Endothelin Receptor Heterodimerization
Inhibits β-arrestin Function

By

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# Table of Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................ iv
List of Figures ......................................................................................................... v
Abstract ................................................................................................................ vi
List of Abbreviations Used ................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... ix

## Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 G-Protein Coupled Receptors ........................................................................ 1
1.2 β-arrestin in Trafficking and Signaling ............................................................ 4
1.3 GPCR Dimerization ......................................................................................... 9
1.4 The Endothelin System .................................................................................. 13
1.5 Endothelin Receptor Dimerization .................................................................. 17
1.6 Hypothesis and Objectives ............................................................................. 18

## Chapter 2: Methods and Reagents

2.1 Generation of Constructs .............................................................................. 19
2.2 Cell Culture .................................................................................................... 20
2.3 Cell Transfection .......................................................................................... 22
2.4 Bioluminescence Resonant Energy Transfer\(^2\) ............................................. 22
2.5 In-cell Western\(^\text{®}\) .................................................................................. 26
2.6 Statistical Analysis and Curve Fitting ............................................................ 27

## Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Physical Interactions Between Endothelin Receptors ................................. 29
3.2 β-arrestin-1 Recruitment to Endothelin Receptors ...................................... 39
3.3 β-arrestin-2 Recruitment to Endothelin Receptors ...................................... 43
3.4 ERK Phosphorylation Downstream of Endothelin Receptor Activation ...... 57
Chapter 4: Discussion .............................................................................................................63
  4.1 ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} receptors heterodimerize and ET\textsubscript{B} receptors homodimerize 64
  4.2 β-arrestin-2, but not β-arrestin-1, was recruited to endothelin receptors ....65
  4.3 Endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibits β-arrestin-2 recruitment....66
  4.4 Endothelin receptor heterodimerization reduces ERK phosphorylation .....66
  4.5 Future directions..............................................................................................................72

References .....................................................................................................................................75
Appendix I ......................................................................................................................................83
Appendix II .....................................................................................................................................84
List of Tables

Table 2.1: Oligonucleotides used to generate fusion constructs

Table 3.1: Endothelin receptor BRET saturation curve data

Table 3.2: Endothelin receptor β-arrestin-1-GFP² recruitment
BRET saturation data

Table 3.3: ETₐ-Rluc recruitment of β-arrestin-2-GFP² BRET
saturation curve data in the presence and absence of ETₐ

Table 3.4: ETₐ-Rluc recruitment of β-arrestin-2-GFP² BRET
saturation curve data in the presence and absence of ETₐ
List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Comparison of GPCR family groups.................................................2
Figure 1.2: G protein-coupled receptor activation and regulation.......................5
Figure 1.3: Potential functions of GPCR dimerization........................................11
Figure 1.4: Vascular endothelin system.................................................................15
Figure 2.1: Principles of Bioluminescence Resonance Energy Transfer...............24
Figure 3.1: ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} BRET\textsuperscript{2} constructs produced energy transfer...........30
Figure 3.2: Evidence for ET\textsubscript{A} receptor homodimerization was inconclusive......33
Figure 3.3: ET\textsubscript{B} receptors formed homodimers........................................35
Figure 3.4: ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} receptors formed heterodimers.......................37
Figure 3.5: ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} receptors constitutively interacted with β-arrestin-1.....41
Figure 3.6: Co-expression of ET\textsubscript{B} inhibited ET\textsubscript{A} recruitment of β-arrestin-2........45
Figure 3.7: Co-expression of ET\textsubscript{A} inhibited ET\textsubscript{B} recruitment of β-arrestin-2........49
Figure 3.8: Co-expression of ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} delayed ET-1-induced β-arrestin-2
recruitment........................................................................................................52
Figure 3.9: Co-expression of ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment
following ET\textsubscript{B}-specific agonism...............................................................55
Figure 3.10: ET\textsubscript{A} mediated ERK phosphorylation was G\textsubscript{qq}- and β-arrestin-1-
dependent...........................................................................................................58
Figure 3.11: ET-1 mediated ERK phosphorylation was delayed by co-expression
of both ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B}........................................................................61
Figure 4.1: Modelling endothelin receptor heterodimerization...........................70
Abstract

Dimerization of G-protein coupled receptors (GPCRs) can affect receptor dynamics at many stages of the GPCR life cycle. Endothelin receptors A (ET\textsubscript{A}) and B (ET\textsubscript{B}) are co-expressed in vascular smooth muscle cells, and are key to microvascular autoregulation through paracrine signalling following local release of endothelin (ET-1) by endothelial cells. Heterodimerization between ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} prolongs downstream signalling. We hypothesized in this study that endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibits β-arrestin function, an important mediator in GPCR desensitization, thereby leading to temporal changes in signaling. Using BRET\textsuperscript{2} technology, the ET\textsubscript{B} homodimer and ET\textsubscript{A}/ET\textsubscript{B} heterodimer were found to form high affinity interactions, while ET\textsubscript{A} homodimerization did not occur. The heterodimer reduced and delayed recruitment of β-arrestin-2, and inhibited β-arrestin-1-dependent ERK signalling as assayed with In-Cell Western\textsuperscript{®}. Thus, this study provides novel insights into how endothelin receptor heterodimerization could be affecting the physiological response to ET-1 in tissues co-expressing both receptor subtypes.
**List of Abbreviations Used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT1AR</td>
<td>Angiotensin II receptor type 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAD</td>
<td>Bcl-2-Associated Death Promoter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β-arr -</td>
<td>β-arrestin-1 dominant negative (Val-53ΔAsp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRET²</td>
<td>Bioluminescence Resonant Energy Transfer²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRET_{EFF}</td>
<td>Bioluminescence Resonant Energy Transfer Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRET_{MAX}</td>
<td>BRET Maximum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRET_{MIN}</td>
<td>BRET Minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cAMP</td>
<td>Cyclic Adenosine Monophosphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cGMP</td>
<td>Cyclic Guanosine Monophosphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMEM</td>
<td>Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle’s Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>Endothelin Converting Enzyme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGFR</td>
<td>Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eIF4e</td>
<td>Eukaryotic Translation Initiation Factor 4E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eNOS</td>
<td>Endothelial Nitric Oxide Synthase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET-1</td>
<td>Endothelin-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETₐ</td>
<td>Endothelin receptor A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETₐ</td>
<td>Endothelin receptor B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER</td>
<td>Endoplasmic Reticulum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERK</td>
<td>Extracellular-signal Regulated Kinase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBS</td>
<td>Fetal Bovine Serum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRET</td>
<td>Fluorescent Resonant Energy Transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GABAB</td>
<td>gamma-Aminobutyric Acid Receptor B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAP</td>
<td>GTPase-Activating Protein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Guanosine Diphosphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFP²</td>
<td>Green Fluorescent Protein²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPCR</td>
<td>G-Protein Coupled Receptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRK</td>
<td>G-protein coupled Receptor Kinase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTP</td>
<td>Guanosine Triphosphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEK293</td>
<td>Human Embryonic Kidney 293 cell line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERG</td>
<td>Human <em>ether-a-go-go</em> related gene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IgG</td>
<td>Immunoglobulin G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>Infrared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNK</td>
<td>c-Jun N-terminal Kinase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Lysogeny Broth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAPK</td>
<td>Mitogen-Activated Protein Kinase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mnk1</td>
<td>MAPK-interacting protein kinase 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Nitric Oxide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>Phosphate-Buffered Saline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCR</td>
<td>Polymerase Chain-Reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKB</td>
<td>Protein Kinase B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKC</td>
<td>Protein Kinase C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Phospholipase C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTx</td>
<td><em>Pertussis</em> Toxin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rho</td>
<td>Ras Homolog Gene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RhoGEF</td>
<td>RhoGTPase Nucleotide Exchange Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLuc</td>
<td><em>Renilla</em> luciferase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taq</td>
<td><em>Thermus aquaticus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSMC</td>
<td>Vascular Smooth Muscle Cell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 G-Protein Coupled Receptors

G-protein coupled receptors (GPCRs) are a large and diverse family of receptors, sensing various stimuli including hormones, ions, small organic molecules, pressure, and even photons. They share a common architecture formed by seven interconnected transmembrane helices, an extracellular N-terminus and an intracellular C-terminus (Granier and Kobilka, 2012). GPCRs are subdivided based on differences in ligand binding into five major families including Family A, B, C, Adhesion and Frizzled (Fig. 1.1; Culhane et al., 2015).

Agonist activation of a GPCR induces conformational changes within regions of the receptor, which ultimately transduces a signal within the cell, setting off a cascade of events that lead to alterations in cellular function (Katritch et al., 2013). GPCRs directly couple to heterotrimeric guanosine triphosphate (GTP) binding proteins (G-proteins), composed of α, β and γ subunits. Agonist-induced conformational changes in the GPCR serve to increase the affinity of the G-protein to the receptor, and the G-protein subsequently exchanges its bound guanosine diphosphate (GDP) for GTP and becomes activated. Although the sequence of events thereafter remains obscure, binding of GTP is thought to induce conformational changes or dissociation between G-protein α and βγ dimer components (Preininger et al., 2013), each of which goes on to activate distinct downstream effectors (Oldham and Hamm, 2008). The GTP-bound Ga subunit is inactivated by intrinsic hydrolytic activity, returning to its inactive GDP-bound state (Chen and Manning, 2001).
**Figure 1.1: Comparison of GPCR family groups**

Family A GPCRs bind a wide range of diverse ligands in the transmembrane region and have a short N-terminus. Family B GPCRs bind larger peptide hormones in their long extracellular N-terminus. Family C receptors have large extracellular N-terminal ligand-binding region in the “Venus flytrap” fold for ligand binding with a conserved disulfide linkage to constitutively form dimers (Zhang et al., 2014). The Adhesion and Frizzled families have GPCR-like transmembrane-spanning regions fused together with one or several functional N-terminal domains. Adhesion families contain auto-proteolytic domains and will cleave their N-terminus following ligand activation, while Frizzled receptors are activated by Wnt proteins. Ligands are shown in red and listed above each family group.

Copyright © 2015 Culhane, Liu, Cai and Yan.
Family A  
*ligands ranging from light, small molecules, peptides to proteins*

Family B  
*peptide hormones*

Family C  
*ions and small molecules*

Adhesion Family  
*ligands mostly unknown*

Frizzled Family  
*Wnt proteins*
G-proteins are subdivided into 4 major groupings based on the α subunit sequence similarity: Gαs, Gαi, Gαq and Gα12/13. These differ functionally by the set of downstream effectors each α-subunit couples with following ligand binding and GPCR activation. Gαs will activate the enzyme adenylate cyclase to produce second messenger cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP), Gαi inhibits adenylate cyclase, Gαq activates the enzyme phospholipase C (PLC), to produce second messengers inositol trisphosphate (IP3) and diacylglycerol (DAG), and Gα12/13 activates RhoGTPase nucleotide exchange factors (RhoGEFs) to initiate protein phosphorylation cascades (Svoboda et al., 2004; Venkatakrishnan et al., 2013). The production of second messengers allows for amplification of the initial GPCR signal, thus allowing minor stimuli to achieve relatively important cellular effects, commonly via activation of kinase proteins that can phosphorylate a myriad of downstream targets (Fig. 1.2; Martins et al., 2012).

1.2 β-arrestin in Trafficking and Signaling

GPCRs that are activated by ligand may terminate their signaling through several mechanisms. GTP-bound G-proteins are inactivated by intrinsic hydrolysis of GTP to GDP, a reaction accelerated by GTPase-Activating Proteins (GAPs; Ross, 2013). Parallel to the above, agonist-induced conformational changes in GPCRs promotes rapid recruitment of G-protein coupled receptor kinases (GRKs) which phosphorylate serine/threonine residues within the intracellular loop 3 or C-terminus of the GPCR. This serves as an anchor for recruitment of β-arrestin, which sterically hinders G-protein recruitment, thus desensitizing the GPCRs to the initial stimuli (Smith and Rajagopal, 2016).
Figure 1.2: G protein-coupled receptor activation and regulation

(A) GPCR activation enables the exchange of GDP to GTP by the α subunit of the G-protein. (B) The GTP-bound α subunit then activates an effector such as phospholipase C (PLC). (C) Second messenger molecules like inositol-1,4,5-triphosphate (IP$_3$), which opens calcium channels present on the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) and initiates Ca$^{2+}$ release, are direct products of enzymatic conversion. (D) G protein-coupled receptor kinases (GRKs) phosphorylate intracellular regions of the GPCR. (E) β-arrestins can recognize the phosphorylated GPCR and trigger internalization, leading to receptor degradation or recycling to the plasma membrane. (F) Second messenger molecules and β-arrestin-mediated MAPK cascades, such as ERK activation, lead to downstream biological events, frequently regulation of gene expression.

Reproduced and modified with permission from Trends in Biotechnology (Martins et al., 2012; see Appendix I for license).
GPCR activation

(A) GPCR ligand

(B) Extracellular space

(C) Signaling cascades

Dissociation of GPCR-G protein complex

Ca^{2+} Ca^{2+} Ca^{2+} Ca^{2+}

(Nucleus)

GPCR regulation

(D) β-arrestin

(E) Clathrin coated Pit

(F) ERK

Degradation
β-arrestin further serves as a scaffold protein, allowing for the formation of clathrin-coated caveolae and endocytosis of the GPCR complex. The GPCR may then be recycled to the plasma membrane, or targeted to lysosomes for degradation (Luttrell et al., 2002; Gainetdinov et al., 2004).

There are four arrestin isoforms in rodents and humans: two of which are exclusively expressed in photoreceptor cells (Moaven et al., 2013), while the two others, termed β-arrestin-1 and β-arrestin-2, are expressed in virtually all tissue types (Pierce and Lefkowitz, 2001). Murine knock-out of either β-arrestin 1 or 2 isoform produces viable offspring, whereas double knock-out of both isoforms is embryonically lethal, indicating that there is sufficient overlap in β-arrestins biological functions to compensate for loss of one isoform and collectively their function is essential for survival (Conner et al. 1997; Kohout et al., 2001). Certain GPCRs possess differential affinities to β-arrestin 1 or 2, leading to internalization that is more reliant on one isoform over the other; as is the case with the predominantly β-arrestin-2 dependent internalization of the β2 adrenergic receptor (Oakley et al., 2000).

In addition to the primary roles of β-arrestins in GPCR signal attenuation and receptor downregulation, β-arrestins also initiate signaling cascades of their own (Lefkowitz and Shenoy, 2005). In effect, β-arrestins are downstream effectors of G-protein-independent GPCR signaling. The most studied β-arrestin- 1 and 2 signaling pathway involves the direct and indirect binding of serine/threonine/tyrosine kinases referred to as mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs). MAPKs are part of a chain of kinase proteins that regulate numerous
transcription factors, ultimately affecting gene expression in the nucleus to promote progression through the cell cycle and cellular proliferation (Pearson et al., 2001). Multiple MAPK family members have been shown to interact with β-arrestin-1 and 2, such as extracellular receptor-regulated kinase 1/2 (ERK 1/2; Tohgo et al., 2002; Shenoy et al., 2006), p38 kinases (Bruchas et al., 2006), and the c-Jun N-terminal kinases (JNKs; McDonald et al., 2000).

Initiation of MAPK cascades downstream of GPCR activation is the result of numerous downstream effectors differing with respect to temporal and spatial patterns. For example, agonist activation of the Gq-coupled angiotensin II receptor type 1 (AT1AR) initiates a rapid and transient G-protein-dependent ERK phosphorylation that is quickly quenched by endogenous β-arrestin-mediated desensitization or altogether eliminated by inhibition of protein kinase C (PKC). Parallel to the transient G-protein-dependent ERK signalling, β-arrestin-dependent ERK phosphorylation develops slowly yet lasts for over an hour due to the long-lasting association between AT1AR and β-arrestin (DeWire et al., 2007).

As β-arrestin scaffolding is trafficked to endosomal vesicles following GPCR internalization, its MAPK cascade activation is spatially restrained to specific cellular locations (Luttrell et al., 2001; Ahn et al., 2004). The functional implications of β-arrestin-mediated ERK phosphorylation are increasingly being described. Phosphorylated ERK appears to remain bound to β-arrestin in the cytosol and not enter the nucleus, inhibiting the usual ERK-dependent transcription of Elk-1, a transcription factor involved in the transcription of genes that promote cell cycle progression (Tohgo et al., 2002). β-arrestin-mediated AT1AR-ERK signaling
blocks apoptosis through phosphorylation of pro-apoptotic Bcl-2-associated death promoter (BAD) (Ahn et al., 2009), stimulates translation through MAPK-interacting protein kinase 1 (Mnk1) phosphorylation of eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4E (eIF4e) (DeWire et al., 2008), and initiates S-phase entry and cellular proliferation via epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) (Kim et al., 2009), supporting that β-arrestin-dependent ERK signaling regulates numerous important developmental processes.

1.3 GPCR Dimerization

The classical model that GPCRs act as single monomeric entities has been challenged by contemporary literature (Bouvier and Hebert, 2014; Milligan, 2007). There is no debate that many isolated GPCRs are capable of coupling to and activating downstream effectors as monomers (Whorton et al., 2007), but a growing body of research indicates this is not the only physiological condition under which GPCRs operate. Dozens of independent studies have provided evidence of dimerization of GPCRs, along with the importance of such interactions to downstream signaling. In many cases, GPCR dimerization is constitutive, beginning in the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) before exportation to the plasma membrane, and continuing until eventual internalization and lysosomal degradation (Dupré et al., 2006; Harding et al., 2009).

GPCR dimerization can exert functional consequences at many stages of the GPCR life-cycle (Fig. 1.3). It can affect biosynthesis of GPCRs; the most striking example of this is the gamma-aminobutyric acid B receptor (GABA_B), which must form homodimers or heterodimers comprised of GABA_B1 and GABA_B2
subunits within the ER to be exported to the plasma membrane (Kaupmann et al., 1998; Villemure et al., 2005; Richer et al., 2009). Physical interactions between GPCRs have also been demonstrated to modulate pharmacological aspects of ligand behaviour such as positive or negative cooperativity (changes in ligand affinity) and signaling bias (Terrillon and Bouvier, 2004). Dimerization of GPCRs may also potentiate, attenuate, or even bias downstream coupling of the receptors. For example, co-activation of both the dopamine receptor 2 (D2) and type 1 cannabinoid receptor (CB1) switches the signaling of CB1 from Gαi to Gαs; this is thought to be mediated by allosteric modulation of CB1 conformation by the physically interacting D2 (Bagher et al., 2016). Dimerization of GPCRs can also affect trafficking behaviours such as co-internalization along a common pathway: co-internalization of the A2A adenosine/D2 dopamine heterodimer is observed following agonist activation of D2 (Hillion et al, 2002). Although evidence of dimerization exists for a large number of GPCRs, the implications of these interactions are only beginning to be unravelled and have functional consequences in health and disease as well as future drug design campaigns targeting these receptors. Identifying ligands capable of selectively binding to and regulating GPCR heterodimers is proposed as a means of increasing the specificity and decreasing off-target effects of clinical pharmacological interventions, and is an emerging area of research (Daniels et al. 2005; Eglen et al., 2007; Dalrymple et al., 2008; Glass et al., 2016).
**Figure 1.3: Potential functions of GPCR dimerization**

(1) Dimerization has been shown to have a primary role in maturation and transport of certain GPCRs from the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) to the cell surface. (2) GPCR heterodimerization can lead to both positive (+) and negative (−) ligand binding cooperativity, as well as (3) potentiating (+) or attenuating (−) signaling or biasing G-protein selectivity. (4) Heterodimerization can promote (+) or inhibit (−) co-internalization of two receptors after the stimulation of only one protomer. G: G protein; L: ligand.

Reproduced and modified with permission from *EMBO Rep.* (Terrillon and Bouvier 2004; see Appendix II for license).
1.4 The Endothelin System

The endothelin system is comprised of endothelin receptors A (ET\textsubscript{A}) and B (ET\textsubscript{B}), in addition to three endogenous peptide activators termed endothelin 1-3 (ET-1/ET-2/ET-3). ET-1 is the most studied endothelin isoform and, along with ET-2, is non-selective in its capacity to activate ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B}, whereas ET-3 is highly selective towards ET\textsubscript{B} (Ling \textit{et al.}, 2013). The endothelin system contributes to several key physiological processes including basal vascular and lung airway tone, cardiac inotropy and chronotropy, renal sodium and water balance, central nervous system hormone release, and cellular proliferation (Maguire and Davenport, 2014). In endothelial cells, ET-1 mRNA is translated into a precursor protein that is processed by proteases, including isoforms of endothelin converting enzymes (ECE) to yield bioactive ET-1 (Kido \textit{et al.}, 1998; D'Orléans-Juste \textit{et al.}, 2003). In vasculature, ET-1 is stored in Weibel-Palade bodies within endothelial cells and released constitutively to regulate basal vascular tone, or dynamically in response to shear stress to regulate arteriole vascular tone following variations in systolic pressures, allowing the endothelin system to autonomously function locally (Vozzi \textit{et al.}, 2014). Thus, the endothelin system contributes to organ blood flow and peripheral vascular resistance. ET-1 is also released in response to cytokines, angiotensin, vasopressin, and oxygen free radicals (Emori \textit{et al.}, 1991). Upon binding ET-1, ET\textsubscript{A} is rapidly internalized and recycled to the plasma membrane, whereas ET\textsubscript{B} along with its bound ET-1 is directed to lysosomal degradation, thus also clearing locally produced ET-1 (Bremnes \textit{et al.}, 2000).
Although ET-1 is an extremely potent and long-lasting vasoconstrictor, it also signals to mediate vasodilation. This dual action is explained by the expression of ET\textsubscript{B} on endothelial cells and co-expression of ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} on vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMC) (Fig. 1.4). Activation of both ET\textsubscript{A} or ET\textsubscript{B} leads to G\textsubscript{q}\textsubscript{q} dependent production of second messengers IP\textsubscript{3} and DAG by PLC. IP\textsubscript{3} diffuses to the ER and opens ligand-gated Ca\textsuperscript{2+} channels, increasing cytosolic Ca\textsuperscript{2+} levels. In endothelial cells, ET\textsubscript{B}-mediated Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release activates endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) to produce short-lived nitric oxide (NO), which diffuses to adjacent VSMCs and activates VSMC soluble guanylate cyclase to produce cyclic guanosine monophosphate (cGMP). cGMP promotes vasodilation mainly through activation of K\textsuperscript{+} channels, culminating in a hyperpolarized VSMC membrane potential (Carvajal et al., 2000). Endothelial ET\textsubscript{B} activation also releases vasodilating prostacyclin and endothelium-derived hyperpolarizing factor (Mazzuca and Khalil, 2012).

In VSMCs, endothelin-mediated Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release following activation of ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} promotes calmodulin to phosphorylate myosin light chain kinase, enabling it to phosphorylate the light chain myosin and allow cross-bridging between actin and myosin filaments, leading to vasoconstriction. The process of smooth muscle relaxation is initiated by dephosphorylation of light chain myosin by myosin phosphatase (Webb, 2003) and cell hyperpolarization via Ca\textsuperscript{2+}-sensitive K\textsuperscript{+} channels (Petkov, 2012).
**Figure 1.4: Vascular endothelin system**

Endothelial ET-1 release is controlled via regulation of gene transcription and ECE activity. ET-1 acts as a local paracrine factor on smooth muscle $\text{ET}_A$ and $\text{ET}_B$ receptors to induce vasoconstriction and mitogenesis. ET-1 also acts in an autocrine manner at endothelial cell $\text{ET}_B$ receptors to stimulate vasorelaxation via release of nitric oxide (NO) following activation of endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS). $\text{ET}_B$ receptors also clear local ET-1 by degradation following $\text{ET}_B$ internalization.

Modified from *Clinical Science* (Tostes et al., 2008).
Blood flow

ET-1

ETB

PLC

IP3/DAG

Ca2+

eNOS

L-arg

NO

prepro-ET-1

Big ET-1

ET-1

paracrine action

ET-1

ETB

PLC

IP3/DAG

Ca2+

MAPKs

cGMP

RELAXATION

CONTRACTION, MIGRATION,
CELL DIFFERENTIATION, SURVIVAL
1.5 Endothelin Receptor Dimerization

Like many other Family A GPCRs (Hiller et al., 2013), endothelin receptors homodimerize and heterodimerize (Gregan et al., 2004; Evans and Walker, 2008). Studies supporting this have used techniques such as co-immunoprecipitation and Fluorescent Resonant Energy Transfer (FRET). Experimentation utilizing heterologous expression in cell culture provides compelling evidence that dimerization between ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} alters important receptor signaling characteristics.

Evidence to date suggests that endothelin receptor heterodimerization delays desensitization and prolongs G-protein-dependent signaling. HEK293 expressing either ET\textsubscript{A} or ET\textsubscript{B} rapidly desensitize ($t_{1/2} < 1$ minute) following ET-1 exposure, whereas HEK293 cells co-expressing both receptor subtypes fail to desensitize (Dai and Galligan, 2006). Evans and Walker (2008) later corroborated this finding; reporting prolonged Ca$^{2+}$ transients in HEK293 cells co-expressing both ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} versus the expression of a single receptor subtype. They further demonstrated that expressing mutant ET\textsubscript{A} receptor that is non-dimerizing but nonetheless functional in its capacity to generate Ca$^{2+}$ transients abolishes this effect; indicating that the observed Ca$^{2+}$ transient prolongation is heterodimer-dependent. ET-1 binding to ET\textsubscript{A} is quasi-permanent, with only 40% dissociation after 4 hours (Devesly et al., 1990), and thus internalization and desensitization are essential mechanisms towards attenuation of endothelin signaling. Thus, heterodimer-dependent alterations of these processes would likely significantly affect the time available for ET-1 to exert its effect.
It remains to be seen if the aforementioned *in vitro* observations translate to tissues co-expressing both endothelin receptor sub-types. If so, heterodimerization of endothelin receptors could partially explain the extraordinarily long vasopressor human response to ET-1, on the order of one to two hours (Clarke *et al.*, 1989; Macrae *et al.*, 1993). Selective inhibition of endothelin receptor heterodimers could provide a means increasing the specificity of endothelin antagonists by solely targeting tissues co-expressing both receptor subtypes.

1.6 *Hypothesis and Objectives*

The functional consequences of endothelin receptor heterodimerization, namely prolongation of Ca\(^{2+}\) transients, could potentially be explained by a failure of β-arrestin and subsequent internalization machinery to properly recognize and attenuate the activated endothelin receptor heterodimers. If this hypothesis is tenable, the heterodimers reduced ability to recruit internalization machinery should concomitantly decrease the extent of β-arrestin-dependent signaling such as ERK phosphorylation.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibits β-arrestin recruitment and β-arrestin-dependent signaling.

Specific objectives include:

1. Quantify the affinity of endothelin receptors to form dimers

2. Determine if heterodimerization affects the recruitment of β-arrestin 1 or 2

3. Determine if heterodimerization affects β-arrestin dependent signaling
Chapter 2: Methods and Reagents

2.1 Generation of Constructs

ET_A and ET_B mammalian expression vectors were generated with either green fluorescent protein\(^2\) (GFP\(^2\)) or Renilla luciferase (Rluc) genes in frame at the 3’ termini. Human ET_A and ET_B receptor sequences were obtained by polymerase chain-reaction (PCR) with *Thermus aquaticus* (Taq) polymerase (Invitrogen Canada Inc.) using 3x N-terminus HA-tagged ET_A or N-terminus Myc-tagged ET_B templates (SinoBiological) (primers in Table 2.1). Primers were designed to remove stop codons and incorporate *PstI* (5’) and *HindIII* (3’) restriction sites.

PCR products were electrophoresed on a 0.8% (w/v) agarose gel and visualized with a UV transilluminator; bands were cut out and DNA purified using the GenElute DNA Extraction kit (Sigma-Aldrich) and then ligated into pGEM-T Easy vector (Promega) with T4 DNA ligase. The resulting constructs were transformed into chemocompetent *E. coli* and plated on X-gal coated agar plates containing 50 µg/mL ampicillin followed by an overnight incubation at 37 °C. White colonies were selected for further overnight incubation in Lysogeny broth (LB) broth containing 50 µg/mL ampicillin. Plasmid DNA was extracted from the transformed *E. coli* using the GenElute Plasmid Miniprep kit (Sigma-Aldrich). The generated ET_A-pGEM-T Easy, ET_B-pGEM-T Easy, as well as pGFP\(^2\)-N3 and pRluc-N1 plasmids (Perkin-Elmer) were all double digested using *PstI* and *HindIII*, and digestion reactions were run on a 0.8% agarose gel. DNA products of interest were isolated, and the digested ET_A and ET_B sequences were each ligated into both pGFP\(^2\)-N3 and pRluc-N1 plasmids. These constructs were then transformed into chemocompetent *E. coli* and ET_A/ET_B-pGFP\(^2\)-N3 transformed cells were plated on
agar plates containing 25 µg/mL zeocin, while ET₁/ET₂-pRluc-N1 transformed cells were plated on agar plates containing 25 µg/mL kanamycin to select for transformed colonies. Resulting colonies were further cultured in 25 µg/mL kanamycin LB broth, and plasmid DNA extracted using the GenElute Plasmid Miniprep kit. All receptor sequences were confirmed by Sanger sequencing (GENEWIZ Inc.).

Human β-arrestin-2-pGEM-T vector (SinoBiological) was processed using similar methodology to produce β-arrestin-2-GFP² (primers in Table 2.1). The carboxy-terminus GFP² fusion construct of human *ether-a-go-go* related gene (HERG-GFP²) and the Rluc-GFP² fusion construct were kindly provided by Dr. Terry Hebert (McGill U., Montreal). The β-arrestin-1 dominant negative (Val-53ΔAsp) and the human β-arrestin-1-GFP² pcDNA3.1 plasmids were provided by Dr. Eileen Denovan-Wright (Dalhousie U., Halifax), and previously described in Ferguson et al., 1996 and Laprairie et al., 2014, respectively.

2.2 Cell Culture

Human embryonic kidney (HEK) 293 cells (Invitrogen) were maintained in Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle’s Medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (DMEM, FBS; Thermo Fisher Scientific) inside sealed flasks (Corning) at 37 °C in a 5% CO₂ environment. Cells were subcultured (1:10) when they reached 90-100% confluency by aspirating media and incubating in trypsin for 3 minutes. DMEM was then added to inactivate the trypsin, and the cells were transferred to a 15 mL conical tube and spun at x 400 g for 3 minutes. The cell pellet was resuspended in fresh DMEM and used for passaging and plating for experiments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Primer (5’ to 3’)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc and ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td>Sense AACTGCAGATGGAAACCCTTTGCCTC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense CCCAAGCTTGTTTCATGCTGTCCTTATG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc and ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td>Sense AACTGCAGATGCAGCCGCCTCCAAGT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense CCCAAGCTTAGATGAGCTGTATTATT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>β-arrestin-2-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td>Sense ATATGAATTCATGGGGGAGAAACC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense ATATAAGCTTTCCGCAGAGTTGATCATC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2.3 Cell Transfection

All transfections were carried out using Lipofectamine 2000 cationic lipid transfection reagent (Invitrogen Inc.) (Dalby et al., 2004). Briefly, 7 µL of Lipofectamine reagent and 4 µg of plasmid DNA were each diluted separately in 250 µL Opti-MEM (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and vigorously mixed followed by a 10-minute incubation at room temperature. The Lipofectamine and DNA were then combined and allowed to incubate together for 20 minutes at room-temperature. Plasmid DNA was supplemented with empty pcDNA 3.1+ vector to achieve 4 µg total DNA in all transfections. The resulting transfection mix was then added to >75% confluent HEK293 cells growing in 6-well plates (Corning) containing serum-free DMEM. Plates were then incubated for 48 hours before experimentation, or resuspended 24 hours later and aliquoted into a clear 96-well plate (Corning) for In-Cell Western® (see below), followed by another 24-hour incubation.

### 2.4 Bioluminescence Resonance Energy Transfer$^2$ (BRET$^2$)

The BRET$^2$ method was used to assay for endothelin receptor physical interactions or β-arrestin recruitment (See Fig. 2.1). BRET$^2$ utilizes a unique Rluc substrate, DeepBlueC coelenterazine (PerkinElmer) which emits light between 290-400 nm during the Rluc-mediated oxidation reaction. If the Rluc protein is in close proximity (50-100 Å) to a molecule of GFP$^2$, then there is resonance energy transfer to the GFP$^2$, exciting it to emit at 505-508 nm (Ramsay et al., 2002). BRET$^2$ provides an advantage over previous resonance energy transfer techniques in that there is greater spectral resolution between Rluc and GFP$^2$ emission wavelengths, which reduces the amount of background signal.
Transfected HEK293 cells plated in a 6-well plate were first resuspended in 1 mL of BRET buffer which was made by supplementing 50 mL of PBS with 1.0 g/L glucose, and 2 Mini Complete ULTRA protease inhibitor cocktail tablets (Roche, Mannheim, Germany) then spun at x 400 g for 1 minute. The cell pellet was resuspended in BRET buffer and 90 µL was then dispensed into a white 96 well plate (Perkin-Elmer). BRET was measured with a Luminoskan Ascent plate reader (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA) immediately after adding DeepBlueC coelenterazine substrate to a final concentration of 5 µM. All measurements were conducted with the plate reader set to make dual luminescent emission measurements with 510 and 405 nm filters, with the integration time set to 10 s, and the photomultiplier tube voltage set to 1200. Raw 510/405 emission ratios were then converted to BRET efficiency ($\text{BRET}_{\text{EFF}}$) by subtracting the minimum obtainable emission ratio ($\text{BRET}_{\text{MIN}}$) and dividing this sum by the maximum obtainable emission ratio ($\text{BRET}_{\text{MAX}}$), by utilizing Rluc transfected cells as the minimum ratio, and Rluc-GFP$^2$ fusion construct transfected cells as the maximum obtainable ratio (equation 1, see page 28).

BRET saturation curves were carried out to demonstrate the specificity of an interaction. In such experiments, a fixed amount of Rluc-fusion construct is co-transfected with increasing amounts of GFP$^2$-fusion construct. $\text{BRET}_{\text{EFF}}$ is then plotted against the mass ratio of GFP$^2$/Rluc plasmid used during transfection. A specific interaction is demonstrated by a plateau in the increase of $\text{BRET}_{\text{EFF}}$ over the range GFP$^2$/Rluc transfection ratios used.
**Figure 2.1: Principles of Bioluminescence Resonance Energy Transfer**

**A.** Proteins that do not form physical interactions, in this case GPCRs, are expressed in frame with Rluc or GFP\(^2\). On the left hand, when the Rluc tag oxidizes the DeepBlueC coelenterazine substrate and emits a blue light, the GFP\(^2\) tag is not in close enough proximity to be excited into emitting. On the right panel is the emission profile spectrum for co-expressed but non-interacting Rluc and GFP\(^2\), with a peak at \(~400\) nm corresponding to Rluc emission. **B.** Physically interacting proteins of interest, in this case GPCRs, are expressed in frame with Rluc or GFP\(^2\). On the left hand, when the Rluc tag oxidizes the DeepBlueC coelenterazine substrate and emits a blue light, the GFP\(^2\) tag is excited by this wavelength light and, in turn, emits a green light. On the right panel is the emission profile spectrum for co-expressed Rluc and GFP\(^2\) in close proximity, with a peak at \(~400\) nm corresponding to Rluc emission, and the subsequent peak at \(~500\) nm corresponding the GFP\(^2\) emission.
2.5 *In-cell Western®*

In-cell Western® method was used to assay ERK phosphorylation (Lovell *et al.*, 2015). 24 hours after transfection, HEK293 cells in 6-well plates were washed in serum-free DMEM, and each well was resuspended in 1600 µL DMEM. 100 µL was plated per well on poly D-lysine coated clear 96-well plate (Corning). Cells were then allowed to incubate for a further 24 hours. Cells were treated with ET-1 to a final concentration of 10 nM, a dose known to achieve maximal response in cell culture experiments (Yanagisawa *et al.*, 1988; Evans and Walker, 2008). Cells were then fixed for 10 minutes with 4% paraformaldehyde at the selected time-points. Cells were then washed 3 times for 5 minutes in PBS, and permeabilized by shaking at room-temperature for 60 minutes in blocking buffer consisting of 20% Odyssey Blocking Buffer (Li-cor) and 0.3% Triton X-100 (Sigma-Aldrich) diluted in PBS. Primary antibodies rabbit polyclonal IgG against C-14 of ERK 1/2 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) and goat polyclonal IgG against Tyr-204 of phosphorylated ERK (p-ERK, Santa Cruz Biotechnology) were applied to wells at 1:200 dilutions in blocking buffer and cells were incubated for one hour at room-temperature, followed by over-night incubation at 4 °C. The following day, wells were washed as described above in PBS and then incubated in secondary antibodies IR-Dye800 conjugated donkey anti-rabbit IgG (Rockland) and Alexa Fluor 680 conjugated donkey anti-goat IgG (Thermo Fisher Scientific), both diluted 1:500 in blocking buffer with shaking for 2 hours at room-temperature. Wells were then washed as above with an additional 5-minute wash in double-distilled H₂O (ddH₂O) and dried over-night. To subtract background auto-emission and non-specific binding, an
additional well from each transfection was treated with the same immuno-blotting procedure, with the exception that primary antibodies were not applied. *Pertussis* toxin dissolved in ddH₂O (PTx, Sigma-Aldrich) was used to inhibit Gαi signalling and was added to the media (0.5 pg/μL) 24 hours prior to drug treatment. Non-selective PKC inhibitor Gö-6983 (Sigma) was applied at the maximal inhibitory concentration of 100 nM (Park *et al.*, 2000), one hour prior to ET-1 treatment.

The relative abundances of p-ERK and total ERK were quantified using the Li-Cor Odyssey Imaging System v3.0, with the read setting set to Microplate 2, the resolution set to 169 µm, quality set to medium, channel 700 (ERK) intensity set to 6 and channel 800 (p-ERK) set to 7.5. A grid was fit to the captured image and the intensities of each well was obtained. Background intensities were subtracted and the ratio of p-ERK to total ERK calculated for each well.

### 2.6 Statistical Analysis and Curve Fitting

All data are presented as the mean ± standard error of the mean. Statistical analyses were performed using Graphpad Prism v.6 (Graphpad Software Inc.). In BRET saturation curve experiments, the data were fit to a rectangular hyperbola (equation 2, page 28), where B_MAX is equivalent to BRET_MAX and K_d to BRET_50. In time-course experiments, the data were fit to a variable slope sigmoidal dose-response (equation 3, page 28), where EC_50 is a measure of the rate of association (t_1/2). Statistical comparisons between points were done with multiple t-tests corrected for multiple comparisons using the Holm-Sidak method, with significance assumed at P<0.05, while statistical comparisons of BRET_MAX and time to half-maxima were performed using unpaired two-tailed t without post-hoc testing.
Equations:

1. $BRET_{EFF} = (405/510 - BRET_{MIN}) / (BRET_{MAX})$

2. Rectangular hyperbola fit: $Y = B_{MAX} \times X / K_d + X$

3. Sigmoidal fit: $Y = Bottom + (Top - Bottom) / (1 + 10^{(EC50-X) \times Hill Slope})$
Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Physical Interactions Between Endothelin Receptors

Endothelin receptor dimerization was confirmed by BRET\(^2\) in HEK293 cells. BRET efficiency (BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\)) was measured in cells co-transfected with 1 µg ET\(_A\)-Rluc and 2 µg of either ET\(_A\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4), ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4), or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3) (Fig. 3.1A). ET\(_A\)-Rluc and ET\(_A\) or ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) produced a significantly higher BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) compared to HERG-GFP\(^2\), a membrane protein that does not interact with GPCRs (Bagher et al., 2013). BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) was also measured in cells transfected with 1 µg ET\(_B\)-Rluc and 2 µg of either ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4), ET\(_A\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4), or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3) (Fig. 3.1B). The ET\(_B\)-Rluc and ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) combination had significantly higher BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) over the HERG-GFP\(^2\) control. Thus, the heterodimer was detectable only with ET\(_A\) as donor and ET\(_B\) as acceptor, which could have been due to different distances or orientations between Rluc and GFP\(^2\) molecules (Pfleger et al., 2006).

BRET saturation curves were generated to test if endothelin receptor physical interactions were specific or due to random collision. 1 µg donor was transfected along with increasing amounts of acceptor. If the physical interaction was specific, BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) would eventually plateau when all donor molecules were occupied. The ability of endothelin receptors to form homodimers or heterodimers in HEK293 cells was tested by transfecting HEK293 cells with: 1 µg ET\(_A\)-Rluc along with 0-3 µg of either ET\(_A\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4) or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3) (Fig. 3.2), 1 µg ET\(_B\)-Rluc along with 0-3 µg of either ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4) or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3) (Fig. 3.3), and 1 µg ET\(_A\)-Rluc along with 0-3 µg of either ET\(_B\)-GFP\(^2\) (n=4) or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3) (Fig. 3.4). Corresponding BRET\(_{\text{MAX}}\) and BRET\(_{50}\) values are summarized in Table 3.1.
**Figure 3.1:** \(ET_A\) and \(ET_B\) BRET\(^2\) constructs produced energy transfer

A. BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) values obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 µg \(ET_A\)-Rluc and 2 µg \(ET_A\) (n=4), \(ET_B\) (n=4), or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3), as indicated. B. BRET\(_{\text{EFF}}\) values obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 µg \(ET_B\)-Rluc and 2 µg \(ET_A\) (n=4), \(ET_B\) (n=4), or HERG-GFP\(^2\) (n=3), as indicated.

* \(P<0.05\) compared to HERG-GFP\(^2\) control.
**Table 3.1**: Endothelin receptor BRET saturation curve data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>BRET&lt;sub&gt;MAX&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>BRET&lt;sub&gt;50&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>Hyperbolic Fit (R&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;)</th>
<th>Linear Fit (R&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc + ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.358 ± 0.070</td>
<td>2.624 ± 0.875</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>0.962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc + ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.280 ± 0.002</td>
<td>0.430 ± 0.013</td>
<td>0.982</td>
<td>0.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc + ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.290 ± 0.002</td>
<td>0.482 ± 0.013</td>
<td>0.986</td>
<td>0.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc + HERG- GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.043 ± 0.004</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET&lt;sub&gt;B&lt;/sub&gt;-Rluc + HERG- GFP&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.034 ± 0.000</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>0.521</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ND: Not determined
**Figure 3.2: Evidence for ET<sub>A</sub> receptor homodimerization was inconclusive**

BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 µg ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc and increasing ET<sub>A</sub>-GFP<sup>2</sup> (solid line, circles; n=4) or HERG-GFP<sup>2</sup> (dashed line, triangles; n=3). BRET<sub>EFF</sub> is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP<sup>2</sup> and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection.

Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28), with additional linear regression in dotted red.
**Figure 3.3: ET$_B$ receptors formed homodimers**

BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 µg ET$_B$-Rluc and increasing ET$_B$-GFP$^2$ (solid line, circles; n=4) or HERG-GFP$^2$ (dashed line, triangles; n=3). BRET$_{E_{FF}}$ is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP$^2$ and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection. Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28).
**Figure 3.4: ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} receptors formed heterodimers**

BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 µg ET\textsubscript{A}-Rluc and increasing ET\textsubscript{B}-GFP\textsuperscript{2} (solid line, circles; n=4) or HERG-GFP\textsuperscript{2} (dashed line, triangles; n=3). BRET\textsubscript{EFF} is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP\textsuperscript{2} and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection. Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28).
BRET$_{eff}$ vs. GFP$^2$/Rluc

- $\bullet$ ET$_A$-Rluc/ET$_B$-GFP$^2$
- $\triangle$ ET$_A$-Rluc/HERG-GFP$^2$
ET$_A$/ET$_A$ interactions were found to be of relatively lower affinity (BRET$_{50} = 2.624 \pm 0.875$) compared to ET$_B$ homodimers (BRET$_{50} = 0.430 \pm 0.013$) and ET$_A$/ET$_B$ heterodimers (BRET$_{50} = 0.482 \pm 0.013$).

### 3.2 β-arrestin-1 Recruitment to Endothelin Receptors

The next objective was to test if endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibited the function of β-arrestin, beginning first with its recruitment. For this, I sought to determine if ET-1 induced β-arrestin-1 recruitment in HEK293 cells using BRET$^2$ methodology. HEK293 cells were transfected with 1 µg ET$_A$-Rluc and 0 to 3 µg β-arrestin-1-GFP$^2$ (n=4) (Fig. 3.5A) as well as with 1 µg ET$_B$-Rluc and 0 to 3 µg β-arrestin-1-GFP$^2$ (n=4) (Fig. 3.5B). BRET measurements were performed 20 minutes after treatment with either vehicle (DMEM) or 10 nM ET-1. Corresponding BRET data are summarized in Table 3.2.

In the case of both ET$_A$ and ET$_B$, BRETr$_{\text{MAX}}$ values were not significantly different between vehicle and ET-1 treatment, indicating that interactions between endothelin receptors and β-arrestin-1 were not enhanced by receptor activation. Therefore, β-arrestin-1 potentially only forms constitutive interactions with endothelin receptors.
Table 3.2: Endothelin receptor β-arrestin-1-GFP<sup>2</sup> recruitment BRET saturation data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>BRET&lt;sub&gt;MAX&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>BRET&lt;sub&gt;50&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>Hyperbolic Fit (R&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;)</th>
<th>Linear Fit (R&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ETA-Rluc</td>
<td>0.070 ± 0.014</td>
<td>0.695 ± 0.434</td>
<td>0.633</td>
<td>0.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Vehicle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETA-Rluc</td>
<td>0.078 ± 0.012</td>
<td>0.553 ± 0.306</td>
<td>0.687</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ ET-1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETB-Rluc</td>
<td>0.048 ± 0.010</td>
<td>0.553 ± 0.010</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Vehicle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETB-Rluc</td>
<td>0.071 ± 0.016</td>
<td>1.067 ± 0.604</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>0.889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ ET-1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 3.5:** $E_{T_A}$ and $E_{T_B}$ receptors constitutively interacted with $\beta$-arrestin-1

**A.** BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 $\mu$g $E_{T_A}$-Rluc and increasing $\beta$-arrestin-1-GFP$^2$ treated with either vehicle (dashed line, circles) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid lines, triangles). **B.** BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 1 $\mu$g $E_{T_B}$-Rluc and increasing $\beta$-arrestin-1-GFP$^2$ treated with either vehicle (dashed line, circles) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid lines, triangles). BRET$_{\text{EFF}}$ is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP$^2$ and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection. Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28); n=4.
A

B

42
3.3 β-arrestin-2 Recruitment to Endothelin Receptors

I then used BRET technology to test if β-arrestin-2 is recruited to endothelin receptors. HEK293 cells were transfected with 0.5 µg ET_A-Rluc and 0 to 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP² ± 0.5 µg untagged ET_B and BRET measurements were performed 20 minutes after vehicle or 10 nM ET-1 treatment (Fig. 3.6), with corresponding BRET data summarized in Table 3.3.

In both the presence and absence of ET_B, BRET_MAX values were significantly higher in the 10 nM ET-1 treated cells compared to vehicle, indicating that ET-1 agonism initiated additional β-arrestin-2-GFP² recruitment. Compared to cells transfected only with ET_A-Rluc, co-transfection with untagged ET_B significantly decreased BRET_MAX in ET-1 treated cells, indicative of a reduced maximal β-arrestin-2 recruitment.
**Table 3.3**: $ET_A$-Rluc recruitment of β-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ BRET saturation curve data in the presence or absence of $ET_B$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>BRET$_{MAX}$</th>
<th>BRET$_{50}$</th>
<th>Hyperbolic Fit ($R^2$)</th>
<th>Linear Fit ($R^2$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$ET_A$-Rluc + Vehicle</td>
<td>0.110 ± 0.035</td>
<td>0.453 ± 0.573</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_A$-Rluc + ET-1</td>
<td>0.326 ± 0.051</td>
<td>0.702 ± 0.340</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>0.533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_A$-Rluc + ET$_B$ + Vehicle</td>
<td>0.085 ± 0.031</td>
<td>0.515 ± 0.686</td>
<td>0.763</td>
<td>0.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_A$-Rluc + ET$_B$ + ET-1</td>
<td>0.210 ± 0.027</td>
<td>0.555 ± 0.253</td>
<td>0.945</td>
<td>0.654</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 3.6: Co-expression of ET<sub>B</sub> inhibited ET<sub>A</sub> recruitment of β-arrestin-2**

BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc and increasing β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> treated with: vehicle (dashed line, black circles) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid line, black circles); or 0.5 µg ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc, 0.5 µg ET<sub>B</sub>, and increasing β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> treated with: vehicle (dashed line, white squares) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid line, white squares). BRET<sub>EFF</sub> is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP<sup>2</sup> and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection. Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28); * P<0.05 between calculated BRET<sub>MAX</sub> values; n=3.
- • ET$_A$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + Vehicle
- • ET$_A$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + 10 nM ET-1
- ◇ ET$_A$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + ET$_B$ + Vehicle
- ◇ ET$_A$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + ET$_B$ + 10 nM ET-1
Similar experiments were also conducted examining β-arrestin-2 recruitment to ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc. HEK293 cells were transfected with 0.5 µg ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc and 0 to 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> ± 0.5 µg untagged ET<sub>A</sub> and BRET measurements were performed 20 minutes after either vehicle or 10 nM ET-1 treatment (Fig. 3.7), with corresponding BRET data summarized in Table 3.4.

In this case, BRET<sub>MAX</sub> was significantly increased after ET-1 exposure in ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc transfected cells but not in cells co-transfected with both receptor subtypes. Interestingly, co-transfection of untagged ET<sub>A</sub> alongside ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc significantly reduced BRET<sub>MAX</sub> compared to transfections lacking untagged ET<sub>A</sub> in ET-1 treated cells; this would be consistent with a heterodimer-mediated inhibition of β-arrestin-2 recruitment. Alternatively, there is also the possibility that the untagged monomeric or homodimeric ET<sub>B</sub> was being activated by ET-1 and recruiting β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> from a limited pool. This would effectively decrease BRET<sub>EFF</sub> by limiting the amount of β-arrestin-2 available for recruitment to ET<sub>A</sub>; although based on the saturation curve data we can begin to observe a decrease in BRET<sub>EFF</sub> at as low as a 1:1 ratio of β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> to ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc when co-transfecting ET<sub>B</sub>. This makes it unlikely that ET<sub>B</sub> is simply sequestering β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> at the 3:1 ratio point.
Table 3.4: $E_{TB}$-Rluc recruitment of β-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ BRET saturation curve data in the presence or absence of $ET_A$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>BRET$_{MAX}$</th>
<th>BRET$_{50}$</th>
<th>Hyperbolic Fit ($R^2$)</th>
<th>Linear Fit ($R^2$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$ET_{TB}$-Rluc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Vehicle</td>
<td>$0.213 \pm 0.046$</td>
<td>$0.910 \pm 0.531$</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td>0.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_{TB}$-Rluc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ ET-1</td>
<td>$0.367 \pm 0.040$</td>
<td>$0.657 \pm 0.229$</td>
<td>0.938</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_{TB}$-Rluc + $ET_A$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Vehicle</td>
<td>$0.204 \pm 0.066$</td>
<td>$1.470 \pm 1.047$</td>
<td>0.902</td>
<td>0.743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ET_{TB}$-Rluc + $ET_A$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ ET-1</td>
<td>$0.235 \pm 0.033$</td>
<td>$0.547 \pm 0.276$</td>
<td>0.984</td>
<td>0.612</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 3.7:** Co-expression of $ET_A$ inhibited $ET_B$ recruitment of $\beta$-arrestin-2

BRET saturation curves obtained from HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg $ET_B$-Rluc and increasing $\beta$-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ treated with: vehicle (dashed line, black circles) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid line, black circles); or 0.5 µg $ET_B$-Rluc, 0.5 µg $ET_A$, and increasing $\beta$-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ treated with: vehicle (dashed line, white squares) or 10 nM ET-1 (solid line, white squares). BRET$_{\text{EFF}}$ is plotted against the mass ratio of GFP$^2$ and Rluc tagged constructs used during transfection. Data were fit to equation #2 (page 28); * $P<0.05$ between calculated BRET$_{\text{MAX}}$ values; n=3.
**BRET**

**ET$_B$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + Vehicle**

**ET$_B$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + 10 nM ET-1**

**ET$_B$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + ET$_A$ + Vehicle**

**ET$_B$-Rluc/βarr2-GFP$^2$ + ET$_A$ + 10 nM ET1**
I next wanted to test if co-expression of both endothelin receptor subtypes delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment. To do this, HEK293 cells were treated with 10 nM ET-1 48 hours after transfection with either 0.5 µg ETₐ-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP² (1.5 µg) ± 0.5 µg untagged ETₜ (Fig. 3.8A), or the reciprocal 0.5 µg ETₜ-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP² ± 0.5 µg untagged ETₐ (Fig. 3.8B). Co-transfection of untagged ETₜ with ETₐ-Rluc significantly decreased BRETₑff at 5-15 and 30 minutes, while co-transfection of untagged ETₐ with ETₜ-Rluc significantly decreased BRETₑff from 5-30 minutes, suggesting an inhibition of β-arrestin-2-GFP² recruitment. The time to half-maximal recruitment was significantly longer in cells transfected with ETₐ-Rluc and ETₜ (10.6 ± 2.8 minutes), compared to cells transfected with ETₐ-Rluc (3.1 ± 5.2 minutes). In the reciprocal experiments, time to half-maximal recruitment was significantly longer in cells co-transfected with ETₜ-Rluc and ETₐ (9.4 ± 1.5 minutes) compared to cells transfected with only ETₜ-Rluc (3.2 ± 1.2 minutes). Together, these experiments provided evidence that co-expression of both endothelin receptor subtypes decreased and delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment. It cannot be accurately stated that this was necessarily an effect of heterodimerization, as the inclusion of the reciprocal receptor subtype could have been creating competition for a limited pool of β-arrestin-2. The latter was partially addressed in the experimental design by expressing β-arrestin-2 at an increased ratio to the endothelin receptors. Furthermore, previous BRET² saturation curves showed ETₐ/ETₜ heterodimer formation was already maximal at a 1:1 ETₐ:ETₜ ratio, so untagged receptor was co-transfected at this level in β-arrestin-2 recruitment assays.
Figure 3.8: Co-expression of ET$_{A}$ and ET$_{B}$ delayed ET-1-induced β-arrestin-2 recruitment

A. Time-course of β-arrestin-2 recruitment to endothelin receptors following 10 nM ET-1 treatment in HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg ET$_{A}$-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ (black) and 0.5 µg ET$_{B}$ (white). B. Time-course of β-arrestin-2 recruitment to endothelin receptors following 10 nM ET-1 treatment in HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg ET$_{B}$-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP$^2$ (black) and 0.5 µg ET$_{A}$ (white). BRET$_{EFF}$ is plotted against time in minutes following ET-1 treatment. Data were fit to equation #3 (page 28); * $P$<0.05; n=3.
To further demonstrate that the delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment was heterodimer-specific, the previous experiment was repeated using ET<sub>B</sub>-selective agonist, BQ-3020. Because BQ-3020 does not appreciably bind or activate ET<sub>A</sub> at the concentration used (Ihara et al., 1992), this approach ensured that ET<sub>A</sub> acted only as a physically interacting protein to ET<sub>B</sub>. HEK293 cells were treated with 10 nM BQ-3020 48 hours after transfection with either 0.5 µg ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> (1.5 µg) ± 0.5 µg untagged ET<sub>B</sub> (Fig. 3.9A), or the reciprocal 0.5 µg ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> ± 0.5 µg untagged ET<sub>A</sub> (Fig. 3.9B). ET<sub>B</sub>-selective agonism did not significantly increase BRET<sub>EFF</sub> in cells transfected with ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc ± ET<sub>B</sub>, suggesting that ET<sub>A</sub> is not recruiting β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast, in HEK293 cells transfected with ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc ± ET<sub>A</sub>, selective ET<sub>B</sub> agonism with BQ-3020 caused a rapid increase in BRET<sub>EFF</sub>, which was significantly lower at 5 and 10 minutes in cells co-transfected with untagged ET<sub>A</sub>. Time to half-maximal recruitment was significantly longer in cells co-transfected with ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc and ET<sub>A</sub> (9.7 ± 2.0 minutes) compared to cells transfected with only ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc (4.6 ± 2.1 minutes). As ET<sub>A</sub> appeared incapable of recruiting β-arrestin-2 with BQ-3020 treatment, the co-transfected ET<sub>A</sub> likely mediated its effect through physical interaction with ET<sub>B</sub>. These experiments showed that BQ-3020 selectively activated ET<sub>B</sub> and that the ET<sub>A</sub>/ET<sub>B</sub> heterodimer was likely delaying β-arrestin-2 recruitment.
Figure 3.9: Co-expression of ET<sub>A</sub> and ET<sub>B</sub> delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment following ET<sub>B</sub>-specific agonism

A. Time-course of β-arrestin-2 recruitment to endothelin receptors following 10 nM BQ-3020 treatment in HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg ET<sub>A</sub>-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> (black) and 0.5 µg ET<sub>B</sub> (white). B. Time-course of β-arrestin-2 recruitment to endothelin receptors following 10 nM BQ-3020 treatment in HEK293 cells transiently transfected with 0.5 µg ET<sub>B</sub>-Rluc and 1.5 µg β-arrestin-2-GFP<sup>2</sup> (black) and 0.5 µg ET<sub>A</sub> (white). BRET<sub>EFF</sub> is plotted against time in minutes after agonist treatment. Data were fit to equation #3 (page 28); * P<0.05; n=3.
**A**

![Graph A](image)

**B**

![Graph B](image)
3.4 ERK Phosphorylation Downstream of Endothelin Receptor Activation

To test if this heterodimer-mediated inhibition of β-arrestin recruitment can potentially alter cell function, In-cell Western® was used to assay for ERK phosphorylation, a signaling molecule directly activated by the GPCR-β-arrestin complex as well as by G-protein-dependent kinase cascades. HEK293 cells transfected with 0.5 µg untagged ET\textsubscript{A} ± 0.5 µg untagged ET\textsubscript{B} ± 1 µg β-arrestin-1 dominant negative (Val-53ΔAsp) (β-arr -) were treated with 10 nM ET-1 and fixed 5 or 20 minutes later. Pertussis toxin (PTX) was applied 24 hours prior to ET-1 treatment, and 100 nM PKC inhibitor Gӧ-6983 one-hour prior to ET-1 treatment. In-cell Western® was then used to assay for ERK and p-ERK (Fig. 3.10). PTX pre-treatment did not alter ERK phosphorylation 5 or 20 minutes after ET-1 treatment, indicating that endothelin receptors may not couple with G\textalpha{i} and that ET-1-mediated ERK phosphorylation is G\textalpha{i}-independent.

Compared to ET-1 treatment, co-transfection with dominant negative β-arrestin-1 significantly decreased ERK phosphorylation at 5 and 20 minutes in ET\textsubscript{A}-transfected cells, but not in cells co-transfected with both ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B}. This suggests that β-arrestin was mediating a proportion of ERK phosphorylation downstream of endothelin receptor activation. To examine if G-protein signalling is also altered by endothelin receptor co-expression, PKC inhibitor Gӧ-6983 was used to inhibit ERK phosphorylation by PKC, a kinase protein activated downstream of G\textalpha{q} activation. PKC inhibition significantly decreased ERK phosphorylation at 5 minutes following ET-1 treatment in ET\textsubscript{A}-transfected HEK293.
**Figure 3.10:** $ET_A$ mediated ERK phosphorylation was Gaq- and β-arrestin-1-dependent

HEK293 cells transfected with 0.5 µg $ET_A$ (black bars) or 0.5 µg $ET_A$ and 0.5 µg $ET_B$ (white bars) were fixed (A) 5 or (B) 20 minutes after treatment with 10 nM ET-1 for processing with In-cell Western® against ERK and pERK. Treatments include 24-hour pre-incubation with pertussis toxin (PTX), co-transfection with β-arrestin-1 dominant negative (β-arr -), and one-hour pre-incubation with 100 nM PKC inhibitor Gö-6983. Data presented as percent change relative to vehicle treatment; * $P<0.05$ relative to ET-1 treatment; n=3-5.
Next, the time-course for ERK phosphorylation was examined in HEK293 cells transfected with 0.5 µg untagged ETₐ ± 0.5 µg untagged ETₐ. Cells were treated with 10 nM ET-1 and then fixed at selected time points, followed by In-cell Western® to assay for ERK phosphorylation (Fig. 3.11). ERK phosphorylation was significantly lower at 3 and 5 minutes in HEK293 cells co-transfected with ETₐ and ETₐ compared to HEK293 cells transfected with only ETₐ.
Figure 3.11: ET-1 mediated ERK phosphorylation was delayed by co-expression of both $ET_A$ and $ET_B$

HEK293 cells transfected with 0.5 µg $ET_A$ (black circles) or 0.5 µg $ET_A$ and 0.5 µg $ET_B$ (white circles) were treated with 10 nM ET-1 and fixed at selected time points for processing with In-cell Western® against ERK and pERK. Data presented as percent change relative to $t=0$ min; n=5.
Chapter 4: Discussion

GPCRs can function as monomeric units (Whorton et al., 2007), but an increasing body of knowledge supports GPCR dimerization or oligomerization as the native physiological state (Bouvier and Hebert, 2014). GPCR dimerization has been documented to profoundly impact receptor dynamics (Gurevich and Gurevich, 2008). Endothelin receptor heterodimerization is an important topic of study because it prolongs calcium transients, and likely plays an important role in endothelin physiology in tissues co-expressing both receptor subtypes. The main focus of my thesis was to test the hypothesis that endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibits β-arrestin function.

My objectives were to quantify the affinity of endothelin receptor physical interactions, and explore how these might impact β-arrestin recruitment and the β-arrestin-dependent ERK signaling cascade. Using BRET² as a means to observe physical interactions via energy transfer, I demonstrated that ET₂A and ET₂B formed heterodimers, and ET₂B formed homodimers, while evidence supporting ET₂A homodimerization was inconclusive. β-arrestin-2, but not β-arrestin-1, was recruited to ET₂A or ET₂B following application of the non-selective endothelin receptor agonist ET-1 in BRET² assays. Co-expression of both ET₂A and ET₂B reduced and delayed β-arrestin-2 recruitment. ERK phosphorylation following the application of ET-1 was not altered by PTX treatment, suggesting it was Gαi-independent. ET-1-induced ERK phosphorylation was both β-arrestin-1- and PKC-dependent in HEK293 expressing ET₂A, while cells co-expressing ET₂A and ET₂B were not significantly affected by Gαi, β-arrestin-1, or PKC inhibition.
4.1 $ET_A$ and $ET_B$ receptors heterodimerize and $ET_B$ receptors homodimerize

In the present study, endothelin receptor dimer combinations were compared in their specificity and affinity. A previous study examining endothelin receptor dimerization with FRET reported that $ET_A$ and $ET_B$ both homo- and heterodimerize (Evans and Walker, 2008). FRET is a qualitative method that simply allows for the visualization of protein-protein interactions in situ, and observing dimerization with FRET can potentially be an artifact arising from overexpression of the fusion proteins (Day et al., 2001). BRET$^2$ overcomes this limitation by allowing for quantitative measurement of the specificity of an interaction (Pfleger and Eidne, 2003). BRET$^2$ saturation curves for $ET_A$-Rluc and $ET_A$-GFP$^2$ did not conclusively demonstrate $ET_A$ homodimerization, as both linear ($R^2 = 0.962$) and hyperbolic ($R^2 = 0.834$) regression provided adequate fits. This experiment should be further extended by testing higher ratios of $ET_A$-GFP$^2$ to $ET_A$-Rluc to examine if the interaction is truly saturable. Regardless, the putative affinity of the interaction given by non-linear regression ($BRET_{50} = 2.624 \pm 0.875$) indicates that even if $ET_A$ homodimerization does occur, it is not likely a dominant species within a mixed population of endothelin receptors.

$ET_B$ homodimers and $ET_A/ET_B$ heterodimers displayed specific and saturable associations with similar affinity to form interactions ($BRET_{50} = 0.430 \pm 0.013$ and $0.482 \pm 0.013$, respectively). It is worth noting that BRET$^{\text{EFF}}$ values reflect a mixed receptor population; when co-expressing $ET_A$-Rluc and $ET_B$-GFP$^2$, the only observable contribution to BRET$^{\text{EFF}}$ are $ET_A$-Rluc/$ET_B$-GFP$^2$ heterodimers, but $ET_A$-Rluc and $ET_B$-GFP$^2$ homodimers and monomers could also be present.
This being said, BRET measurement does not give any indication towards the existence of higher-order geometries, and therefore the term “dimers”, as measured with BRET in this study, represents the minimal oligomeric state, and may actually be components of unseen oligomers (Gandia et al., 2008).

4.2 β-arrestin-2, but not β-arrestin-1, was recruited to endothelin receptors

Endothelin receptors have previously been classified as “Class A” GPCRs that bind β-arrestin-2 with a higher affinity than β-arrestin-1 (Oakley et al., 2000). This study found that β-arrestin-2-GFP, but not β-arrestin-1-GFP, was recruited to endothelin receptors following ET-1 exposure using BRET in HEK293 cells. β-arrestin isoforms could be functionally divergent (Srivastava et al., 2015), as has been previously proposed in endothelin receptors by reports demonstrating that β-arrestin-2 knock-down prevents ET\textsubscript{A} receptor desensitization in HEK293 cells, while β-arrestin-1 knock-down has no such effect (Morris et al., 2012). On the other hand, β-arrestin-1 siRNA silencing inhibits ET-1 driven activation of Protein Kinase B (PKB) (Cianfrocca et al., 2010) and MAPK signalling (Rosanò et al., 2009) in the human ovarian carcinoma cell line, and prevents podocyte phenotypic changes driven by ET\textsubscript{A}-driven signalling (Buelli et al., 2013). The overall body of evidence supports that both β-arrestin isoforms are important to endothelin receptor function and my BRET\textsuperscript{2} assays detected a constitutive β-arrestin-1 association to endothelin receptors that did not change following agonist treatment, whereas β-arrestin-2 both constitutively and dynamically associated with endothelin receptors. Thus, β-arrestin isoforms may act differentially towards endothelin physiology.
4.3 *Endothelin receptor heterodimerization inhibits β-arrestin-2 recruitment*

Through examination of BRET\textsubscript{MAX} values obtained by non-linear regression of BRET saturation curves obtained from β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} and Rluc-tagged endothelin receptors, I showed that co-expression of both receptor subtypes significantly decreased the extent and rate of β-arrestin-2 recruitment. Since ET-1 was used, one legitimate limitation to these experiments is that untagged endothelin receptors may be sequestering a limited pool of β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} from the opposing Rluc-tagged endothelin receptor. It is also possible that only one molecule of β-arrestin is capable of being recruited to the activated heterodimer, and thus β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} recruitment to the untagged receptor would effectively block β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} recruitment to the Rluc tagged receptor, potentially decreasing BRET\textsubscript{EFF}. For these reasons, β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} was overexpressed at a large ratio to the endothelin receptors and an ET\textsubscript{B}-selective agonist was tested. The ET\textsubscript{B}-selective agonist BQ-3020 produced a similar effect to ET-1, in which case untagged ET\textsubscript{A} did not recruit β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} to itself and must be delaying β-arrestin-2-GFP\textsuperscript{2} recruitment to ET\textsubscript{B}-Rluc by formation of heterodimers. This inhibition and delay in the recruitment of β-arrestin-2 would be consistent with delayed desensitization of active endothelin receptors in heterodimer, and could thus play a role in tissues co-expressing ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B}.

4.4 *Endothelin receptor heterodimerization reduces ERK phosphorylation*

The next aim of my study was to test if ERK phosphorylation was affected by endothelin receptor heterodimerization. ERK phosphorylation downstream of endothelin receptors could ultimately be the summative result of several effectors
including PTX-sensitive Gαi, Gαq-activated PKC, and β-arrestin-dependent ERK signalling (Eishingdrelo and Kongsamut, 2013). These effectors likely contribute to ERK phosphorylation in a time-dependent fashion, as G-protein signalling is generally rapid and transient while β-arrestin signalling’s onset is slower yet longer lasting (Ahn et al., 2004). For this reason, Gαi, Gαq, and β-arrestin-1 inhibition were each assayed at 5 and 20 minutes after ET-1 treatment.

ET-1-driven ERK phosphorylation was found to be PTX-insensitive, suggesting endothelin receptors do not couple to Gαi. This finding would be strengthened by testing the PTX batch against a GPCR that is known to couple to Gαi such as the CB1 receptor (Shim et al., 2013), as a positive control. Co-transfection with a mutant β-arrestin-1 construct that competes with endogenous β-arrestin-1 recruitment and function significantly reduced ERK phosphorylation 5 and 20 minutes after ET-1 treatment in HEK293 cells transfected with ET_A, confirming that a significant proportion of ET-1-mediated ERK phosphorylation was β-arrestin-dependent. Co-transfection with the mutant β-arrestin-1 construct also appeared to reduce ERK phosphorylation in HEK293 co-transfected with ET_A and ET_B, but failed to produce a significant effect due to large standard deviation; this should be addressed with further experimentation by increasing the number of replicates. Alternatively, this could be interpreted as a reduced importance of β-arrestin-1 dependent ERK signalling by the endothelin receptor heterodimer, which would be consistent with inhibited β-arrestin recruitment to the heterodimer.

In HEK293 cells transfected with ET_A, pre-treatment with PKC inhibitor Gö-6983 significantly reduced ERK phosphorylation at 5 minutes, but not 20 minutes,
after ET-1 treatment, consistent with a transient Gαq-dependent ERK phosphorylation. Interestingly, PKC inhibition in HEK293 cells co-transfected with both endothelin receptor subtypes appeared to also reduce ERK phosphorylation 20 minutes after ET-1 treatment, although this effect was not significant and warrants further experimentation by increasing the number of replicates. Evans and Walker (2008) conclusively demonstrated that endothelin receptor heterodimer activation induces longer lasting Ca^{2+} transients compared to homodimers. As this is a G-protein-dependent outcome of endothelin receptor activation, it can be presumed that potentially extended PKC activity would also be an effect of endothelin receptor heterodimerization. However, this could also be a consequence of synergistic signalling interactions downstream of the activation of monomeric endothelin receptors A and B. To demonstrate that the above is unequivocally tied to heterodimerization, I would have to repeat the experiments performed in this study with the non-dimerizing mutant ET_A construct (Evans and Walker, 2008). The use of this mutant ET_A construct should abolish the effects of ET_A/ET_B heterodimerization on β-arrestin recruitment and ERK phosphorylation. It would also be informative to repeat the above experiments with HEK293 cells transfected with ET_B, in order to determine if ERK activation downstream of ET_B activation is similar to ET_A-dependent ERK signalling. This is also necessary to determine if the alterations in ERK activation by co-expression of ET_A and ET_B are caused by heterodimerization or simply by expression of ET_B.
ET-1 produces a long lasting vasoconstriction in most vascular beds where both receptor subtypes are co-expressed in VSMCs (Clarke et al., 1989; Macrae et al., 1993; Maguire and Davenport, 2014). This could be explained by endothelin receptor heterodimerization, with previous reports highlighting that the heterodimer extends the time-frame of ET-1-induced Ca\(^{2+}\) transients in HEK293 cells and that dual antagonism of both endothelin receptors is required to block these prolonged Ca\(^{2+}\) transients (Evans and Walker, 2008). Interestingly, despite concerns pertaining to endothelial ET\(_B\) inhibition due to its importance in vasodilation, dual endothelin receptor antagonists such as bosentan have proven more clinically successful than have specific ET\(_A\) antagonists (Böhme et al., 2002; Clozel and Flores, 2006; Iglarz et al., 2015), which could indeed be explained by the need to antagonize both receptor subtypes when attempting to block heterodimer signaling. As such, it appears the agonist-activated heterodimer efficaciously couples to G-protein G\(_{\alpha q}\), whilst inhibiting \(\beta\)-arrestin-2 recruitment and signal desensitization. This would prolong signalling from activated endothelin receptors by increasing the length of time G\(_{\alpha q}\) can activate PLC, leading to prolonged Ca\(^{2+}\) release and PKC activation. This is in contrast to the endothelin receptor homodimers or monomers, which are rapidly desensitized by \(\beta\)-arrestin recruitment and internalization (Fig. 4.1).
**Figure 4.1: Modelling endothelin receptor heterodimerization**

**A.** Following ET-1 binding, endothelin receptor monomers initiate Gαq-dependent Ca^{2+} release through transient PLC activation (dashed arrow) of IP_{3} production and subsequent opening of IP_{3}-gated Ca^{2+} channels present on the endoplasmic reticulum. PLC also activates PKC through DAG production, which contributes to Ca^{2+}-independent vasoconstriction and activates numerous downstream effectors, including ERK, a regulator of gene expression that translocates to the nucleus to promote proliferation and cell-cycle progression. β-arrestin is recruited to the activated ET receptors and rapidly desensitizes the response followed by internalization, as well as directly activating ERK. **B.** Heterodimerization of ET\textsubscript{A} and ET\textsubscript{B} masks internalization motifs required for β-arrestin recruitment, thus prolonging the time available for the activated receptor complex to generate Ca^{2+} transients and PKC activation. Endothelin receptor heterodimerization may thus mediate the long vasoconstrictor response to ET-1 by prolonging receptor activation through inhibition of β-arrestin function.
A

ET-1

ET_A

ET_B

Gαq

β-arrestin-2

β-arrestin-2

ERK

ERK

Gene Expression
Cellular Proliferation
Progression Through Cell Cycle

PKC

PLC

DAG + IP_3

Ca^{2+}

Sustained Vasoconstriction

B

ET-1

ET_A

ET_B

Gαq

β-arrestin-2
4.5 Future directions

As mentioned previously, the presented BRET$^2$ assays do not differentiate between dimers and oligomers. Recent evolutions in methodology such as sequential BRET-FRET, described in Carriba et al. (2008), enable the resolution of higher order GPCR complexes. Although the authors utilized this novel technique to show complexation of three separate GPCRs, it could potentially be used to detect oligomerization of endothelin receptor dimers. For example, such an assay would involve heterologous expression of ET$_{A}$-Rluc, ET$_{B}$-GFP$^2$, and either ET$_{A}$-YFP or ET$_{B}$-YFP. When coelenterazine induces BRET between ET$_{A}$-Rluc and ET$_{B}$-GFP$^2$, GFP$^2$ emission sequentially excites the YFP fusion protein if the third endothelin receptor is in close enough proximity for subsequent FRET. Alternatively, endothelin receptor dimers may stand alone and YFP emission would thus be unobserved.

Determining if endothelin receptor heterodimerize in tissues could be achieved using techniques such as the proximity ligation assay (described in Trifilieff et al., 2011). Briefly, rolling circle DNA polymerase amplification would occur between oligonucleotide-conjugated antibodies targeting ET$_{A}$ and ET$_{B}$ if the antibodies were in close enough proximity. Labelled complimentary oligonucleotides would then be added to detect the cluster of amplified DNA, allowing the visualization of GPCR dimerization in native tissues. Such experimentation would either confirm or reject the premise that this interaction is physiologically relevant by providing evidence as to whether or not endothelin receptor heterodimerization occurs appreciably in vivo.
While my thesis was carried out using a heterologous expression system, it would be interesting to test vessel function \textit{in situ} in a homozygous ET\textsubscript{B} loss-of-function rat model (Gariepy \textit{et al.}, 1998). This rodent model expresses a mutation that abrogates expression of functional ET\textsubscript{B}. My results, along with those of previous \textit{in vitro} reports, would predict that the endothelin receptor heterodimer increases the contractile response to ET-1 by inhibiting receptor desensitization and prolonging Ca\textsuperscript{2+} transients. The loss of endothelin receptor heterodimerization in vessels isolated from such animals should thus show a more transient contractile response.

Conflictingly, ET\textsubscript{B}-deficient rats have increased systolic blood pressure compared to their wild-type counterparts (Gariepy \textit{et al.}, 2000); this is likely explained by the loss of vasodilating endothelial ET\textsubscript{B}, which would counteract the elimination of heterodimer signaling. This said, the ET\textsubscript{B} loss-of-function rat model contains a deletion in exon 1 of the ET\textsubscript{B} gene, which encodes for transmembrane helices 1 and 2, but the mutant protein is nonetheless expressed (Thakali \textit{et al.}, 2008). This leaves open the alternative possibility that endothelin receptor heterodimerization still occurs in this transgenic model, as the domains thought to be essential to dimerization, namely the PDZ domain of ET\textsubscript{A} and the transmembrane helix 4 of ET\textsubscript{B}, would still yet be present (Evans and Walker, 2008). Techniques that examine GPCR dimerization natively in tissues, such as the aforementioned proximity ligation assay, could resolve this question using this model.
Tissues that co-express both receptor sub-types, such as vascular smooth muscle cells, may potentially contain a large proportion of ETA in dimer with ETB. Circulating ET-1 seems to be elevated with aging in humans (Miyauchi et al., 1992; Fernandez-Cruz et al., 1993); for this reason, vascular endothelin receptor heterodimer inhibition may be an important target in disease conditions common to the aged such as arterial hypertension and cerebral hypoperfusion. ET-1 is more important as a local paracrine factor than as a systemically circulating hormone, and is thus key to proper hemodynamics in vascular beds that rely on mechanisms of auto-regulation, such as resistance arterioles that regulate blood flow to capillaries based on the metabolic needs of surrounding tissues and are the main targetable contribution to peripheral resistance (Dunn and Nelson, 2014). It is apparent that exploring the functions of the endothelin receptor heterodimer will be important in directing endothelin-targeted clinical interventions that have thus far proven challenging (Remuzzi et al., 2002) despite widespread promise in a variety of pathological conditions.
References


Appendix I

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# Appendix II

License for Figure 1.3

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