

Using Colour-Magnitude-Diagrams to Study the Evolution of Young Stellar Populations

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Signed:
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Abstract

Timescales for stellar evolution and star and planet formation are critical to provide constraints on theories. The accuracy of these timescales, and therefore our ability to confidently reject a given model, rely on the accuracy of the derived ages for star-forming-regions (SFRs). In this study I have developed the new techniques and adopted or updated the existing techniques necessary to derive precise age orders for a range of SFRs.

Deriving precise ages for SFRs requires precise distances and extinctions. I have applied a new technique, τ^2 fitting (Naylor & Jeffries, 2006), to derive a set of self-consistent and statistically robust distances (and mean extinctions), with associated uncertainties for 12 SFRs. I have also revised and formalised a widely used method of deriving individual extinctions, the Q-method (Johnson & Morgan, 1953). These new data show that the largest remaining uncertainty in deriving distances to SFRs is composition.

Deriving ages or age orders for pre-main-sequence (pre-MS) populations using pre-MS theoretical isochrones has been shown to be unreliable at present (Naylor et al., 2002; Bonatto et al., 2004; Pinsonneault et al., 2004), largely due to model dependencies and spreads within a colour-magnitude diagram (CMD). Therefore, I have developed a technique to model the pre-MS, generating **empirical isochrones**, which effectively removes spreads in pre-MS populations in a CMD.

The derived distances and extinctions have been applied to the empirical isochrones, enabling the creation of an age ordered ladder in intrinsic colour and absolute magnitude. This has been calibrated using ages for fiducial sequences and nominal ages assigned to the separable groups, which are as follows:

- 1 Myr, NGC2244 and IC5146.
- 2 Myrs, NGC6530 and the ONC.
- 3 Myrs, λ Ori, Cep OB3b, NGC2264 and σ Ori.
- 4 – 5 Myrs, NGC2362 and IC348.
- 10 Myrs, NGC7160.
- 13 Myrs, h and χ Per.
- 20 Myrs, NGC1960.
- 40 Myrs, NGC2547.

Once assigned the nominal ages and age orders were combined with ancillary data to investigate rotation rate and disc evolution. The general trends of rotation rate distribution evolution and disc fraction changes with age confirmed existing estimates for the disc survival, and therefore star-disc interaction through disc-locking, with a timescale of ≈ 5 Myrs. However, this study also revealed some of the first evidence of local environment effects. IC348 appears ‘out of sequence’ in both the rotation rate distribution and disc fraction. Specifically, IC348 has a larger disc fraction than expected at its nominal age and exhibits a rotation rate distribution expected from a much younger SFR (i.e. the ONC). This could be a consequence of the lower number density of O stars (none exist in IC348) and therefore a lower density of *UV* flux, which acts to hasten disc dissipation.

Finally, a potentially important feature of stellar populations in a CMD, the R-C gap was identified. This separation in a CMD of the fully convective pre-MS and main-sequence (MS) stars with radiative cores was found to vary as a function of age. As the R-C gap is also measurable in colour it provides a distance independent age indicator. I have explained the underlying physics of the R-C gap and discussed possible applications of this phase change of the stellar interior. In addition, an overlap between the pre-MS and MS sections of the R-C gap was apparent in all SFRs where the R-C gap could be unambiguously identified. This R-C gap overlap shows that the studied SFRs must contain a **spread in isochronal** ages. However, the interpretation of this spread is dependent on the underlying assumptions. If one assumes stars form by a robust slow-star-formation (SSF) mechanism and isochronal ages represent the true age of a star, then these spreads can be construed as true age spreads. Alternatively, if one adopts a rapid-star-formation model (RSF), this spread can be explained as a variation in accretion histories of the constituent stars. As found by Siess et al. (1999) and Tout et al. (1999) accretion can act to accelerate pre-MS star evolution, meaning the isochronal age does not represent the true age of the star. This increases the advantages of empirical isochrones and age ordering over the derivation of individual ages for SFRs. Indeed, this R-C gap overlap could be used to ‘normalise out’ any spread in age or accretion history and therefore increase the power of derived age orders.

Contents

1	Introduction	26
2	Star formation and evolution	28
2.1	General principles	29
2.1.1	Timescale of collapse	29
2.1.2	Simple stellar lifetimes	30
2.2	Core collapse models	31
2.2.1	Slow star formation	31
2.2.2	Rapid star formation	32
2.2.2.1	Problems with the standard model	32
2.2.2.2	Forming GMCs	33
2.3	Summary	34
2.4	Evolution of young stellar objects	34
2.4.1	Rotation during collapse	34
2.4.2	Pre-main-sequence stars	35
2.4.2.1	High-mass pre-MS	36
2.4.2.2	Low-mass pre-MS	36
2.5	Evolution of the pre-main-sequence	37
2.5.1	Angular momentum evolution	38
2.5.1.1	Main-sequence stars	39
2.5.1.2	Pre-MS stars and disc locking	41
2.5.1.2.1	pre-MS stars	41
2.5.1.2.2	Very LM stars	42
2.5.1.3	Recent evidence for disc locking	43
2.6	Disc dissipation	44
2.6.1	Local environment effects	44
2.7	Summary	45
3	Theory to observation	46
3.1	Where do stars form?	46
3.2	The HR diagram	47
3.3	The colour-magnitude diagram	51
3.4	Membership selection	53

3.4.1	pre-MS star selection	53
3.4.1.1	Photometric CMD selection	53
3.4.1.2	IR excess or disc indicators	54
3.4.1.3	H α	56
3.4.1.4	X rays	56
3.4.1.5	Periodic variability	56
3.4.1.6	Li	57
3.4.2	Kinematic selection methods	59
3.4.3	Proper motions	60
3.4.4	Radial velocity	60
3.5	Summary	61
3.6	Timescales and ages from a CMD	61
3.6.1	Degeneracies	62
3.6.1.1	Distance fitting	62
3.6.1.2	Extinction fitting	64
3.6.2	Ages	65
3.6.2.1	HM ages, nuclear or turn-off ages	65
3.6.2.2	pre-MS ages, turn-on or contraction ages	66
3.7	Summary	67
4	Deriving Distances and Extinctions	68
4.1	Introduction	68
4.2	Sample characterisation: Literature distances, extinctions and nominal ages	69
4.2.1	h and χ Per	69
4.2.2	NGC2547	70
4.2.3	The ONC	70
4.2.4	NGC2264	71
4.2.5	σ Ori	71
4.2.6	NGC7160	72
4.2.7	Cep OB3b	72
4.2.8	IC348	72
4.2.9	λ Ori	72
4.2.10	NGC2362	73
4.2.11	IC5146	73
4.2.12	NGC6530	73
4.2.13	NGC1960	74
4.2.14	NGC2244	74
4.3	The data	76
4.3.1	Memberships and photometric cuts	76
4.3.1.1	The turn-off cut	76
4.3.1.2	The turn-on cut	77
4.3.1.3	Fitted stars	79

4.4	The models	88
4.4.1	Geneva	90
4.4.2	Geneva-Bessell	90
4.4.3	Padova-Bessell	90
4.4.4	Extinction vectors in the Bessell system	90
4.4.4.1	The extinction dependence of the extinction vector	91
4.4.5	<i>TYCHO</i> photometry	91
4.5	Fitting	91
4.5.1	Fitting statistic	92
4.5.1.1	τ^2 definition	92
4.5.1.2	A generalised χ^2	93
4.5.2	Example distance fit: χ Per	93
4.5.2.1	Mean extinction fitting	94
4.5.3	Practical effect of assumptions	97
4.5.3.1	Age assumption	97
4.5.3.2	MS isochrones for a possible pre-MS population	99
4.5.3.3	Composition	99
4.6	Individual intrinsic colours	99
4.6.1	The ONC	100
4.6.2	h and χ Per	100
4.6.3	Q-method	100
4.6.3.1	NGC6530, NGC2244 and λ Orionis	100
4.6.3.2	Pseudo-MS straight line	101
4.6.3.3	Extinction vectors	102
4.6.4	Revised Q-method	102
4.6.4.1	Stationary or inflection point	103
4.6.4.2	Age assumption	103
4.6.4.3	Metallicity	104
4.6.4.4	Binarity	104
4.6.5	Example of SFRs with significant variable reddening	105
4.7	Model dependency	116
4.8	Results	118
4.8.1	Notes on results	122
4.9	Implications	122
4.9.1	Individual Distances	122
4.9.1.1	The ONC	122
4.9.1.2	σ Orionis	138
4.9.1.3	NGC2547	138
4.9.1.4	NGC2244	138
4.9.1.5	NGC2362	139
4.9.1.6	h and χ Per	139

4.9.2	Metallicity	139
4.10	Summary	139
5	Empirical isochrones, modeling the pre-MS	141
5.1	Introduction	141
5.2	Data collection	142
5.2.1	New observations	142
5.2.2	Data reduction	142
5.2.3	Literature data	146
5.3	Sequence isolation	146
5.3.1	Literature memberships	147
5.3.1.1	NGC2264	147
5.3.1.2	NGC2547	149
5.3.1.3	ONC	149
5.3.1.4	NGC7160	149
5.3.1.5	σ Ori	149
5.3.1.6	Cep OB3b	150
5.3.1.7	IC348	151
5.3.1.8	λ Ori	152
5.3.1.9	NGC2362	153
5.3.1.10	IC5146	153
5.3.1.11	NGC6530	153
5.3.1.12	NGC2244	153
5.3.1.13	Biases and summary	153
5.3.2	Isolating the sequence without memberships	154
5.3.2.1	h and χ Per: an example	154
5.3.2.2	NGC1960	157
5.4	Fitting procedure	157
5.4.1	NGC2264: an example	157
5.4.2	NGC2547	158
5.4.3	ONC	161
5.4.4	NGC7160	163
5.4.5	σ Ori	163
5.4.6	Cep OB3b	163
5.4.7	IC348	163
5.4.8	h and χ Per	166
5.4.9	NGC1960	166
5.4.10	λ Ori, NGC2362, IC5146, NGC6530 and NGC2244	168
5.5	Summary	168

6	Age orders, nominal ages and the R-C gap	173
6.1	Data comparison	173
6.1.1	Sequence spreads	173
6.2	R-C gap and the R-C gap overlap	175
6.2.1	Evidence for a gap in a V , $V-I$ CMD	176
6.2.2	The origin of the R-C gap	177
6.2.3	Age spreads and the R-C gap overlap	179
6.3	Age orders	185
6.3.1	Theory comparison	185
6.3.2	Age ladder	186
6.3.2.1	NGC2244	188
6.3.2.2	IC5146	189
6.3.2.3	NGC6530	189
6.3.2.4	The ONC	189
6.3.2.5	λ Ori	191
6.3.2.6	Cep OB3b	191
6.3.2.7	NGC2264	194
6.3.2.8	σ Ori	194
6.3.2.9	NGC2362	194
6.3.2.10	IC348	197
6.3.2.11	NGC7160 and h and χ Persei	197
6.3.2.12	NGC1960 and NGC2547	197
6.3.3	Age groups	200
6.3.4	Comparison with literature ages	200
6.3.4.1	Nominal age of ≈ 1 Myr	203
6.3.4.1.1	NGC2244	203
6.3.4.1.2	IC5146	203
6.3.4.2	Nominal age of ≈ 2 Myrs	203
6.3.4.2.1	The ONC	203
6.3.4.2.2	NGC6530	203
6.3.4.3	Nominal age of ≈ 3 Myrs	204
6.3.4.3.1	λ Ori	204
6.3.4.3.2	Cep OB3b	204
6.3.4.3.3	NGC2264	204
6.3.4.3.4	σ Ori	204
6.3.4.4	Nominal age of $\approx 4-5$ Myrs	204
6.3.4.4.1	IC348	204
6.3.4.4.2	NGC2362	204
6.3.4.5	Older SFRs	204
6.3.4.5.1	NGC7160	205
6.3.4.5.2	h and χ Persei	205

6.3.4.5.3	NGC1960	205
6.3.4.5.4	NGC2547	205
6.3.5	Summary	205
6.4	Secular Evolution	206
6.4.1	Rotational period distributions	206
6.4.2	Disc dissipation	206
6.4.3	Local environment	212
6.5	Summary	212
7	Conclusions and future work	214
7.1	Conclusions	214
7.2	Future Work	216
7.2.1	Extending introduced techniques	216
7.2.2	Further studies	217
7.2.2.1	Metallicity	217
7.2.2.2	R-C gap	217
7.2.2.3	Initial mass functions	217

List of Figures

3.1	Figure of HR diagram showing the MS and post-MS phases. From URL: http://www.math.lsa.umich.edu/mmss/coursesONLINE/Astro/Ex1.2/HR.htm . The pre-MS stars will appear above and to the right of the main sequence.	48
3.2	Figure of HR diagram of the pre-MS models of Baraffe et al. (2001a). For masses $0.2 - 1.2M_{\odot}$. Isochrones are the solid lines showing ages of 1, 5, 10 and 50 Myrs. A ZAMS down to $M = 0.075M_{\odot}$ is also shown as the lowest solid line. The dashed lines are the evolutionary tracks.	49
3.3	Filter responses as a function of wavelength for <i>Johnson-Cousins-Glass UBVR</i> and <i>2MASS JHK</i> . Figure made from figures in Bessell (2005).	52
3.4	A schematic of a CTTS pre-MS star showing the disc, accretion columns, infalling envelope and central star from Hartmann (2001).	54
3.5	A CMD of h and χ Persei combined and adjusted to absolute magnitude and intrinsic colour. This figure shows a strong MS blue-ward and brighter than the contamination, then a pre-MS joining this in the contamination. The post-MS stars evolving red-ward and brighter than the MS are shown and the giant branch of large (bright) and cool (red) stars.	55
3.6	A CMD showing direction of the distance (d_m) variable, vertical blue dashed line. The direction of the extinction (A_V in this plane), red dotted line. pre-MS mass tracks from Siess et al. (2000) for Masses $M_{\star} = 0.13, 0.16, 0.2, 0.25, 0.3 - 2.0$ ($\Delta M_{\star} = 0.1$) and $2.2, 2.5, 2.7, 3.0, 3.5, 4, 5, 6$ and $7M_{\odot}$, bold black lines. The mass tracks are bounded by the ZAMS and 0.1 Myr isochrones from Siess et al. (2000). Finally, the MS HM isochrones of Girardi et al. (2002) for 1 and 20 Myr, green dashed lines, with the turn-off for 20 Myrs shown. This figure shows that for HM fitting distance is degenerate with extinction only, and for LM or pre-MS fitting distance is degenerate with age only.	62
3.7	The MS isochrone distance fit to the Pleiades from Stauffer et al. (2007).	64
3.8	The extinction as a function of wavelength from URL: www.astro.livjm.ac.uk/courses/phys134/magcol.html .	65
3.9	A schematic showing the fitting of a cluster sequence to an isochrone in a colour-colour diagram. This has been modified from the original source at URL: http://xoomer.alice.it/hrtrace/Geberal_Info_Wd_file/Geb1.png .	66

- 4.1 1, 3, 5, 15 and 20 Myr isochrones from Siess et al. (2000) showing the MS, and pre-MS. $B - V$ colour cuts are shown for each age to isolate the MS. These are: -0.17, -0.1, -0.06 and 0.2 for 1, 3, 5, and older sequences respectively. 78
- 4.2 NGC1960. Photometry of Johnson & Morgan (1953) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the photometric cut used for the distance determination. 79
- 4.3 NGC2264. Photometry of Mendoza V. & Gomez (1980) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 80
- 4.4 NGC2362. Photometry of Johnson & Morgan (1953) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 81
- 4.5 NGC2547. Photometry of members from Claria (1982a) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 82
- 4.6 NGC6530. Photometry of Sung et al. (2000) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 83
- 4.7 χ Per: Photometry of stars defined as members in Slesnick et al. (2002) and within $2'$ (radius) of ($\alpha=2\ 22'\ 5.02''$ $\delta=+57\ 7'\ 43.44''$) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the photometric cut used. 84
- 4.8 h Per. Photometry of stars defined as members in Slesnick et al. (2002) and within $2'$ (radius) of ($\alpha=2\ 18'\ 58.76''$ $\delta=+57\ 8'\ 16.54''$) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the photometric cut used. 85

- 4.9 λ Ori. Photometry of Murdin & Penston (1977) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 86
- 4.10 NGC2244. Photometry of Park & Sung (2002) plotted as dots, with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks and the stars used for extinction derivation circled. Filled circles therefore represent stars used for both distance and extinction derivation. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 87
- 4.11 The ONC. Photometry of Hillenbrand (1997) plotted as dots with the stars used for the distance derivation appearing as asterisks. Here the stars have been cut using the T_{eff} values. 88
- 4.12 σ Ori. Photometry of Caballero (2007) plotted as dots with the stars used for the distance derivation plotted as asterisks. The bold line is the empirical photometric cut and the dashed line is position of the turn-on predicted by theory. 89
- 4.13 The distance fit for χ Per to the Geneva-Bessell isochrones. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 95
- 4.14 τ_v^2 value shown as a function of distance modulus. With minima at $dm \approx 11.79$ and 11.83 and an inflection point at $dm \approx 11.76$. Towards lower distance moduli the slope is much sharper than the shallow incline towards higher distance moduli. These features are discussed in Section 4.5.2. 96
- 4.15 Figure showing $E(B - V)$ fit of χ Per to the Geneva-Bessell isochrones. See Section 4.5.2.1 for details of the symbols. Here a systematic shift in $E(B - V)$ as a function of colour ($U - B$) is evident, as in Figure 4.37. This is probably due to a difference in the photometric systems of Bessell et al. (1998) and Slesnick et al. (2002) (see Section 4.6.3). The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 98
- 4.16 Geneva isochrones of 1 and 30 Myrs (limited to $30M_{\odot}$ and $7M_{\odot}$ respectively, the masses at which stars depart the pseudo-MS for these ages) showing the negligible shift of the MS line with age, the inflection point and the shift in the post-MS section. The bold lines are the validity ranges for the reddest stars, with the dashed lines the upper validity ranges for the bluest stars, for the two different age isochrones. Approximate validity ranges for different age isochrones for straight lines drawn from these isochrones are shown in Table 4.4. 103
- 4.17 10 Myr Geneva isochrones of $Z = 0.02$ and $Z = 0.008$, the line are almost coincident until the inflection point. 104

- 4.18 Geneva-Bessell 10 Myr isochrones with the outer binary envelope (gray region enclosed by black line) and the Q-method straight MS line (red line). The horizontal dashed lines are the points at which the Geneva-Bessell isochrones evolve away from the MS (see Figure 4.16). The horizontal bold lines are the validity region of the original Q-method given in Johnson & Morgan (1953). The two angled dotted lines are the extinction vectors of Bessell et al. (1998) at each end of the Q-method validity range. Finally, the large dashed line shows the region below which (redder $U - B$) the solution for a given star can be multi-valued. The inset figure shows the approximate differences in derived A_V . The top dashed line is the revised Q-method minus the old Q-method, the lower dashed line is that derived from the outer binary envelope minus the old Q-method, and the bold line is that derived from the binary envelope minus the revised Q-method to the single star sequence. 106
- 4.19 NGC6530 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 107
- 4.20 NGC2244 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 108
- 4.21 λ Ori $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 109
- 4.22 NGC6530 distance fit using mean extinction, the fit for which is shown as Figure 4.19. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 110
- 4.23 NGC2244 distance fit using mean extinction, the fit for which is shown as Figure 4.20. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 111
- 4.24 λ Ori distance fit using the mean extinction, the fit for which is shown as Figure 4.21. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 112

4.25	NGC6530: photometry of Sung et al. (2000). Dots show the stars apparent colour and magnitude and the crosses are the stars positions after application of individual extinctions derived using our revised Q-method.	113
4.26	NGC2244: photometry of Park & Sung (2002). Dots show the stars apparent colours and magnitudes and the crosses are the stars positions after application of individual extinctions derived using our revised Q-method.	114
4.27	λ Ori: photometry of Murdin & Penston (1977). Dots show the stars apparent colours and magnitudes and the crosses are the stars positions after application of individual extinctions derived using our revised Q-method.	115
4.28	The distances and uncertainties (68% confidence intervals) derived for all SFRs and all isochrones, where a mean extinction has been derived. The results shown for each cluster are for, from left to right, Geneva (0) (blue), Geneva Bessell (0) (black), Padova Bessell (0) (red), Geneva Bessell ($\neq 0$) (green) and Padova Bessell ($\neq 0$) (yellow). All the resulting distances agree within the uncertainties for all models.	119
4.29	NGC6530 distance fit using Q-method extinctions (see Section 4.6.3). Figure shown in intrinsic colour and extinction corrected magnitude. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. . . .	123
4.30	NGC2244 distance fit using Q-method extinctions (see Section 4.6.3). Figure shown in intrinsic colour and extinction corrected magnitude. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. . . .	124
4.31	λ Ori distance fit using the Q-method extinctions (see Section 4.6.3). Figure shown in intrinsic colour and extinction corrected magnitude. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available.	125
4.32	NGC2264 distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available.	126
4.33	NGC2264 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available.	127

- 4.34 NGC2362 distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 128
- 4.35 NGC2362 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 129
- 4.36 h Per distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 130
- 4.37 h Per $E(B - V)$ fit. Here a systematic shift in $E(B - V)$ as a function of colour ($U - B$) is evident. This is probably due to a difference in the photometric systems of Bessell et al. (1998) and Slesnick et al. (2002) (see Section 4.6.3). The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. . . . 131
- 4.38 NGC1960 distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 132
- 4.39 NGC1960 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 133
- 4.40 NGC2547 distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 134
- 4.41 NGC2547 $E(B - V)$ fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 135
- 4.42 The ONC distance fit. Figure shown in intrinsic colour and extinction corrected magnitude. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available. 136

4.43	σ Orionis distance fit. The colour bar shows the probability density (ρ from Naylor & Jeffries, 2006) for the contours in the figure, generated using the isochrone. The circles are the positions of the photometric points with the bars showing the uncertainties where available.	137
5.1	The difference in $V - I$ for Cep OB3b between data taken in the system used here and using Cousins I filter. The line is the best fit through the data.	147
5.2	The full catalogue for the NGC2264 field (dots). Circles are the periodic variables from Lamm et al. (2004), asterisks are X-ray sources from Flaccomio et al. (1999) and crosses are $H\alpha$ sources from Dahm & Simon (2005).	148
5.3	The full catalogue for the σ Ori field (dots). Circles are members from Burningham et al. (2005b), while asterisks are X-ray sources from Sanz-Forcada et al. (2004). Crosses are members from Kenyon et al. (2005).	150
5.4	The full catalogue for the Cep OB3b field (dots). Asterisks are X-ray sources from Naylor & Fabian (1999), Getman et al. (2006) and the Second ROSAT PSPC catalogue. Triangles are members from Pozzo et al. (2003). Circles are $H\alpha$ sources from Ogura et al. (2002). Crosses are the periodic variables from Littlefair et al. (2005).	151
5.5	The full catalogue for the IC348 field (dots) The asterisks are X-ray sources from Preibisch & Zinnecker (2002) and the Second ROSAT PSPC catalogue. Circles are the periodic variables from Cohen et al. (2004) and Littlefair et al. (2005). Crosses are $H\alpha$ sources from Herbig (1998). Triangles are spectroscopic members with extinctions from Luhman et al. (2003) and Herbig (1998).	152
5.6	The full catalogue for the h and χ Per field (dots). The dotted line shows a colour-magnitude selection of $V < 14$ th, showing the sequence clear of the contamination. The solid line is the best fitting spline, described in Section 5.4 to the selected sequence corrected to the mean extinction for the two clusters.	156
5.7	The positions of stars in the h and χ Per catalogue. Asterisks are stars with $V < 14$ th, and the large circles show the regions selected.	157
5.8	Stars selected as members of NGC2264. Circles are the periodic variables from Lamm et al. (2004), asterisks are X-ray sources from Flaccomio et al. (1999), crosses are $H\alpha$ sources from Dahm & Simon (2005) and triangles are proper motion members from Mendoza V. & Gomez (1980). The spline fit to the sequence after a colour-magnitude selection is shown.	159
5.9	The effect of choosing a wider colour-magnitude selection in NGC2264. The effect is limited by the large number of sources within the sequence. The dashed curve is the result using no selection, with the dotted line being the colour-magnitude selection and the solid line the spline fit after the colour-magnitude selection is enforced i.e. only stars above the line were used to produce the spline curve.	160

- 5.10 The full catalogue for the NGC2547 field (dots). Asterisks are the X-ray sources from Jeffries & Tolley (1998), circles are spectroscopic members from Jeffries & Oliveira (2005). The X-ray sources, some of which clearly lie in the BG MS contamination were removed using a colour-magnitude cut prior to fitting, shown here as the dotted blue line. 161
- 5.11 The ONC photometry from Hillenbrand (1997) (dots). Circles are objects which are periodic variables from Herbst et al. (2002). The asterisks are X-ray sources from Flaccomio et al. (2003). The best fit spline through all data points is also shown. 162
- 5.12 The full catalogue for the NGC7160 field (dots). Circles are members from Sicilia-Aguilar et al. (2004) and Sicilia-Aguilar et al. (2005). 163
- 5.13 Stars selected as members in σ Ori. Circles are Burningham et al. (2005b) members. Asterisks are X-ray sources from Sanz-Forcada et al. (2004). Crosses are members from Kenyon et al. (2005). The fitted spline curve is shown. The colour-magnitude selection is shown as the dotted line. 164
- 5.14 Stars selected as members in Cep OB3b. Asterisks are X-ray sources from Naylor & Fabian (1999), Getman et al. (2006) and the second PSPC catalogue. Triangles are members from Pozzo et al. (2003). Circles are $H\alpha$ sources from Ogura et al. (2002). Crosses are the periodic variables from Littlefair et al. (2005). The fitted spline curve is shown. 165
- 5.15 Stars selected as members in IC348. The asterisks are X-ray sources from Preibisch & Zinnecker (2002) and the Second ROSAT PSPC catalogue. Circles are the periodic variables from Cohen et al. (2004) and Littlefair et al. (2005). Crosses are $H\alpha$ sources from Herbig (1998). Triangles are spectroscopic members with extinctions from Luhman et al. (2003) and Herbig (1998). Individual extinctions from Luhman et al. (2003) and Herbig (1998) have been applied before fitting. The colour-magnitude selection is shown as the dotted line. 166
- 5.16 Stars within 2 arcmin radius of the centres of η and χ Per. Stars in the η Per region have been shifted in extinction to match those χ Per. The dotted lines are the colour-magnitude cuts used, and the solid curve the best fitting spline. 167
- 5.17 This spline curve lies around 0.3 mags above the sequence due to a clear binary sequence. 168
- 5.18 Stars selected as members in λ Ori. The dots are Li members from Dolan & Mathieu (2001). 169
- 5.19 Stars selected as members in IC5146. Dots are likely pre-MS members from Herbig & Dahm (2002). Asterisks are $H\alpha$ members from Herbig & Dahm (2002) with known spectral types excluding stars lying below the Pleiades MS. Only the asterisks were fitted. 170
- 5.20 Stars selected as members in NGC2244. The dots are X-ray sources showing $H\alpha$ emission from Berghöfer & Christian (2002). 171

5.21	Stars selected as members in NGC2362. The dots are $H\alpha$ and spectroscopically confirmed pre-MS members from Dahm (2005).	171
5.22	The photometry of NGC6530 from Prisinzano et al. (2005) (dots). Crosses are X-ray sources from Prisinzano et al. (2005). Circles are weak $H\alpha$ stars from Sung et al. (2000). Asterisks are strong $H\alpha$ stars from Sung et al. (2000).	172
6.1	The likely PMS objects for fields of different ages, plotted in dereddened colours and absolute magnitudes. The spread in absolute colour magnitude space clearly decreases as age increases. The ZAMS and isochrones of approximately the correct age from Siess et al. (2000) are shown.	174
6.2	Dots are the combined photometric catalogue of NGC2264, photometry from Chapter 5 and > 90% members from Mendoza V. & Gomez (1980). The crosses are $H\alpha$ emitters from Dahm & Simon (2005). The locus of the $H\alpha$ emitting stars does not lie below the locus of the whole sequence. Meaning active accretion is not likely to play a major role in sequence spreads.	175
6.3	The histograms showing the number of stars as a function of intrinsic colour ($(V - I)_0$). For the young SFRs where the R-C gap is almost horizontal the stars have been collapsed onto the x-axis. For h and χ Per the stars have been collapsed onto the spline, as the R-C gap is diagonal in CMD space and using the x-axis effectively foreshortens the gap. The vertical dashed line shows the approximate central position expected for the R-C gap in each SFR, estimated from the CMD. For the ONC, NGC2264 and h and χ Per a simple statistical treatment confirms the observation of a gap at the expected position to the 10σ , 12.5σ and 6.7σ level respectively. For σ Ori only a decrease in the number of stars is seen. Note, in this simple example the effects of saturation and completeness have not been accounted for, however, for the three clear cases these effects could not cause the gap or drop in density. Further characterisation of the gap will be undertaken in future work.	178
6.4	Isochrones (solid blue lines) from Siess et al. (2000) for the approximate ages of the four fields in Figure 6.1; 1, 3, 4 and 13 Myrs and two bounding isochrones, the ZAMS and 0.1 Myrs as a lower bound. Mass tracks (dashed lines) are show for 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.2, 1.0, and $0.8M_{\odot}$. The evolution between 1 and 3 Myrs of 3 and $1M_{\odot}$ stars are shown as filled circles, with the tracks highlighted in red.	179
6.5	The ONC with a Geneva-Bessell 1 Myr MS isochrone and the Pre-MS isochrones of Siess et al. (2000) for 1, 3 and 10 Myrs. Stars appear to lie at the turn-on for an age of 10 Myr.	180
6.6	χ Per with a Geneva-Bessell 13 Myr MS isochrone (dashed line) and the pre-MS isochrones of Siess et al. (2000) for 13 and 23 Myrs (bold lines). Stars appear to lie below the turn-on and above and blueward of the turn-off for an age of 13 Myr .	181

- 6.7 Absolute magnitude as a function of intrinsic colour for stars in the ONC and NGC2264 adjusted using a extinctions and distances from Chapter 4. The blue dots are the ONC and the red dots are NGC2264. The locus of points for NGC2264 can be seen to lay below the ONC, however the MS section is very similar in extent for each SFR, i.e. the turn-on appears coincident. The pre-MS isochrones from Siess et al. (2000) are shown for 1 and 3 Myrs. Most importantly in the MS section stars from both populations extend below the turn-ons and for both SFRs the peak of the MS (brightest stars) is similar i.e. the turn-offs do not appear significantly different, although this is based on only a few stars. 184
- 6.8 A sample of the empirical isochrones. Youngest to oldest, the ONC, NGC7160 and h and χ Per. The *left* panel is the empirical isochrones in an absolute V , $V-I$ CMD, with the lowest curve the ZAMS relation of Siess et al. (2000). The *right* panel is the ZAMS subtracted space; at a given V the ZAMS $V-I$ is subtracted from the $V-I$ of the spline. 185
- 6.9 The selected members for the ONC, Cep OB3b, h and χ Per and NGC2547. The solid line is the empirical isochrone. The dashed line is the best fit isochrone (by eye) from Siess et al. (2000) (≈ 1 , ≈ 3 , ≈ 13 and ≈ 16 Myrs respectively). The sequences and empirical isochrones can be seen to move away from the theoretical counterparts to varying degrees. 187
- 6.10 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC2244, bounded by the dashed line of IC5146, with NGC1960 shown as a representative older cluster. The dots show stars in the MS section of the NGC2244 sequence, which lies redward of the empirical MS, most probably due to an underestimate of the extinction to this cluster. 188
- 6.11 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of IC5146, bounded by the dashed lines of NGC2244 and NGC6530, with NGC1960 shown as a representative older cluster. The dots show stars in the MS section of the IC5146 sequence. 189
- 6.12 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC6530, bounded by the dashed lines of IC5146 and the ONC, with NGC1960 shown as a representative older cluster. The dots show stars in the MS section of the sequence. 190
- 6.13 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of the ONC, bounded by the dashed lines of IC5146 and Cep OB3b, with NGC1960 showing a lower bound. The dots show stars in the MS section of the sequence. 191
- 6.14 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of λ Ori, bounded by the dashed lines of IC5146 and Cep OB3b, with NGC1960 showing a representative older cluster. 192
- 6.15 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of Cep OB3b, bounded by the dashed lines of IC5146 and NGC2264, with NGC1960 showing a representative older cluster. 193
- 6.16 The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC2264, bounded by the dashed lines of the ONC and σ Ori, with NGC1960 showing a representative older cluster. The dots show stars in the MS section of the sequence. 194

6.17	The solid line is the empirical isochrone of σ Ori, bounded by the dashed lines of the ONC and NGC2362, with NGC1960 showing a representative older cluster.	195
6.18	The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC2362, bounded by the dashed lines of NGC2264 and IC348, with NGC1960 showing a representative older cluster.	196
6.19	The solid line is the empirical isochrone of IC348, bounded by the dashed lines of NGC2264 and NGC1960.	197
6.20	The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC7160, bounded by the dashed lines of the ONC and χ Per.	198
6.21	The solid line is the empirical isochrone of NGC1960, bounded by the dashed lines of the ONC and NGC2547.	199
6.22	The solid lines are the empirical isochrone of the ONC at the largest and smallest distance modulus. The two bounding dashed lines are that of IC5146 at it's closest distance and Cep OB3b at it's farthest distance. The lowest dashed line shows the NGC1960 as a representative older cluster. Even using the SFRs with the most uncertain distances, which are twice that of any other, only Cep OB3b just changes by one group.	201
6.23	The solid lines are the empirical isochrone of Cep OB3 at the largest and smallest distance modulus. The two bounding dashed lines are that of the ONC at its closest distance and IC348 at its farthest distance. The lowest dashed line shows the NGC1960 as a representative older cluster. Again even using the SFRs with the most uncertain distances, which are twice that of any other, only Cep OB3b changes by just one group.	202
6.24	Distribution of rotation periods for stars with $M > 0.25M_{\odot}$ in the ONC. The distribution is clearly bi-modal. This figure has been adapted from Figure 10 in Littlefair et al. (2005).	207
6.25	Distribution of rotation periods for stars with $M > 0.25M_{\odot}$ in NGC2264. The distribution is not bi-modal and appears different from the distribution found for the ONC. This figure has been adapted from Figure 10 in Littlefair et al. (2005).	208
6.26	Distribution of rotation periods for stars with $M > 0.25M_{\odot}$ in IC348. The distribution is more like that shown in Figure 6.24 than that in Figure 6.25. This figure has been adapted from Figure 10 in Littlefair et al. (2005)	209
6.27	Cluster ages against the fraction of JHKL excess sources from Haisch et al. (2001), used a disc indicator. The straight line is a simple linear regression fit.	210
6.28	Figure showing the nominal age of each SFR with the IR excess from various literature sources. The inset panel shows the region 0-5 Myrs enlarged.	210
6.29	Figure showing the log(nominal age) of each SFR with the IR excess from various literature sources. The inset panel shows the region 0-5 Myrs enlarged.	211

List of Tables

4.1	Extinction, dm , ages and sources. A^* = Individual values from sources indicated.	75
4.2	Literature sources for data. Notes as follows. (1) <i>TYCHO</i> VB bands.	76
4.3	The empirical and theoretical cuts for each SFR. The apparent cut has been converted into intrinsic colour using the $E(B - V)$ derived in Section 4.8. Also shown the nominal age adopted for each SFR. The notes are as follows. (1) Individual extinctions derived from T_{eff} , see Section 4.6. (2) Individual extinctions derived using Q-method (see Section 4.6.3) for distance result adopted, mean extinctions also used see Sections 4.6.3 and 4.4. (3) Age from Park & Sung (2002). (4) Data in <i>TYCHO</i> photometric system. (5) Age from Sanner et al. (2000). (6) Age from Naylor & Jeffries (2006).	77
4.4	The approximate validity range (not including multiple value solutions) for several ages derived from the Geneva-Bessell isochrones, defined as regions where the real isochrone moves more than 0.01 in colour away from the straight line model.	102
4.5	The distance moduli derived for σ Ori in the <i>TYCHO</i> photometric system for the different models and calibrations to Vega colours of zero or Vega $B - V = -0.002$ and $U - B = -0.004$. Uncertainties required to achieve $0.40 < P_r(\tau^2) < 0.60$ are also shown.	116
4.8	The distance moduli and $E(B - V)$ values , derived using $U - B$ $B - V$ fitting, for each SFR using the different models and calibrations to Vega colours of zero or Vega $B - V = -0.002$ and $U - B = -0.004$. Uncertainties required to achieve $0.40 < P_r(\tau^2) < 0.60$ are also shown.	118
4.6	The distance moduli derived for the ONC using intrinsic colours derived from T_{eff} values of Hillenbrand (1997) in different colour indices. Uncertainties required to achieve $0.40 < P_r(\tau^2) < 0.60$ are also shown.	119
4.7	The distance moduli derived for h and χ Per using intrinsic colours derived from T_{eff} values of Slesnick et al. (2002) alone or supplemented by cooler stars dereddened using an average extinction. Uncertainties required to achieve $0.40 < P_r(\tau^2) < 0.60$ are also shown.	120
4.9	The distance moduli and mean $E(B - V)$ values , after application of Q, for each SFR using the different models and calibrations to Vega colours of zero or Vega $B - V = -0.002$ and $U - B = -0.004$. Uncertainties required to achieve $0.40 < P_r(\tau^2) < 0.60$ are also shown.	120

4.10	Distance moduli and range adopted and those derived in this chapter. Notes are as follows. (1) Individual extinctions from T_{eff} value given is approximate mean. (2) Distance derived using mean extinction derivation from τ^2 fitting. (3) No uncertainties given in literature source, typical uncertainties adopted. (4) Distance derived after application of extinctions derived using revised Q-method (see Section 4.6.3), mean extinction quoted. (5) Mean of many values, assumed typical uncertainties. (6) $E(B - V)$ from Brown et al. (1994). (7) Assumed to be at the distance of χ Per.	121
4.11	Distances and extinctions adopted for the chosen SFRs. Notes are as follows. (1) Distance and extinction from Herbig & Dahm (2002). (2) individual extinctions used from Hillenbrand (1997) mean extinction quoted. (3) distance after application of individual extinctions using the Q-method mean extinction quoted. (4) Distance and extinction from Pozzo et al. (2003). (5) Distance from Herbig (1998) and individual extinctions from Herbig (1998) and Luhman et al. (2003) mean extinction quoted. (6) Extinction from Brown et al. (1994).	140
5.1	Exposure times for each field.	142
5.2	The catalogues presented in this thesis with their corresponding table reference number. These reference numbers are those used on internet servers and are marked with a # when used in the text. Notes are as follows. (1) The address for the Cluster Collaboration webpage is: http://www.astro.ex.ac.uk/people/timn/Catalogues/description.html . (2) Data are currently not available at CDS archive or from the Cluster Collaboration web page.	143
5.3	Literature sources and astrometric matching criteria. 1 Jeffries & Tolley (1998), 2 Jeffries & Oliveira (2005), 3 Sicilia-Aguilar et al. (2005), 4 Flaccomio et al. (1999), 5 Dahm & Simon (2005), 6 Lamm et al. (2004), 7 Second ROSAT PSPC catalogue and Naylor & Fabian (1999), 8 Pozzo et al. (2003) and Ogura et al. (2002), 9 Luhman et al. (2003) and Herbig (1998), 10 Cohen et al. (2004) and Littlefair et al. (2005), 11 Sanz-Forcada et al. (2004), 12 Burningham et al. (2005b) and Kenyon et al. (2005), 13 Herbst et al. (2002), 14 Flaccomio et al. (2003), 15 Second ROSAT PSPC catalogue, 16 Preibisch & Zinnecker (2002), 17 Herbig (1998), 18 Littlefair et al. (2005), 19 Ogura et al. (2002), 20 Dahm (2005), 21 Dolan & Mathieu (2001), 22 Herbig & Dahm (2002), 23 Sung et al. (2000), 24 Prisinzano et al. (2005), 25 Getman et al. (2006), 26 Mendoza V. & Gomez (1980) and 27 Berghöfer & Christian (2002).	155

- 6.1 The new nominal ages and the fraction of stars with IR excesses. The notes are as follows. (1) Haisch et al. (2001). (2) Hernández et al. (2007). First value for TTS stars (approximate mass range $1 - 0.1M_{\odot}$). Second and third values for entire sample, first thick discs and secondly thick and evolved discs. (3) Dahm & Hillenbrand (2007). (4) Sicilia-Aguilar et al. (2005). (5) Young et al. (2004). (6) Barrado y Navascués et al. (2007). First value derived from the IRAC CCD, with the second and third from spectral-energy distribution (SED) fitting (thick discs then thin and thick discs combined) all in the approximate mass range $0.1 - 1.0M_{\odot}$. (7) Prisinzano et al. (2007). (8) Currie et al. (2007) for h and χ Per stars fainter than $J=13.5$, stars brighter than this have 0% disc fraction. It is important to note that each of these studies is over a different mass range (due to different distances and magnitude ranges) and excess candidates were selected in a heterogeneous fashion. 208

Declaration

This thesis contains work published or pending publication as papers. The results of Chapter 4 have been accepted for publication in the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society (MNRAS). The results and techniques of Chapter 5 have been published in MNRAS, Volume 375, Issue 4, pp. 1220-1240. The results of Chapter 6 are contained in both of the papers so far mentioned. The preliminary results of Chapter 7 are nearing completion and pending submission for publication (March-April 2008).

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