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Screening non-MAPT genes of the Chr17q21 H1 haplotype in Parkinson's disease

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Andrew S. McCallion generated the single cell RNA-Seq data.

Zbigniew K. Wszolek recruited patients from the clinic to participate in this study.

Owen A. Ross was lead of the project and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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Abstract

Introduction: The microtubule-associated protein tau (*MAPT*) gene is considered a strong genetic risk factor for Parkinson's disease (PD) in Caucasians. MAPT is located within an inversion region of high linkage disequilibrium designated as H1 and H2 haplotype, and contains eight other genes which have been implicated in neurodegeneration. The aim of the current study was to identify common coding variants in strong linkage disequilibrium (LD) within the associated loci on chr17q21 harboring MAPT.

Methods: Sanger sequencing of coding exons in 90 Caucasian late-onset PD (LOPD) patients was performed. Specific gene sequencing for LRRC37A, LRRC37A2, ARL17A and ARL17B was not possible given the high homology, presence of pseudogenes and copy number variants that are in the region, and therefore four genes (NSF, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and CRHR1) were included in the analysis. Coding variants from these four genes that did not perfectly tag $(r^2=1)$ the *MAPT* H1/H2 haplotype were genotyped in an independent replication series of Caucasian PD cases $(N=851)$ and controls $(N=730)$.

Results: In the 90 LOPD cases we identified 30 coding variants. Eleven non-synonymous variants tagged the MAPT H1/H2 haplotype, including two SPPL2C variants (rs12185233 and rs12373123) that had high pathogenic combined annotation dependent depletion (CADD) scores of >20 . In the replication series, the non-synonymous *KANSL1* rs17585974 variant was in very strong LD with *MAPT* H1/H2 and had a high CADD score of 24.7.

Conclusion: We have identified several non-synonymous variants across neighboring genes of $MAPT$ that may warrant further genetic and functional investigation within the biological etiology of PD.

Keywords

MAPT; KANSL1; NSF; CRHR1; SPPL2C; H1 Haplotype; Parkinson's disease

Introduction

Parkinson's disease (PD) is a progressive, age-associated neurodegenerative movement disorder. PD is considered a multifactorial disease, whereby environment and genetics both contribute to disease risk. Although a handful of genes have been identified that harbor highly penetrant mutations, disease risk is primarily suspected to be influenced by multiple

low penetrant population-based susceptibility variants. Genome-wide association approaches have now nominated over 90 susceptibility loci in Caucasians with one of the most highly replicated being on Chr17q21, containing the MAPT gene [1].

MAPT encodes for microtubule associated protein tau, a protein which is thought to stabilize the formation or facilitate flexibility of axonal microtubules $[2, 3]$. MAPT is located in a region of high disequilibrium (LD) spanning approximately 1.8 megabases and containing a 900 kilobase inversion polymorphism which defines two extended haplotypes, known as H1 and H2 [4]. H1 is the most common haplotype, with a frequency ~20% for the H2 allele in European populations; the H2 haplotype is completely absent or very rare in other populations [5]. Mutations in MAPT have been associated with many neurodegenerative diseases, and specifically the H1 haplotype is associated with increased risk of developing progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP) [6, 7], corticobasal degeneration (CBD) [8], and Alzheimer's disease (AD) [9], as well as PD [10]. The MAPTH1 association linked to an increased risk of PD led to functional studies that determined the tau protein could influence α-synuclein aggregation and fibrillization [11–12].

However, the functional variant/s responsible for the MAPTH1 association signal with PD are still unknown. While continued research has focused on identifying variants within the MAPT gene that drive the PD association signal, few studies have investigated the other genes (LRRC37A, LRRC37A2, NSF, ARL17A, ARL17B, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and $CRHR1$, which are located within the inversion on Chr17q2-H1 haplotype and therefore could plausibly be driving the Caucasian MAPT PD association signal. In the current study, exons of non- MAPT genes on Chr17q2-H1 were Sanger sequenced in a cohort of patients with late-onset PD (LOPD). Identified variants were subsequently genotyped in a larger, independent, PD case-control cohort to assess association with disease in the context of the MAPT H1/H2 signal. Specifically, our aim was to identify common coding variants, in genes other than MAPT, in strong LD within the disease-associated haplotype on chr17q21.

Methods

Subjects

A total of 90 individuals, clinically diagnosed with sporadic, late-onset PD (age >50 at diagnosis) (LOPD) were initially included for exon sequencing as a discovery cohort (stage one). An independent cohort of 851 clinically diagnosed PD patients and 730 healthy controls were further recruited for a replication study (stage two). Cohort demographics are summarized in Table 1. All subjects were unrelated. PD diagnosis was determined using the Queens Square Brain bank criteria [13], and all patients were Caucasian, non-Hispanic and of European descent. Known carriers of pathogenic mutations in the leucine-rich repeat kinase 2 (LRRK2), α-synuclein (SNCA), vacuolar protein sorting-associated protein 35 (VPS35), PTEN-induced kinase 1 (PINK1), Parkin E3 ubiquitin protein ligase (PARKIN) and PARK7 (DJ1) genes were excluded. This study was approved by Mayo Clinic Institutional Review Board and written informed consent was obtained prior to commencement. All blood samples were collected at Mayo Clinic Jacksonville (FL, USA).

Sanger Sequencing

Genomic DNA was extracted from whole blood using Autogen FlexStar standard protocol methods (Autogen, Holliston, MA). A total of eight genes (LRRC37A, LRRC37A2, NSF, ARL17A, ARL17B, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and CRHR1) located within the chr17q21 H1/H2 inversion region (chr17:45,761,253–46,765,892; hg38) were initially considered for Sanger sequencing of coding exons (primers available upon request). However, specific gene sequencing for LRRC37A, LRRC37A2, ARL17A and ARL17B was not possible given the high homology, presence of pseudogenes and CNVs that are present in the region, and therefore four genes (NSF, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and CRHR1) were included in the analysis. Bidirectional Sanger sequencing was performed using established protocols on the Applied Biosystems $3730x/DNA$ analyzer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA). Sequence data was analyzed using Applied Biosystems SeqScape software (version 2.5) (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA). Variant annotations were made using human build GRCh37. Variants were defined as common and rare if their minor allele frequency (MAF) was 1% or $\langle 1\%$ respectively, and were labeled as H1/H2-defining if they were in perfect linkage disequilibrium (LD) (r^2 =1) with the *MAPT* H1/H2-tagging variant rs8070723. A variant was selected for further genotyping in the replication case-control series if it was (a) a nonsynonymous variant or frameshift mutation, (b) not an H1/H2 tagging variant $(r^2\;1)$, and (c) not in complete LD with a different variant in the same gene that has already been selected for further genotyping in the replication series.

Genotyping

The H1/H2 tagging variant rs8070723 and H1c tagging variant rs242557 were genotyped using an ABI TaqMan™ allelic discrimination assay on Applied Biosystems 7900HT Realtime PCR System (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA) and were analyzed using SDS (version 2.2.2) software (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA).The genotype data for rs8070723 was then used to determine variants that defined the *MAPT* H1/H2 haplotype (i.e. perfect LD with rs8070723 with an $r^2=1$). Additionally, Selected variants were genotyped using Agena Bioscience iPlex Gold chemistry (Agena Bioscience, San Diego, CA) and ABI Taqman™ SNP genotyping custom-designed assays (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA). Genotyping data was analyzed using Typer 4.0 (Agena Bioscience, San Diego, CA) and ABI QuantStudio Real-Time PCR (version 1.1) (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA) software respectively. The genotyping call rate was >95% for all variants

Statistical analysis

In the replication series, associations of common variants (MAF≥1%) with risk of PD were evaluated using logistic regression models that were adjusted for gender and age at blood draw. Odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals were estimated, and each variant was examined under a dominant model (i.e. presence vs. absence of the minor allele). For rare variants (MAF<1%), the proportion of subjects with a copy of the minor allele was compared between PD patients and controls using Fisher's exact test. Associations of common variants with age of PD onset were examined using linear regression models that were adjusted for gender; regression coefficients and 95% CIs were estimated and are interpreted as the change in mean age of PD onset corresponding to presence of the minor

allele of the given variant. All statistical analyses were performed using R Statistical Software (version 3.6.1). P-values <0.05 were considered as statistically significant, and all statistical tests were two-sided. Combined annotation dependent depletion (CADD) scores were determined using the online CADD single nucleotide variant lookup tool ([https://](https://cadd.gs.washington.edu/snv) [cadd.gs.washington.edu/snv\)](https://cadd.gs.washington.edu/snv); a CADD score >20 indicates a variant is among the 1% most deleterious for the gene.

Single-cell RNA-sequencing

For exploration of the expression of genes in substantia nigra dopaminergic (DA) neurons, single-cell RNA-seq data from mouse postnatal day 7 (P7) midbrain neurons was downloaded [\(https://github.com/pwh124/sc-da-parkinsons\)](https://github.com/pwh124/sc-da-parkinsons) [14]. These populations included DA neurons from the periaqueductal grey area, substantia nigra, and ventral tegmental area as well as a postnatal neuroblast population [14]. Expression was visualized using ggplot2 [15] and custom scripts in the R statistical environment (<https://www.r-project.org/>).

Results

Discovery cohort

After Sanger sequencing of coding exons in four neighboring genes on the *MAPT* inversion (*NSF, KANSL1, SPPL2C*, and *CRHR1*) in 90 individuals with sporadic LOPD, a total of 51 variants were identified. Of these 51 variants, 40 were common (MAF 1%), 11 were rare (MAF <1%), and also among the 51 variants, 20 were in perfect LD with the H1/H2 haplotype tagging variant rs8070723 (r^2 =1). One *NSF* variant (rs748314870) was a frameshift mutation. We observed 29 variants that were non-synonymous, and 11 of those non-synonymous variants (located in *KANSL1*, *SPPL2C* and *NSF*) tagged the H1 haplotype $(r^2=1)$ (Table 2). Importantly, of these 11 non-synonymous H1/H2 tagging variants, two located in *SPPL2C* have a CADD score > 20 (rs12373123 and rs12185233) (Table 3) estimating these variants be among the top 1% of those having a deleterious effect; also of note, NSF rs1238228075 had a CADD score of 19.2.

Replication cohort

After exclusion of NSF rs2074406 from further analysis due to its complete LD with a different NSF variant (rs757532604), 17 non-synonymous variants and the frameshift mutation were selected for genotyping in the replication series of 786 PD patients and 751 controls in order to evaluate whether variants in genes neighboring MAPT may be driving the PD association signal that is observed for the *MAPT* H1/H2 haplotype. When evaluating associations between these variants and PD risk (Table 4), no variants were more strongly associated with risk of PD than the H1/H2 defining rs8070723 variant (OR=0.57, P<0.001) in terms of association ORs. However, similar but slightly weaker associations were noted for both KANSL1 rs35643216 (OR=0.62, P<0.001) and KANSL1 rs17585974 (OR=0.61, P<0.001); both of these KANSL1 variants were in strong LD with rs8070723 (r^2 0.83) and the second of these rs17585974, has a CADD score of 24.7. We attempted to look in singlecell RNA-seq data from mouse midbrain neurons to assess expression of these PD candidate genes in disease relevant tissue. This revealed the expression of Crhr1, Mapt, Nsf and Kansl1 (Figure 1) in this population of cells critical to PD pathogenesis [\(https://](https://pwh124.shinyapps.io/expressionshiny/)

[pwh124.shinyapps.io/expressionshiny/\)](https://pwh124.shinyapps.io/expressionshiny/), consistent with their posited roles in modulating risk, individually or in combination [14]. Expression levels of the other genes $(Lrrc37a,$ Arl17a/b and Sppl2c) were too low to accurately measure or not detectible.

Associations with age of PD onset

We next examined associations with age of PD onset for the *MAPT* rs8070723 H1/H2 tagging variant, the $MAPTH1c$ haplotype partial tagging variant rs242557, and the two aforementioned KANSL1 non-H1/H2 tagging variants (rs35643216 and rs17585974). Consistent with the findings of a recent GWAS [16], there was not a significant association with of age of PD onset for *MAPT* rs8070723 (β: 0.76, 95% CI: −0.98 to 2.49, P=0.39), MAPT rs242557 (β: -0.16, 95% CI: -1.82 to 1.49, P=0.85), KANSL1 rs35643216 (β: 1.12, 95% CI: −0.67 to 2.91, P=0.22), or *KANSL1* rs17585974 (β: 1.19, 95% CI: −0.60 to 2.97, $P=0.19$).

Discussion

This study set out to investigate if variation outside of the *MAPT* gene could account for the PD GWAS signal at Chr17q21 in Caucasians. We identified a number of H1/H2 tagging non-synonymous variants in genes other than MAPT, including two SPPL2C variants (rs12185233 and rs12373123) with CADD scores >20 indicating high likelihood of a deleterious effect. We did not observe any stronger associations with PD risk for common non-synonymous non-H1/H2 tagging variants relative to the H1/H2 signal. However, slightly weaker associations were noted for two *KANSL1* variants (rs35643216 and rs17585974; ORs 0.62 and 0.61); these two variants were in strong LD with $MAPTH1/Hz$, and interestingly KANSL1 rs17585974 has a high CADD score of 24.7. Also of note, while not quite reaching a CADD >20, NSF rs1238328075 and KANSL1 rs34043286 have relatively high CADD scores 19.19 and 15.71 respectively and should not be excluded from being functionally important. Though future functional studies are clearly needed in order to establish whether any of the aforementioned variants may truly be the causal variant that drives the *MAPT* H1/H2 association in PD, the results provided herein represent an important and necessary first step toward the identification of potential causal variants and the subsequent conduction of such functional studies.

A closer look at the functionality of the other genes is warranted. KANSL1 codes for KAT8 Regulatory NSL Complex Subunit 1, which encodes a nuclear protein that is involved with histone acetylation with the MLL1 and NSL1 complexes [17]. Notably a recent study has implicated KANSL1 (and KAT8 another potential PD GWAS hit) in regulating PINK1 directed mitophagy nominating variation within the gene as driving the Chr17q21 association signal [18]. Differences in KANSL1 expression levels have also been observed in brains of individuals with PD, AD, and frontotemporal dementia [19, 20], which suggests a potential role in neurodegeneration although this may be simply driven by the broader H1/H2 association and not be specific. Additionally, we have reported single cell transcriptional analyses of mouse midbrain dopamine neurons in which we reported the expression of *Crhr1, Mapt, Kansl1* and *Nsf* within nigral dopamine neurons [14]. The expression of Sppl2C was very low or not detectible however, SPPL2C codes for Signal

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Peptide Peptidase Like 2C, which is a member of the GxGD‐type intramembrane aspartyl proteases family, which have emerged as key components of driving pathologies in AD and viral infections [21]. Even though not being well-characterized, recently SPPL2C candidate substrates have been demonstrated to cluster and impair vesicular trafficking which accelerates retention of cargo proteins in the endoplasmic reticulum, and disrupts subcellular compartmentation [21]; dysfunction in synaptic vesicle trafficking is well characterized in PD pathogenesis [22].

Although links can be made for *KANSL1* and *SPPL2C* in PD pathogenesis, a direct link to the well-established PD gene LRRK2 can be made for NSF. NSF codes for a N-Ethylmaleimide Sensitive Factor, Vesicle Fusing ATPase. The N-terminal of *NSF* is required for SNAP-SNARE complex binding [22], and the D1 domain is essential for ATP binding and hydrolysis, which controls NSF activity managing synaptic vesicle endocytosis [23, 24]. Belluzzi et al., demonstrated that *NSF* is directly phosphorylated by *LRRK2* at T645 resulting in enhanced ATPase activity and disrupted synaptic vesicle trafficking [24, 25]. Synaptic vesicle release and recycling is one of the major pathways implicated in PD etiology and is also linked to α -synuclein dysfunction at the synapse [26, 27].

A number of limitations within the study design did not let us fully resolve the causative gene at this locus. For example, specific gene sequencing for LRRC37A, LRRC37A2, ARL17A and ARL17B was not possible given the high homology, presence of pseudogenes and CNVs that are present in the region. LRRC37A codes for Leucine Rich Repeat Containing-37, Member A, and ARL17A and ARL17B encode ADP-Ribosylation Factor-Like 17A and −17B respectively. LRR motifs are important for intermolecular or intercellular interactions with exogenous factors in the immune system and/or with different cell types in the developing nervous system [28]. These genes could not be excluded as potentially influencing susceptibility to PD phenotype.

Although the sample population chosen was sporadic to address the GWAS signal specifically we did observe two variants in $KANSL1$ (both CADD >20) and one variant $(CADD >14)$ in *NSF* that were detected in PD cases but not in controls. The function of these variants have not been characterized, yet both variants in KANSL1 are in the pathogenic range, CADD <20.38 is benign and CADD > 33.25 is pathogenic [29]. Further sequencing of patients with familial PD may identify pathogenic mutations that would help discriminate the disease-related gene or genes on the chr17q21 haplotype. It is important to note that next generation sequencing data currently available does not have adequate coverage of all coding exons and therefore should be used with caution for identifying variants and their significance.

Another approach would be to exploit ethnic-diversity to narrow down the region of association and pinpoint the relevant gene. Interestingly, in association studies in Asian populations there is no evidence of a signal at Chr17q21 for PD and the H2 haplotype is absent in this population [30]. We have included population frequencies from publicly available dataset (gnomAD) in Table 4 to highlight the ethnic-specific nature of the alleles. If the variants are frequent in the Asian population it would potentially rule those out as driving the signal in Caucasian populations. Using populations with different haplotype

structure and genomic architecture may be a viable way to fine-map GWAS signals and nominate functional genes/variants.

In conclusion, our work explored the association of common coding variation around the Chr17q21 PD GWAS signal that do not map to the MAPT gene. Although no association was observed that was stronger than the established H1/H2 association, a number of nonsynonymous variants were identified that also tag H1/H2 across at least three genes $(KANSL1, SPPL2C$ and $CRHR1$ and may represent other functional variants that influence disease risk. Further biological testing of variants in cell and animal models for modulation of PD relevant phenotypes such as alpha-synuclein aggregation/toxicity or PINK1-PRKN mitophagy will be needed to establish the disease risk at the Chr17q21 locus.

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- MAPTH1 is a consistent Parkinson's disease association locus on chr17q21
- **•** Chr17q21 H1 extended haplotype is a complex genetic region of inversion
- **•** Other genes/variants in complete linkage disequilibrium may be responsible
- Potentially damaging variants in KANSL1, NSF and SPPL2C

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Figure 1.

Boxplots displaying the RNA expression of Mapt, Nsf, Crhr1, and Kansl1 in mouse midbrain dopaminergic cell populations identified in postnatal day 7 (P7) mice [14]. The levels of other genes (Lrrc37a, Arl17a/b and Sppl2c) are not detectible. The box represents the interquartile range and whiskers on the boxplots represent +/−1.5 interquartile range. Each dot represents expression measured in a single cell as log2-transformed transcript counts.

Table 1:

Cohort demographics.

Age is given as the sample mean \pm SD (minimum-maximum).

 \overline{a}

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Table 2:

Sanger sequencing of four neighboring genes (NSF, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and CRHR1) located 900kb around MAPT on chromosome 17 identified 51 Sanger sequencing of four neighboring genes (NSF, KANSL1, SPPL2C, and CRHR1) located 900kb around MAPT on chromosome 17 identified 51 variants in 90 individuals clinically diagnosed with sporadic, late-onset Parkinson's disease. variants in 90 individuals clinically diagnosed with sporadic, late-onset Parkinson's disease.

*

indicates SNP excluded from genotyping in stage 2 because it was in complete LD with rs757532604 which was genotyped.

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Table 3:

Non-synonymous SNPs in complete linkage-disequilibrium to MAPT H1/H2-tagging SNP rs8070723 (r Non-synonymous SNPs in complete linkage-disequilibrium to MAPTH1/H2-tagging SNP rs8070723 (r²=1.00).

Base positions are aligned to homo sapiens chromosome build GRCh38, allele frequencies are obtained from the publicly available gnomAD database. AA= amino acid. CADD= Combined Annotation Base positions are aligned to *homo sapiens* chromosome build GRCh38, allele frequencies are obtained from the publicly available gnomAD database. AA= amino acid. CADD= Combined Annotation Dependent Depletion. Dependent Depletion.

* A CADD greater than 20 indicates a variant that is in the top 1% of deleterious variants. A CADD greater than 20 indicates a variant that is in the top 1% of deleterious variants.

NSF rs1238328075 has sequence coverage below 10 and therefore the MAF is not available (N/A) from the gnomAD database. NSF rs1238328075 has sequence coverage below 10 and therefore the MAF is not available (N/A) from the gnomAD database.

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Table 4:

Stage two replication phase results. **Stage two replication phase results.**

correspond to presence of the minor allele. For rare variants $(MAF<1%)$, the proportion of subjects with a copy of the minor allele was compared between correspond to presence of the minor allele. For rare variants (MAF<1%), the proportion of subjects with a copy of the minor allele was compared between independent cohorts of N=786 unrelated, clinically diagnosed PD patients and N=751 unrelated, healthy controls. Non-H1/H2 tagging variants had an r² independent cohorts of N=786 unrelated, clinically diagnosed PD patients and N=751 unrelated, healthy controls. Non-H1/H2 tagging variants had an r² GRCh38. For common variants (MAF 1%), ORs, 95% CIs, and p-values result from logistic regression models that were adjusted for age and sex. ORs GRCh38. For common variants (MAF 1%), ORs, 95% CIs, and p-values result from logistic regression models that were adjusted for age and sex. ORs < 1.00 linkage disequilibrium score relative to *MAPT* H1/H2-defining SNP rs8070723. Base positions are aligned to *Homo sapiens* chromosome build <1.00 linkage disequilibrium score relative to MAPTH1/H2-defining SNP rs8070723. Base positions are aligned to Homo sapiens chromosome build Associations of genotyped common and rare, non-synonymous, and non-H1/H2 tagging variants with risk of late-onset Parkinson's disease in Associations of genotyped common and rare, non-synonymous, and non-H1/H2 tagging variants with risk of late-onset Parkinson's disease in PD patients and controls using Fisher's exact test.

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*

A CADD greater than 20 indicates a variant that is in the top 1% of deleterious variants.