Identifying motor functional neurological disorder using resting-state functional connectivity

Jennifer Wegrzyk\textsuperscript{a,1}, Valeria Kebets\textsuperscript{b,1}, Jonas Richiardi\textsuperscript{a}, Silvio Galli\textsuperscript{a}, Dimitri Van de Ville\textsuperscript{c,d}, Selma Aybek\textsuperscript{a,b,e,*}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Geneva University Hospital, Rue Gabrielle-Perret-Gentil 4, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Neuroscience, University of Geneva, Campus Biotech, Chemin des Mines 9, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
\textsuperscript{c} Institute of Bioengineering, Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne, Campus Biotech, Chemin des Mines 9, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
\textsuperscript{d} Department of Radiology and Medical Informatics, University of Geneva, Campus Biotech, Chemin des Mines 9, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
\textsuperscript{e} Neurology University Clinic, Inselspital, Department of Clinical Neuroscience, 3010 Bern, Switzerland

1. Introduction

Motor functional neurological disorder (mFND) – formerly called “hysteria” – represents a clinical diagnosis for which positive bedside signs exist (Daum et al., 2014), and treating clinicians, mostly neurologists and psychiatrists, can refer to established diagnostic criteria (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)). Even though misdiagnosis rates are low (Stone et al., 2009), neurologists still fear missing an underlying organic pathology (Slater, 1965) and a majority continue to engage in an exclusionary process involving many referrals and investigations, thus promoting early diagnosis and allowing early engagement in appropriate therapy.

1 These authors contributed equally to the manuscript.

Keywords:
Rfing state functional magnetic resonance imaging
Functional connectivity
Functional neurological disorder
Biomarker
Classification

1. Introduction

Motor functional neurological disorder (mFND) – formerly called “hysteria” – represents a clinical diagnosis for which positive bedside signs exist (Daum et al., 2014), and treating clinicians, mostly neurologists and psychiatrists, can refer to established diagnostic criteria (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)). Even though misdiagnosis rates are low (Stone et al., 2009), neurologists still fear missing an underlying organic pathology (Slater, 1965) and a majority continue to engage in an exclusionary process involving many additional investigations (Espay et al., 2009). A misdiagnosis in the majority continue to engage in an exclusionary process involving many referrals and investigations, thus promoting early diagnosis and allowing early engagement in appropriate therapy.

Besides the fear of misdiagnosis, neurologists avoid discussing the diagnosis of functional neurological disorder (FND) with their patients (Kanaan et al., 2009a) because they themselves bear doubts about an alternate explanation for the symptoms of feigning (Kanaan et al., 2009b). Patients in turn feel their doctors do not understand them, which leads to multiple consultations for the same symptoms and change of general practitioner (Crimlisk et al., 2000). The identification of functional neurological disorder (FND) by its diagnosis and allowing early engagement in appropriate therapy.

Conclusions: The good accuracy to discriminate patients from controls suggests that RS FC could be used as a biomarker with high diagnostic value in future clinical practice to identify mFND patients at the individual level.
A new and promising tool in the search of biomarkers for neuropsychiatric disorders is resting-state (RS) functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Woodward and Cascio, 2015) which allows the study of blood oxygen level dependent (BOLD) signal fluctuations generated under resting conditions. The temporal correlation between the time courses of different brain regions is computed to obtain measures of functional connectivity (FC). Compared to active tasks, the advantage of RS fMRI is that behavioral differences between patients and controls have lower impact on the interpretation of the results.

Literature in functional neuroimaging of mFND has been dominated by task-based studies, all aiming at uncovering the neural correlates of the disorder. Two RS studies in mFND patients (Maurer et al., 2016; Baek et al., 2017) have investigated neural correlates of the disorder but no studies to date have used a multivariate classification approach to investigate RS FC as a potential positive biomarker. The aim of our study was therefore to use whole-brain RS FC in a predictive setting to discriminate mFND patients from healthy controls.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Participants

53 subjects (26 mFND patients and 27 controls matched for age and gender) participated in the study (Table 1). Three patients (1 patient with movement disorders and 2 patients with weakness) and 2 healthy controls were excluded from analysis due to excessive movement in the scanner, resulting in a total sample of 48 subjects. Patients were recruited from the outpatient clinic of a tertiary university hospital (University Hospitals Geneva, Department of Clinical Neurosciences). Two board-certified neurologists (SG or SA) confirmed the diagnosis of FND according to DSM-5 criteria and using motor positive signs (e.g., Hoover sign or tremor variability, distractibility and entrainment test). Healthy control subjects (with a similar sociodemographic background and individually matched to the patients by age and sex) were recruited via advertisement. For both groups, the main exclusion criteria were current neurological disorders, substance dependence and contraindications for MRI scanning. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the University Hospitals of Geneva (CER 14-088). All participants gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.2. Data acquisition

2.2.1. Clinical evaluation

Participants completed the State Anxiety Inventory (STAI-S) (CDG et al., 1983) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck et al., 1996) on the day of MRI session. Clinical severity of the motor symptom was evaluated by the neurologists with a 0–5 Clinical Global Impression Score (CGI) (0 = no symptom to 5 = very disabling symptom).

2.2.2. MRI acquisition parameters

MRI was performed using a 3.0 Tesla unit (Siemens, Magnetom TrioTim). Functional imaging data and one structural image were acquired in one session. fMRI data were acquired using a whole-brain single shot multi-slice BOLD echo-planar-imaging (EPI) sequence with the following parameters: TR: 2 s; TE: 20 ms; flip angle 80°; PAT factor = 2; FOV: 240 mm; matrix size: 64 × 64 × 40; 2.5 mm slice thickness; inter-slice gap 1.125 mm; voxel size 3.00 × 3.00 × 2.50 mm; TA: 5:08 min, 150 functional images.

During the RS fMRI session, the subjects were instructed to lie still, to think of nothing in particular and to watch a cross symbol projected on a black screen. The scan protocol for structural MRI consisted of a T1-weighted MPRAGE sequence with the following parameters: TR: 1.9 s; TE: 2.27 ms; flip angle = 9°; PAT factor = 2, voxel size 1.0 × 1.0 × 1.0 mm; acquisition time: 5:04.

2.3. Data analyses

Demographic and clinical data were compared between the two groups with two-sample t-tests or Mann-Whitney U tests (depending on the distribution normality), and the chi2 test when appropriate.

2.3.1. Preprocessing of imaging data

For preprocessing, we relied on a previously used pipeline (Richiardi et al., 2012) using SPM12 tools (http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm/software/spm12/). Functional images were first realigned, then the mean functional image was co-registered with the structural image. The latter was segmented into grey matter, white matter, and cerebrospinal fluid. A customized version of the IBASPM toolbox (Aleman-Gomez et al., 2006) was used to build an individual structural brain atlas, based on the AAL atlas (Tzourio-Mazoyer et al., 2002). In order to check the consistency of the results, two other atlases, the Hammers probabilistic structural atlas (Hammers et al., 2003), and the Shirer functional atlas (Shirer et al., 2012), were additionally chosen for comparison. The atlas was then mapped back onto the native resolution of the functional data, and region-averaged time series were extracted. The first 10 time points were discarded to ensure magnetization equilibration. Motion parameters, as well as the average signal of a mask of white matter and cerebrospinal fluid, were regressed out. Time series were Winsorized to the 95th percentile to increase robustness to outliers (e.g., spikes). Time courses were then filtered into frequency subbands using a wavelet transform (cubic orthogonal B-spline wavelets). Five frequency subbands were extracted, respectively with main bandpass characteristics at 0.5–1 Hz, 0.25–0.5 Hz, 0.125–0.25 Hz, 0.0625–0.125 Hz, and 0.0312–0.0625 Hz. We investigated alterations of FC in the latter subband (0.0312–0.0625 Hz), as this subband represents typical low-frequency RS fluctuations. Motion-related artefacts were accounted for as described in Supplemental File Appendix 1.

2.3.2. RS FC modelling and classification

We computed pairwise Pearson correlation coefficients between all atlas regions in order to obtain a correlation matrix (number of regions × number of regions) for each subject (see Supplemental File, Appendix 2). Next, we converted the correlation coefficients to z-scores using Fisher-Z transformation, and used them as features for the classifier by reshaping the upper-triangular part of the matrix (excluding the diagonal) as a vector.

We used a linear Support Vector Machine (SVM) classifier with L2 regularization to learn a discriminant function that would optimally separate the two groups. The SVM is a supervised learning method that performs binary classification, by building the largest-margin hyperplane allowing for an optimal separation of the training examples. We
Importantly, the individual classification performance was significant across all three atlases.

3.3. Post-hoc analyses

3.3.1. Analyses of connectivity

The most discriminative connections (i.e., those yielding the higher SVM weights) included increased connectivity in patients between: 1) subcortical (right caudate) and limbic (left amygdala) as well as parietal regions (bilateral postcentral gyrus), 2) the paracentral lobule with frontal regions (bilateral mid orbitofrontal gyrus) and decreased connectivity in patients between 3) parietal regions (right temporal-parietal region including the inferior parietal lobule) and frontal regions (right superior orbito-frontal gyrus), (Fig. 1).

Mean functional connectivity in controls and patients between pairs of regions showing discriminative functional connectivity (Supplemental Table S3). Discriminative connections of the other two atlases used can be found in Supplemental Fig. S1.

3.3.2. Regression analyses assessing impact of anxiety, depression and medication use

Whether subjects (either all subjects or patients only) were correctly classified or not was not predicted by depression scores or medication intake, either taken individually or altogether (Supplemental Table S2). Anxiety, however, had an impact on accuracy (when taking all subjects, but not within patients only); indeed, subjects who were more anxious were more prone to be misclassified (beta = −0.02, p = 0.0495; see Supplemental Table S2).

3.3.3. Seed connectivity of the right caudate

In patients, the right caudate was hyper-connected to the right inferior frontal gyrus, the right and left middle orbitofrontal gyrus, the right middle cingulate cortex, the left superior parietal lobule, the left angular gyrus and the bilateral cerebellum (cf. Fig. 2/Table 3).

When contrasted to the patient group, the control group showed hyperconnectivity between the right caudate and the left hippocampus (Table 3).

4. Discussion

4.1. Classification as potential clinical diagnostic biomarker

Based on a five-minute resting-state fMRI protocol, a classification approach using the standard AAL atlas was able to discriminate mFND patients from healthy controls with almost 70% accuracy, specificity and sensitivity. Validation with two additional atlases confirmed good accuracies, i.e., 62.5–68%. Moreover, classification results were not driven by differences in depression, anxiety or psychotropic medication use.

This is the first study using a classification approach in FND. In contrast to previous fMRI studies on FND that focused on inference at the group level, the present study allows for inference at a single-subject level suited for future clinical decision-making. In recent years, classification algorithms have been applied in preclinical efforts to complement clinical diagnosis with the aim to identify neurological and psychiatric disorders using imaging-based markers (for review, (Wolfers et al., 2015)). Particularly, models based on multivariate pattern analyses of fMRI data have been proposed for several mental disorders mainly focusing on schizophrenia and mood disorders. When comparing our present findings with previous RS FC classification studies that discriminate patients from healthy controls using the same classifier (i.e., SVM), our classification accuracy and sample size range within reported values (Wolfers et al., 2015). These findings suggest that RS FC may represent a promising positive biomarker for the disorder that could be useful in future clinical practice, providing additional validation steps are followed. In particular, our findings should
be replicated in independent and larger datasets and its reliability across different centres should be determined. It will indeed be important to verify that, when using similar acquisition parameters, the classification algorithm can be applied in another hospital. Then, a comparison not only to healthy controls but also to patients presenting the same symptom (comparing organic weakness to functional weakness for instance) should be carried out. Finally, improving specificity and sensitivity will be sought for by adding pre-test probability clinical scores and by applying feature selection (Pereira et al., 2009) and focusing on regions of interest.

4.2. Connectivity patterns to understand FND mechanisms

The primary aim of our study was to determine the value of RS FC in discriminating patients from controls at an individual level, but our data also provide important information on a group-level to understand the underlying mechanisms of FND. Two connectivity patterns are particularly important to discuss: 1) one showing increased connectivity in patients compared to controls between the right caudate and the left amygda and bilateral postcentral gyri and 2) one showing decreased connectivity in patients between the right inferior parietal cortex (part of the right temporo-parietal junction TPJ) and frontal regions.

4.2.1. Role of the right temporo-parietal junction (TPJ)

This latter finding of decreased connectivity between the right inferior parietal cortex and frontal regions (right superior frontal gyrus) is consistent with a recent resting state data analysis from a cohort of 25 mFND patients compared to 24 healthy controls which found decreased connectivity between the right inferior parietal cortex (taken as a seed region) and prefrontal regions (right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex/anterior cingulate) (Baek et al., 2017). Another seed-based RS FC study focused on the right TPJ in 35 mFND patients compared to 35 controls (Maurer et al., 2016) and found decreased connectivity with bilateral sensorimotor cortex, cerebellum, and right insula. The TPJ is a large region encompassing posterior inferior parietal lobule and angular gyrus (Bzdok et al., 2013). Given the role of the right TPJ in motor intention awareness and self-agency perception (Desmurget et al., 2009), aberrant connectivity involving this region might explain FND patients’ inability to initiate movement and to recognize themselves as
the authors of their actions (Voon et al., 2010a). Our results also point to its connectivity within the executive network possibly engaged in social processing of behavior (Carter and Huettel, 2013), action awareness (Farrer et al., 2008) and top-down regulation of affects.

4.2.2. Role of the right caudate

The implication of the caudate in mFND has been previously shown in a PET experiment (Vuilleumier et al., 2001) revealing increased caudate activity during mFND with functional weakness, which returned to normal in patients who recovered from their functional weakness in a longitudinal follow-up experiment. A form of principal component analysis of these data (CY, 2011) identified a network including the thalamus and caudate (together with inferior frontal and orbitofrontal regions), which was found to exhibit selective increase in coupling in the hemisphere contralateral to the motor symptom. Another PET experiment (Schrag et al., 2013) in mFND patients with psychogenic dystonia showed abnormally increased blood flow in the basal ganglia (including the right caudate) as compared to healthy controls. The caudate, as part of the dorsal/sensorimotor striatum structure, receives many convergent excitatory projection inputs from the sensorimotor cortex, thalamus, prefrontal cortex, insula and the amygdala (Voon et al., 2004). A proposed function of the dorsal striatum is to encode short motor programs to be linked together in order to increase complexity of motor output (Yin, 2010) thereby preventing excessive computational demands on cortical structures (Graybiel, 1998). When dysfunctional, no efficient selection and assembly of motor actions can take place, possibly resulting in abnormal behavioral patterns, as observed in mFND. Also the caudate plays a role in favoring habitual implicit well-learned movement (McNamee et al., 2015) rather than goal-directed explicit controlled movement, a pattern observed in mFND (Pares et al., 2013). The hyperconnectivity we found between caudate and amygdala is of particular interest, as there is evidence that the amygdala plays a role in shifting goal-directed movement to habitual movement through interaction with the caudate, in order to promote well-learned defense in behavior in cases of threat (Schwabe et al., 2010). The amygdala has consistently shown increased activity in mFND (Voon et al., 2010a; Aybek et al., 2014; Voon et al., 2010b; Voon et al., 2011) as well as a lack of habituation to negative stimuli (Aybek et al., 2015). One could thus postulate that hyperarousal in mFND expressed by hyperactivity of the amygdala has an influence on motor program selection via the caudate. Our seed-based analysis on the caudate also confirms limbic-motor interaction in mFND, as it revealed hyperconnectivity with the mid-cingulate. The mid-cingulate is considered as the motor-limbic region and is thought to play a role in willed action by participating in a “choice network” (Brass et al., 2013). This region has been proposed to be a hub linking emotion (value and affects signals) to cortical and subcortical motor control (Madlon-Kay et al., 2013).

Altogether, RS FC data from our study and previous literature confirm findings from task-based fMRI experiments involving nodes of motor control (self-agency, motor intention and motor action selection) with limbic system key regions (amygdala, motor mid-cingulate cortex).

4.3. Limitations

Our study has several limitations. One is the homogenous sample of adult subjects suffering from mFND, not including other FND presentation such as non-epileptic seizure and not including children, which limits the generalizability of our findings to FND in general. Also, the fact that our patients had similar anxiety scores to controls suggests that our cohort may not be representative of FND in general, who tend to be more anxious. A future design should aim to include all consecutive patients and monitor drop-outs (rate and reason) in order to ensure the studied population is representative of the general FND population.

Another limitation is the fact that our sample included both positive (movements) and negative (weakness), which may confound the results. This may be overcome in future validation steps by including larger number of patients and stratifying them according to symptom type.

Another limitation is that we included patients with psychotropic medication. Although we verified with post-hoc analyses that classification results were not driven by medication, we cannot be certain that drug intake did not affect our results. Similarly, we verified that depression scores did not predict the classification - future studies should.
exclude that this variable is not a confounding factor. Another limitation of our study is the rather small sample size (total of 48 subjects) that could directly affect classifier performance and lead to unstable predictive models. However, in a large comprehensive review of studies using classifiers in neuropsychiatry, sample sizes were mostly below 100 with a majority of sample sizes around 50 participants (Wolfers et al., 2015).

4.4. Conclusions

Classification using resting state fMRI allowed for discrimination of MfND patients from healthy controls with almost 70% accuracy, specificity and sensitivity.

This constitutes an important first step towards clinical application of such a non-invasive technique, not to replace the clinical diagnosis but to ascertain its value and to provide additional rule-in tests to make the diagnosis of fMRI. Future validation steps are now needed in separate samples and other MRI scanners, as well as in combination with clinical scores (pre-test probability) to confirm that this classification tool can be utilized in clinics worldwide.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Funding/support

This work was supported by the Swiss National Research Foundation (Ambizione grant PZ00P3_147997 for SA) and the Leenards Foundation (Ambizione grant PZ00P3_147997 for SA) and the Leenards Foundation (Ambizione grant PZ00P3_147997 for SA).

Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nicl.2017.10.012.

References


Vroomen, P.C., Cerebrovasc. Dis. 17 (6), 418.


