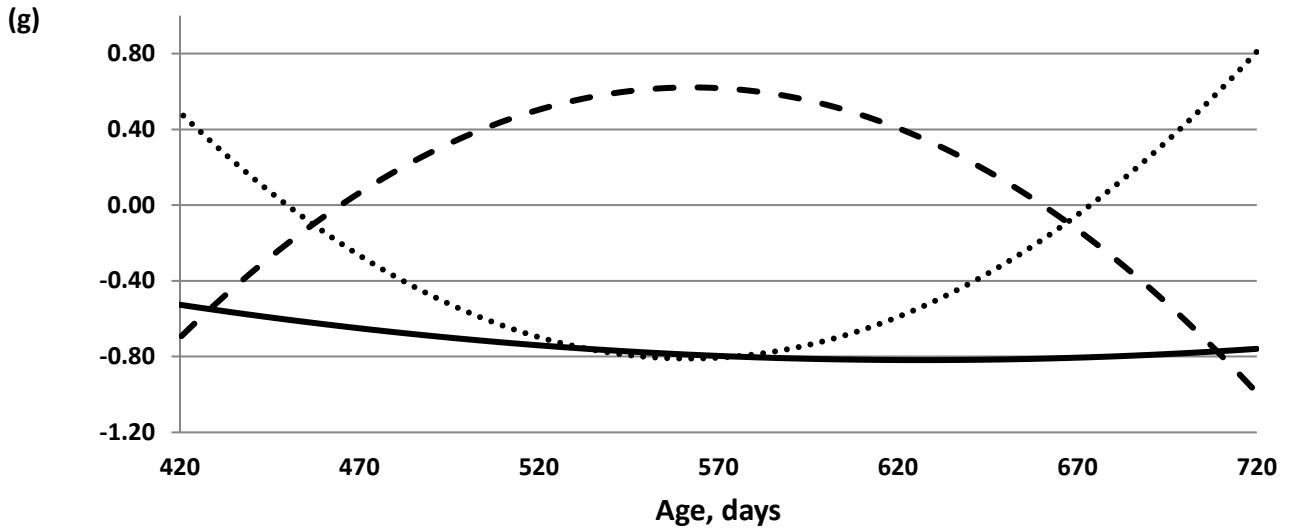


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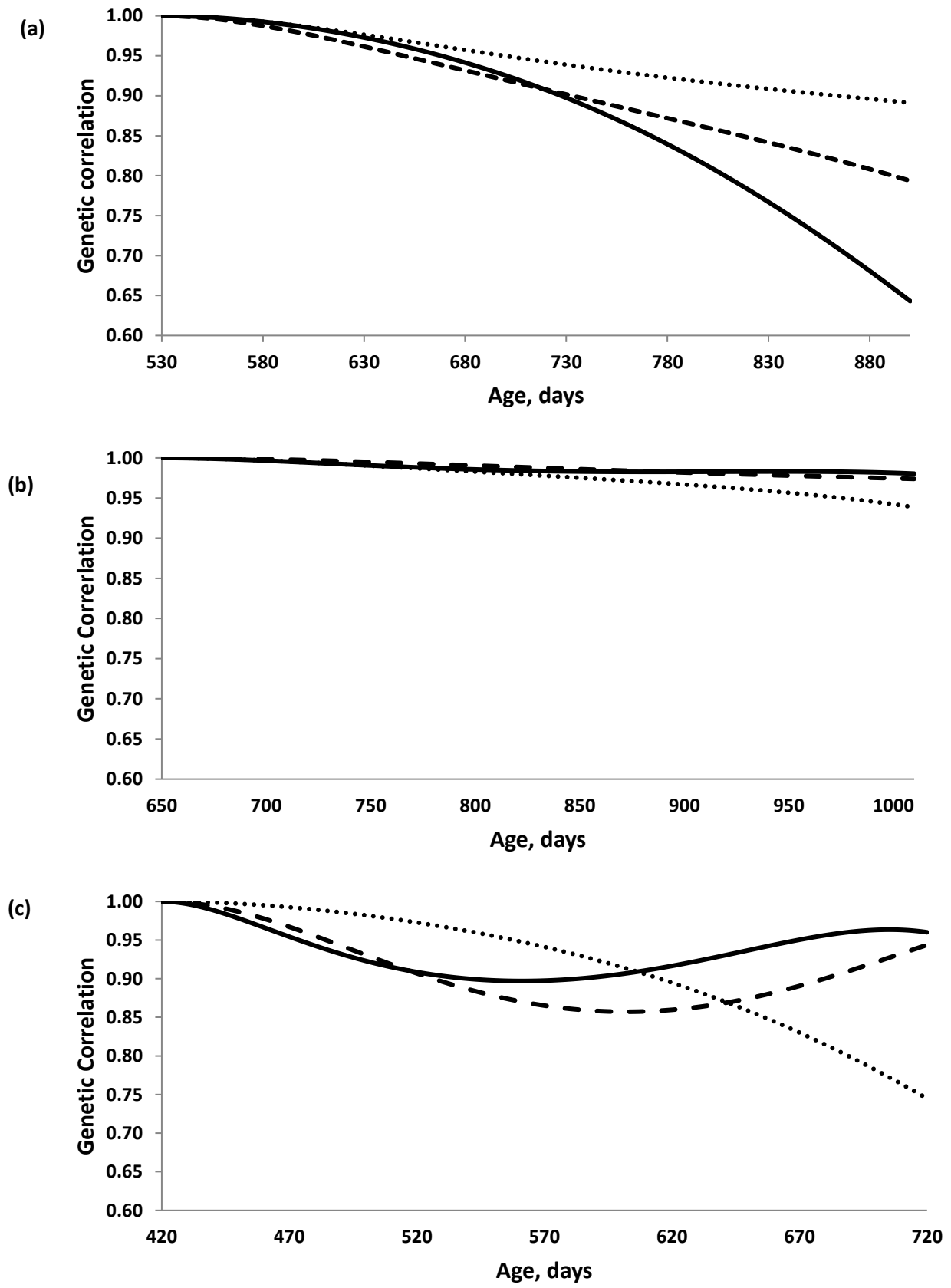


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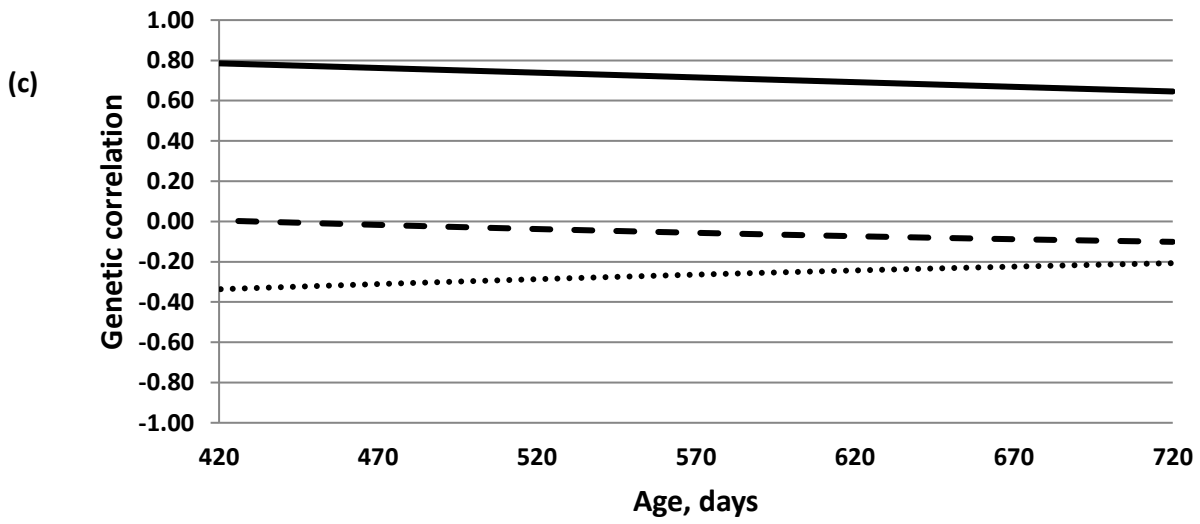
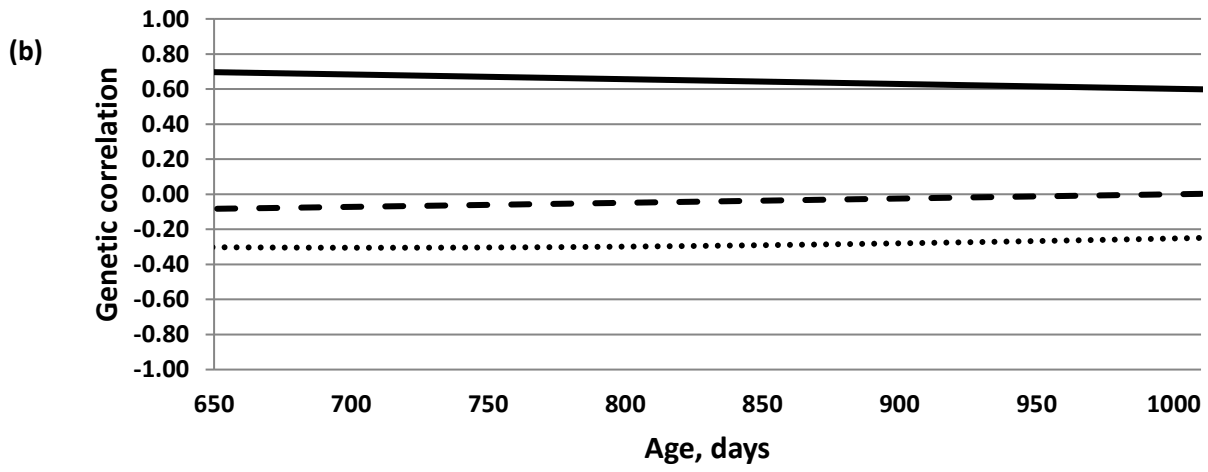
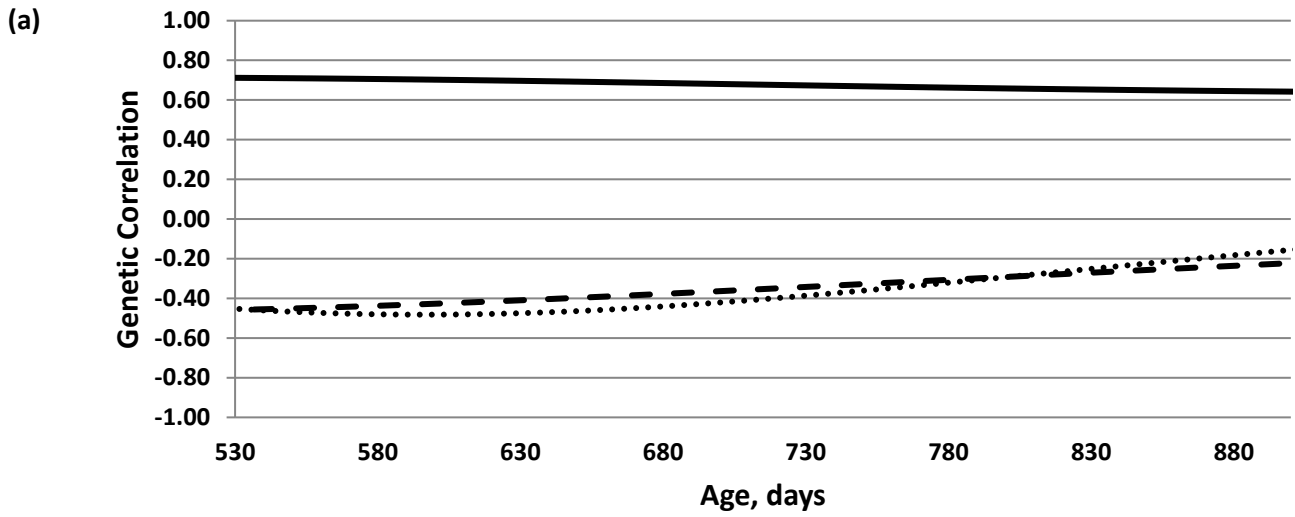


Figure 7.

Figure 1. Distribution of age at slaughter for (a) heifers, (b) steers and (c) young bulls.

Figure 2. Fixed effects profiles for (a) carcass weight, (b) carcass conformation and (c) carcass fat for heifers (---), steers (•••) and young bulls (—), estimated using quadratic polynomials. Intercept was taken as the weighted average of contemporary group and abattoir-date of slaughter and fixed effects from a fifth parity dam with no heterosis or recombination loss. Carcass conformation and fat scores were measured on a scale of 1-15.

Figure 3. Estimates of genetic variance for (a) carcass weight, (b) conformation, and (c) fat, in heifers (---), steers (•••) and young bulls (—). Standard errors of genetic variance estimates ranged from 20.72 to 67.57 (kg²) for carcass weight, 0.04 to 0.10 (units²) for conformation and 0.01 to 0.09 (units²) for fat. Carcass conformation and fat scores were measured on a scale of 1-15.

Figure 4. Heritability estimate for (a) carcass weight, (b) conformation, and (c) fat, in Heifers (---), steers (•••) and young bulls (—). Standard errors of heritability estimates ranged from 0.01 to 0.02 for carcass weight, 0.01 to 0.03 for conformation and 0.01 to 0.03 for fat.

Figure 5. Eigenfunctions (y-axis unit less) associated with the largest (—), middle (---) and smallest (•••) eigenvalues in heifers for a) carcass weight, b) conformation and c) fat, and in steers, for d) carcass weight, e) conformation, and f) fat and in young bulls for g) carcass weight, h) conformation and i) fat.

Figure 6. Genetic correlations in a) heifers, b) steers and c) young bulls, between observations across ages at slaughter for carcass weight (—), conformation (---) and fat (•••). Standard errors of genetic correlation estimates ranged from 0.00 to 0.02 for carcass weight, 0.00 to 0.01 for conformation and 0.00 to 0.01 for fat.

Figure 7. Genetic correlations across age for (a) heifers (b) steers, and (c) young bulls, between carcass weight and conformation score (—), conformation and fat score (---), and fat score and carcass weight (•••) across ages at slaughter. Standard errors of genetic correlation estimates ranged from 0.01 to 0.04 for carcass weight and conformation score, 0.02 to 0.09 for conformation and fat score, and 0.02 to 0.14, carcass weight and fat score.