
Role of Structural and Conformational Diversity for Machine Learning Potentials

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Abstract

1 In the field of Machine Learning Interatomic Potentials (MLIPs), understanding
2 the intricate relationship between data biases, specifically conformational and
3 structural diversity, and model generalization is critical in improving the quality of
4 Quantum Mechanics (QM) data generation efforts. We investigate these dynam-
5 ics through two distinct experiments: a fixed budget one, where the dataset size
6 remains constant, and a fixed molecular set one, which focuses on fixed structural
7 diversity while varying conformational diversity. Our results reveal nuanced pat-
8 terns in generalization metrics. Notably, for optimal structural and conformational
9 generalization, a careful balance between structural and conformational diversity
10 is required, but existing QM datasets do not meet that trade-off. Additionally, our
11 results highlight the limitation of the MLIP models at generalizing beyond their
12 training distribution, emphasizing the importance of defining applicability domain
13 during model deployment. These findings provide valuable insights and guidelines
14 for QM data generation efforts.

15 1 Introduction

16 Molecular Dynamics (MD) simulations are invaluable tools in the realm of drug and material
17 discoveries. They allow a deeper understanding of the dynamic behavior of biomolecules and
18 materials, shedding light on their structures, functions, and intricate interactions between them and
19 other molecules [18, 37]. For instance, in drug discovery, leveraging MD simulations can improve
20 the estimation of ligand-protein binding energies [19] and kinetics [33, 6, 7, 32]. MDs accuracy and
21 reliability are contingent on the precision of the force fields employed to calculate the changes in
22 energy and forces during the simulations. However, due to their inherent approximations, force fields
23 are not accurate enough and improving them requires a significant expertise and parametrization.
24 Consequently, Machine Learning Interatomic Potentials (MLIPs) trained on Quantum Mechanics
25 (QM) data have emerged as a promising solution to these problems.

26 MLIPs have gained popularity in the field of atomistic modeling and simulations over the past decade
27 [5, 38, 20, 43, 41, 22, 1, 40]. Their appeal lies in their trade-off between speed and accuracy, enabling
28 expedited calculations compared to QM methods while maintaining comparable levels of precision.
29 They are mainly enabled by the recent developments in ML modeling for physical systems and
30 the creation and availability of large QM datasets. The first is exemplified by the variety of model
31 architectures and descriptors allowing MLIPs to comprehend the inherent symmetries and biases
32 within atomistic systems and QM modeling [13, 14, 24, 34, 8, 35, 42, 30]. The latter is underscored by
33 the increasing number of efforts to generate and publicly release QM datasets, despite the substantial
34 costs associated with such endeavors [31, 28, 27, 29, 38, 39, 11, 44, 17, 16, 10].

35 The landscape of MLIP models and their inherent biases, as well as their role in generalization, has
36 received some attention in the recent literature [3], whereas data biases, such as the QM level of theory,
37 the number of labeled molecules and conformers, and the diversity in chemical and conformational
38 aspects, have been comparatively under-explored. These data-specific factors significantly affect the
39 accuracy and generalization capabilities of MLIPs. Consequently, the primary focus of this work
40 is to shed light on the implications of data biases, with the goal of providing valuable insights and
41 guidelines for optimizing the trade-off between the cost of data generation and the value it brings to
42 modeling and generalization efforts.

43 **Contributions:** First, we designed and conduct experiments to understand the intricate relationship
44 between dataset size, structural diversity, conformational diversity and model generalization. Second,
45 our analysis of generalization is multifaceted allowing the readers to understand how the performance
46 of MLIPs changes within and outside the training distribution of both conformers and structures.

47 2 Related Works

48 **QM Datasets** Publicly available QM datasets exhibit a wide range of trade-offs between conforma-
49 tional and structural diversity. On one end of the spectrum, we have structurally diverse datasets with
50 no conformational diversity (i.e one conformer per molecule). For instance QM7, QM8, and QM9 [31]
51 respectively comprise 7.1K, 21K, and 133K molecules, each offering only a single energy-minimized
52 conformer per molecule. Larger scale efforts have yielded datasets such as PubchemQC-PM6 [29],
53 PubchemQC-B3LYP/6-31G*/PM6 [27], and Molecule3D [44] which provide a substantial number
54 of molecules—221M, 86M, and 4M, respectively—with a single optimized geometry per molecule
55 and QM properties calculated under various levels of theory.

56 Moving towards the other end of the spectrum, we have collections with a few molecules but hundreds
57 or thousands of conformers per molecule. For example, QM7X [16] extends the QM7 dataset to
58 encompass 4.2M off-equilibrium conformations for 6.9K molecules. Similarly, DES370K and
59 DES5M [10] consist respectively of 370K and 5M dimer conformations from 400 small molecules,
60 computed at various levels of theory.

61 In the middle ground, some data collections have both structural and conformational diversity. ANI
62 [38] and its extensions, ANI-1x and ANI-1ccx [39], offer a substantial dataset of 20M off-equilibrium
63 conformations for 57K unique yet diversified molecules, featuring various levels of theory. Likewise,
64 Spice [11] provides a collection of 1.1M conformers for 19K molecules, and GEOM [2], computed
65 using a semi-empirical method, offers 37M energy-optimized conformers for approximately 450K
66 molecules. Meanwhile, QMugs [17] limits itself to three conformers per molecule for 665K drug-like
67 molecules containing up to 100 atoms. Finally, OrbNet Denali [9] contributes 2.3 million equilibrium
68 and off-equilibrium conformers for 200K molecules.

69 Other aspects of variation among these diverse datasets are presented in Appendix A. Collectively,
70 they illustrate the multifaceted trade-offs, especially between conformational and structural diversity,
71 in the field of QM data generation. They emphasize the critical considerations researchers must make
72 when generating such data or selecting a dataset for training MLIPs.

73 **Data bias and implications:** Only a couple of studies have delved into the role of QM data biases
74 in model generalization. Glavatskikh et al. [15] contrasted QM9 and PC9 which is a subset of
75 PubChemQC [28], that mimics the size constraints and atom types of QM9 but has greater chemical
76 diversity (meaning herein, higher diversity of functional groups, wider bond length distributions and
77 species with multiplicity > 1). The superior generalization of PC9 models suggests that chemical
78 diversity plays a pivotal role in QM model generalization. Frey et al. [12] explored the impact of
79 dataset size on the scaling behavior of invariant GNNs (SchNet [36]) and equivariant GNNs (PaiNN
80 [35] and Allegro [26]). They observed power-law-like scaling behavior in relation to model size, with
81 distinct regimes based on dataset size. Their findings underscore the intricate relationship between
82 dataset size and model complexity in the context of MLIP performance.

83 Unlike the aforementioned works that concentrate on individual data biases, our study delves into
84 multiple biases, namely dataset size, conformational and structural diversity, and their relationships.
85 We also examine various forms of generalization to provide a comprehensive understanding of MLIP
86 capabilities in the face of changing data biases.

87 3 Method

88 Let's consider a QM dataset with N datapoints (conformers), encompassing unique molecular
89 structures, with n_c conformers per molecule ($N = n_s \cdot n_c$). Our investigation seeks to
90 analyze how generalization evolves when altering the dataset size, the structural diversity (n_s),
91 and the conformational diversity (n_c). To give a comprehensive picture of MLIPs generalization,
92 we consider four facets of model performance. In the subsequent sections, we will delve deeper
93 into the methodological setup and elaborate on the chosen generalization metrics. It's important
94 to mention that, for the present study, our definition of diversity is primarily based on the count
95 of unique molecules or conformations within a dataset. However, we intend to expand upon this
96 definition in the future to incorporate measures of similarity as well.

97 3.1 Setup

98 Our investigation comprises two pivotal experiments, each involving the training of MLIPs on
99 simulated QM datasets characterized by distinct values of n_s , n_c . For a visual representation
100 of these experiments, please refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1: Experimental setup: Left. (1) n_c -Fixed: Keeping the number of molecules n_s fixed at 12.5k, 25k, 50k and 100k, we increase the conformer per molecule n_c . Right. (2) n_s -fixed: Keeping the total number of conformers N fixed at 50k, 200k, 800k and 3.2M, we increase the conformer per molecule n_c while decreasing the number of molecules n_s .

101 n_c -fixed experiment: Herein, we replicate a scenario where there is a fixed budget for data generation.
102 Our objective is to investigate the interplay between structural and conformational diversity and its
103 influence on MLIP generalization. By simulating the generation of QM datasets with a constant
104 number of conformers (N), we concurrently vary the values of n_s and n_c . Specifically, as n_s
105 decreases, we proportionally increase n_c by the same factor. To illustrate, for $N = 200K$, we
106 generate datasets with $(n_s = 200K; n_c = 1)$, $(n_s = 100K; n_c = 2)$, $(n_s = 50K; n_c = 4)$,
107 $(n_s = 25K; n_c = 8)$, and $(n_s = 12.5K; n_c = 16)$. This gradual transition spans from a setup
108 featuring low conformational diversity but high structural diversity ($n_s = 200K; n_c = 1$) to one
109 characterized by high conformational diversity and low structural diversity ($n_s = 12.5K; n_c = 16$).
110 By varying $N \in \{50K; 200K; 800K; 3.2M\}$, our aim is to explore the intricate relationship between
111 this trade-off and the generated dataset size.

112 n_s -fixed experiment: This experiment emulates a recent trend in QM data generation, wherein an
113 emphasis is placed on increasing conformational diversity due to its perceived importance in MLIP
114 generalization. Here, our goal is to evaluate the intrinsic impact of conformational diversity on MLIP
115 generalization. To achieve this, we simulate the creation of QM datasets which remains fixed, with
116 values set at 2.5K, 25K, 50K, and 100K, while we systematically increase the value of n_c
117 from 1 to 16. The total number of conformers (N) is de facto increasing with n_c .

118 Note that we do not conduct an experiment where n_c is fixed while n_s increases. This scenario has
119 already been explored by Frey et al[12], Glavatskikh et al[15], and their findings suggest that
120 higher chemical diversity consistently benefits MLIP generalization.

121 3.2 Generalization metrics

122 The distinct aspects of MLIP model performance can be categorized along two axes of generalization.
123 The first axis focuses on the similarity between test samples and the training distribution, distin-
124 guishing between samples that are Independent and Identically Distributed (IID) and those that are
125 Out-of-Distribution (OOD). As data points can exhibit variations along both structural and conforma-
126 tional dimensions, the second axis pertains to differentiating chemical characteristics, encompassing
127 both structural and conformational aspects. Consequently, these axes yield four specific generalization
128 metrics for analysis: IID structural (IID-S), OOD structural (OOD-S), IID conformational (IID-C),
129 and OOD conformational (OOD-C).

130 To calculate the IID-S metric, the test set consists of molecules that share similar physicochemical
131 properties with those in the training set. Conversely, for OOD-S, the test molecules are drawn from a
132 chemical subspace that is distant from the training set. For IID-C and OOD-C metrics, the test sets
133 are composed of novel conformers belonging to molecules encountered during training. To determine
134 whether a conformer is IID-C or OOD-C, we simply compute its minimum Root Mean Square
135 Distance (RMSD) to the training conformers and consider where it falls on that RMSD spectrum.
136 We avoid choosing an arbitrary threshold herein because the spaces of conformers and RMSD are
137 continuous and what is IID or OOD might depend a lot on the molecular energy surface.

138 4 Results

139 4.1 Experimental details

140 **Datasets:** For our experiments, we use the GEOM dataset¹ a large collection comprising 37
141 million conformers covering 450K molecules. It has two subsets: GEOM-QM9 made of 133K small
142 molecules from the QM9 dataset¹¹, with up to 9 heavy atoms (C, N, O, F) and GEOM-Drugs
143 consisting of 317K larger and drug-like molecules. We simulate all our QM data generation by
144 sampling from GEOM-Drugs, and we consider GEOM-QM9 as structurally OOD from it. The
145 structural differences between GEOM-Drugs and GEOM-QM9 are illustrated in Appendix B.

146 **Model Training:** To train our MLIPs, we use the Equivariant Transformer, a component of the
147 TorchMD-NET models^{4,11}. Our model has approximately 2 million parameters with `num_layers=8`
148 and `hidden_channels=128`. Other hyperparameters are left to their default values. We trained
149 with the L2 loss and the Adam optimizer with a cosine annealing scheduler for the learning rate
150 between 10^{-8} and 10^{-4} .

151 **Model Evaluation:** We evaluate the models' performance using the mean absolute error (MAE) on
152 the potential energy. The IID-S metric is computed using unseen molecules from GEOM-Drugs and
153 the OOD-S is computed using molecules from GEOM-QM9 as their chemical space is very different
154 from drug-like molecules. IID-C and OOD-C metrics are computed using molecules that have been
155 seen during training according to criteria described in subsection 3.2.

156 Our experiments are repeated three times using different random seeds, leading to varied data splits
157 and model initializations. For each result, we include error bars to illustrate the standard deviation
158 across these three splits.

159 4.2 Structural generalization

160 Figure 2 presents the structural generalization metrics from the experiment, illustrating their
161 dependence on n_c and, implicitly, on n_s , as the two variables are inversely related in this setup.
162 Across different values of n_c , we observe a gradual increase in IID-S MAE as n_s increases and
163 decreases. Although the rate of this increase is less pronounced for larger values of n_c , there remains
164 a notable two-fold increase in IID-S MAE when structural diversity decreases by a factor of four
165 and $N = 3:2M$. Conversely, OOD-S MAE also shows an increase with rising values of n_c , but
166 these trends are less pronounced across n_c values. This phenomenon can partly be attributed to
167 the inherently larger OOD-S MAEs when compared to IID-S MAEs. In fact, the best IID-S MAEs
168 remain in the low single digits, whereas the best OOD-S MAEs hover around 50 kcal/mol.

¹Implementation as provided in <https://github.com/torchmd/torchmd-net>

Figure 2: N -fixed: Performance on IID-S and OOD-S as we increase the conformational diversity (n_c) and reduce structural diversity (n_s), while keeping number of conformers fixed.

169 Collectively, these results underscore that within fixed budget constraints, the structural generalization capabilities of MLIPs significantly deteriorate when prioritizing conformational diversity over structural diversity. Consequently, one should exercise caution when opting to sacrifice structural diversity in favor of conformational diversity.

Figure 3: n_s -fixed: Performance on IID-S and OOD-S as we increase the conformational diversity (n_c) while keeping structural diversity fixed.

173 Figure 3 shows the structural generalization metrics for the fixed experiment, demonstrating their dependency on n_c and implicitly on N which are proportional in this setup. For lower values of n_s (i.e., $n_s \in [12K; 25K]$), we observe a gradual reduction in both IID-S and OOD-S MAEs as conformational diversity increases. Although the decrease in MAEs is less pronounced for OOD generalization, it remains notably significant. On the other hand, in cases with higher values of n_s (i.e., $n_s \in [50K; 100K]$), both IID-S and OOD-S MAEs decrease rapidly with small increase in conformational diversity but when it increases further, IID-S MAE plateaus and OOD-S MAE begins to increase. These findings suggest that when structural diversity is low, enhancing conformational diversity can be beneficial. However, as structural diversity increases, the advantages of additional conformational diversity diminish significantly.

183 Across both experiments, irrespective of the particular values of n_c and n_s , we consistently observe that IID-S MAEs remain significantly lower than OOD-S MAEs. This emphasizes the MLIP's limited capacity to generalize beyond its training distribution. Therefore, it is imperative for both experimenters and model users to clearly understand the model's structural applicability domain.

187 4.3 Conformational generalization

188 In Figure 4, we delve into conformational generalization in the fixed experiment, examining its dependence on n_c (implicitly n_s). Across all N values, a consistent pattern emerges: the MAE remains relatively stable when the RMSD to the training conformers is below a threshold. However, beyond this threshold, we observe an increase in MAE, followed by a return to near-initial values as RMSD continues to increase. Specifically, the plots reveal a steep MAE increase when RMSD is 5 \AA in scenarios with low conformational diversity ($n_c \leq 4$) but high structural diversity in the

Figure 4: N - xed : Distribution of MAE performance for conformers from both IID-C and OOD-C based on their RMSD from the training distribution. The four plots represent N values (50k, 200k, 800k, and 3.2M) with varying n_c and n_s .

194 training set. Conversely, less steep increases occur when MAE registers between 2.5 Å and 4 Å for
195 high conformational diversity ($n_c = 32$) in the training set. The steepest curves are evident when
196 $n_c = 2$ [8; 16], highlighting the need for a delicate trade-off between structural and conformational
197 diversity to achieve effective generalization to unseen conformers of seen molecules.

198 In Figure 5, we explore conformational generalization in experiments where structural diversity is
199 xed , and conformational diversity varies. Across all N values, we observe consistent MAE values
200 for all RMSD when $n_c = 2$ [8; 16]. However, in low conformational diversity settings (i.e., 4),
201 MAE remains steady when RMSD ≤ 3 Å, but as RMSD increases, so does MAE before gradually
202 decreasing. The steepness of these MAE increases and the maximum values reached are inversely
203 related to conformational diversity. This reaffirms the conclusions drawn from the xed budget
204 experiments: the trade-off between conformational and structural diversity significantly impacts
205 conformational generalization.

206 While our experiments indicate that the optimal number of conformers per molecule for effective
207 generalization across conformers in both IID and OOD, falls between 8 and 16, it's important to
208 note that this may vary based on other experimental factors such as network architecture and the
209 chemical space of the training set. Therefore, experimenters should determine the optimal level of
210 conformational diversity tailored to their specific chemical space and MLIP modeling approach.

211 5 Discussion

212 In the pursuit of developing MLIPs for atomistic modeling, our study delved into the intricate interplay
213 between conformational and structural diversity, data size and model generalization. Through
214 comprehensive experiments, we unraveled key insights that hold significant implications for the
215 MLIP community.

Figure 5: n_s -xed: Distribution of MAE performance for conformers from both IID-C and OOD-C based on their RMSD from the training distribution. The four plots represent n_c values (12k, 25k, 50k, and 100k) with varying n_s and N .

216 In the N -xed experiment, where the dataset size remained constant, we discerned that achieving
217 optimal structural generalization necessitates a delicate equilibrium between structural and conforma-
218 tional diversity. The steep rise in MAEs observed when increasing conformational diversity at the
219 expense of structural diversity highlights the need to strike this balance.

220 Conversely, in the n_s -xed experiment, where structural diversity was kept constant while conforma-
221 tional diversity varied, we observed that the benefits of increased conformational diversity were more
222 pronounced when structural diversity was limited. However, as structural diversity expanded, the
223 advantages of additional conformational diversity diminished, reinforcing the importance of balance.

224 Throughout both experiments, a consistent pattern emerged: the model's generalization capabilities
225 were constrained within its training distribution, as indicated by substantially lower in-distribution
226 MAEs compared to out-of-distribution MAEs. This underscores the crucial need for researchers and
227 model users to define and recognize the model's applicability domain. Furthermore, the nuanced
228 relationships between conformational and structural diversity and their impact on generalization
229 provide a foundation for future advancements in the field, emphasizing the importance of finding the
230 optimal level of diversity tailored to the specific chemical space and MLIP modeling approach.

231 While our study has rigorously explored the influence of data biases on MLIP generalization, it
232 uses a specific architecture and dataset, so we acknowledge the need to enhance the validity of our
233 conclusions. Consequently, we intend to conduct a more extensive analysis that encompasses various
234 MLIP modeling biases and incorporates diverse QM datasets. Our plans involve the utilization of
235 alternative QM datasets, employing improved DFT theory levels, incorporating force labels, and
236 leveraging state-of-the-art MLIP architectures, such as Equiformer and MACE [4]. This broader
237 experimentation will provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of data biases on MLIP
238 generalization, contributing to the advancement of atomistic modeling in various scientific domains.

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356 A QM-Datasets

357 Following table lists down the various publicly available QM-Datasets.

Table 1: List of available QM-Datasets and their data generation characteristics

QM Dataset	Number of Molecules (n_s)	Average Conformers per Molecule (n_c)	Total Conformers (N)	DFT Theory Level	Atom Types
GEOM [2]	450,000	82	37,000,000	GFN2-xTB	18
PubchemQC-PM6 [27]	221,190,415	1	221,190,415	PM6	5
PubchemQC- [29]	85,938,443	1	85,938,443	B3LYP/6-31G*//PM6	5
Molecule3D [44]	3,899,647	1	3,899,647	B3LYP/6-31G*	5
NablaDFT [21]	1,000,000	5	5,000,000	/ B97X-D/def2-SVP	6
QMugs [17]	665,000	3	2,000,000	GFN2-xTB; / B97X-D/def2-SVP	10
Spice [11]	19,238	59	1,132,808	/ B97M-D3(BJ)/def2-TZVPPD	15
ANI [38, 39]	57,462	348	20,000,000	/ B97x:6-31G(d)	4
DES370K [10]	3,700	100	370,000	CCSD(T)	20
DES5M [10]	3,700	1351	5,000,000	SNS-MP2	20
OrbNet Denali [9]	212,905	11	2,3000,000	GFN1-xTB	16
QM7-X [16]	6,970	604	4,200,000	PBE0+MBD	6

358 B Structural differences between GEOM-Drugs and GEOM-QM9 359 Distribution

360 To illustrate the structural differences between the drug-like molecules from GEOM-Drugs and the
 361 small molecules from GEOM-QM9, we create fingerprints for each molecule using the fingerprint
 362 function from the datamol library [25]. Subsequently, we extracted two principal components from
 363 these fingerprints using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The resulting principal components
 364 were then plotted, revealing a noticeable separation between clusters representing GEOM-Drugs and
 365 GEOM-QM9 molecules.

