Chronic alcohol intake abolishes the relationship between dopamine synthesis capacity and learning signals in the ventral striatum


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Abstract

Drugs of abuse elicit dopamine release in the ventral striatum, possibly biasing dopamine-driven reinforcement learning towards drug-related reward at the expense of non-drug-related reward. Indeed, in alcohol-dependent patients, reactivity in dopaminergic target areas is shifted from non-drug-related stimuli towards drug-related stimuli. Such ‘hijacked’ dopamine signals may impair flexible learning from non-drug-related rewards, and thus promote craving for the drug of abuse. Here, we used functional magnetic resonance imaging to measure ventral striatal activation by reward prediction errors (RPEs) during a probabilistic reversal learning task in recently detoxified alcohol-dependent patients and healthy controls (N = 27). All participants also underwent [18F]fluoro-DOPA positron emission tomography to assess ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity. Neither ventral striatal activation by RPEs nor striatal dopamine synthesis capacity differed between groups. However, ventral striatal coding of RPEs correlated inversely with craving in patients. Furthermore, we found a negative correlation between ventral striatal coding of RPEs and dopamine synthesis capacity in healthy controls, but not in alcohol-dependent patients. Moderator analyses showed that the magnitude of the association between dopamine synthesis capacity and RPE coding depended on the amount of chronic, habitual alcohol intake. Despite the relatively small sample size, a power analysis supports the reported results. Using a multimodal imaging approach, this study suggests that dopaminergic modulation of neural learning signals is disrupted in alcohol dependence in proportion to long-term alcohol intake of patients. Alcohol intake may perpetuate itself by interfering with dopaminergic modulation of neural learning signals in the ventral striatum, thus increasing craving for habitual drug intake.

Introduction

Alcohol stimulates dopamine release in the ventral striatum, and this provides a conduit for reinforcing drug consumption and assigning the value of stimuli associated with it (Di Chiara, 1995; Heinz et al., 2004; Volkow et al., 2004). In alcohol-dependent patients, ventral striatal activation in response to drug-associated stimuli is greater than that in response to non-drug-associated stimuli (Wrase et al., 2007; Beck et al., 2012). Exaggerated activation in response to drug cues indicates a ‘hijacked’ state of the ‘reward system’, and is related to the clinical severity of alcohol dependence, particularly acute craving for alcohol (Wrase et al., 2007), as well as alterations of the...
dopamine system (Heinz et al., 2005; Martinez et al., 2005). This suggests a model of addiction in which dopamine dysfunction and the associated shift in salience processing (Robinson & Berridge, 1993) might impair flexible learning from non-drug-related rewards (Park et al., 2010; Ersche et al., 2011). However, this has not yet been shown. Here, we examined reward prediction error (RPE) signals during a task requiring flexible adaptation to non-drug rewards, and related these to craving and presynaptic dopamine.

Phasic dopamine signals have previously been shown to be commensurate with RPEs that are involved in learning the expected reward associated with environmental cues (Schultz et al., 1997; Bayer & Glimcher, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2013). This is mirrored in human imaging studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), where ventral striatal activation covaries with RPEs derived from computational models of reinforcement learning (e.g. O’Doherty et al., 2004). Although hemodynamic fMRI activation is not dopamine-specific, such fMRI-derived phasic signals were found to relate to measures and manipulations of dopamine (Pessiglione et al., 2006; Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). In healthy volunteers (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013), we recently found evidence for potential regulation of phasic, event-related RPEs (measured via fMRI) by dopamine synthesis capacity [as assessed with 6-[18F]fluoro-DOPA (FDOPA) positron emission tomography (PET)]. This may be disrupted during early alcohol abstinence (Heinz et al., 2005).

In alcohol-dependent patients, impaired learning of novel, non-drug-related rewards may result in a dominance of inflexible behavioral patterns associated with habitual, chronic alcohol intake, potentially triggered by drug cue-induced craving (Evetrick & Robbins, 2005). Indeed, the ability to adapt behavior to changing reward contingencies is impaired in drug-dependent patients (Park et al., 2010; Ersche et al., 2011). A better understanding of the dopaminergic regulation of reward-related learning signals can provide insights into the neural processes underlying this impaired behavioral adaptation. In this study, we examined the relationship between PET-derived dopamine synthesis capacity and fMRI-derived RPEs during reversal learning in controls and recently detoxified alcohol-dependent patients.

In agreement with the idea that chronic alcohol intake impairs the neurobiological correlates of flexible reward learning, thereby promoting craving for alcohol, we tested two hypotheses: first, coding of RPEs in ventral striatal activation during reversal learning correlates negatively with the patients’ level of craving for alcohol; and second, ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity shows distinct covariance with ventral striatal activation elicited by RPEs in alcohol-dependent patients as compared with healthy participants, reflecting altered dopaminergic regulation of learning signals.

**Materials and methods**

**Participants and instruments**

A total of 27 participants, consisting of 13 recently detoxified, male alcohol-dependent patients and 14 matched male healthy controls, were included in the study (Table 1). Patients fulfilled DSM-IV and ICD-10 criteria for alcohol dependence, had no other psychiatric axis I disorder, and no current drug abuse other than nicotine consumption (SCID interview) (First et al., 2001). Patients were recruited at the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy (Campus Charité Mitte) of the Charité—Universitätsmedizin Berlin. Disease severity and alcohol craving were assessed with the Alcohol Dependence Scale (Skinner & Sheu, 1982) and the Obsessive Compulsive Drinking Scale (OCDS) (Anton, 2000) at the time of imaging data collection. The amount of alcohol intake was evaluated with the Lifetime Drinking History (LDH) (Skinner & Sheu, 1982). On the basis of the LDH and a clinical interview, the age of onset, the duration of illness and the numbers of previous detoxifications and relapses were evaluated (Table 1). At the time of imaging data collection, patients were withdrawn from any previous medication for at least four plasma half-lives.

Healthy controls had no axis I or II psychiatric disorder, no family history of psychiatric disorders in first-degree relatives, and no current drug abuse or a past history of drug dependence other than nicotine consumption (SCID interview) (First et al., 1997, 2001). Controls were matched to patients for age and handedness (Table 1). Thirteen of 14 healthy controls have already been reported in a previous fMRI PET study focusing on controls only (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). To further characterise the two samples, verbal IQ was assessed with a German vocabulary test (Schmidt & Metzler, 1992). Neuropsychological functioning was assessed to analyse cognitive deficits as possible confounds of reversal learning. Therefore, the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (Grant & Berg, 1948) and the D2 Test (Brickenkamp, 2001) for attention were applied (Table 1). The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Sample characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alcohol-dependent patients (N = 13)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smokers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHI (12/13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal IQ (13/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2 attention (13/12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCST perseveration score (13/14)</td>
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<td>LDH last year (kg) (13/14)</td>
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<td>OCDS sum (13/14)</td>
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<td>OCDS mean craving (13/14)</td>
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<td>ADS</td>
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<td>Age of onset (years)</td>
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<td>Duration of illness (years)</td>
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<td>Number of detoxifications</td>
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ADS, Alcohol Dependence Scale; EDI, Edinburgh Handedness Inventory; WCST, Wisconsin Card Sorting Test.

Group means with standard deviations and range in parentheses are reported; for group comparisons, two-sample t-tests were used; to compare the numbers of smokers between groups, a chi-square test was performed.
research ethics committee of the Charité Universitätsmedizin approved the study, which was performed in accordance with national radiation safety regulations. After being given a complete description of the study, each participant gave written informed consent. The study conformed with the guidelines of the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association).

Reversal learning task

Reversal learning was examined as in previous studies (Park et al., 2010; Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). During fMRI acquisition, participants performed two sessions of 100 trials with three types of block. In block type 1, for the right-hand stimulus a reward (green smiley) was delivered in 80% of the recent right-hand choices, and a punishment (red frowny) was delivered otherwise (Fig. 1). Conversely, a punishment was delivered for choosing the left-hand stimulus in 80% of the recent left-hand choices, and a reward was delivered otherwise. In block type 2, the contingencies were simply reversed for the left and right sides. In block type 3, the probabilities were 50/50 instead of 80/20. Reversals always occurred after 16 trials, or at any time after 10 trials once subjects reached 70% correct choices. Participants were instructed to respond as quickly as possible (response window: 2 s). The chosen option and feedback were presented simultaneously for 1 s. The trials were separated with a jittered interval of 1–6.5 s. Before entering the scanner, participants performed a practice version of the task (without a reversal component), so as to be introduced to the probabilistic nature of the task. Furthermore, participants were instructed that reversals would occur and that they should try to adapt their behavior accordingly.

Behavioral data analysis

The number of learned blocks was calculated for each individual, and this count of achieved reversal stages was compared between alcohol-dependent and cocaine-dependent patients (Park et al., 2010; Ersche et al., 2011). A learned block was defined as in Park et al. (2010): over a sliding window of five trials, subjects had to choose the correct response a minimum of four times, indicating 80% correct instrumental behavior (Park et al., 2010).

Computational modeling

As the main goal of the present study was to examine the neural coding of RPEs and its relationship with dopamine synthesis capacity, we applied a standard reinforcement learning model, a Rescorla–Wagner model, to each participant’s behavioral task sequence, as reported in previous studies of alcohol-dependent patients (Park et al., 2010) and healthy participants in a combined fMRI PET study (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). The likelihood of a subject’s choice for action a on trial t is represented by the action’s value $Q_t(a)$ and expressed by the softmax rule:

$$p(a|Q_t) = \frac{\exp(Q_t(a))}{\sum_a \exp(Q_t(a))}$$

The value $Q_t(a)$ of a chosen action is iteratively updated by use of the following equation:

$$Q_t(a) = Q_{t-1}(a) + \alpha[R_t - Q_{t-1}(a)]$$

Here, $\alpha$ is the individual learning rate that weights the difference between the delivered reward in trial t and the expected outcome. The obtained reward (1 or −1) is scaled by the variable $R$ to depict the individual’s effective reinforcement sensitivity ($\beta$). This variable was assigned the value $R_t = R_{\text{rew}}$ if a reward was obtained and $R_{\text{pun}}$ if a punishment was obtained. The initial Q value ($iQ$) for the right-hand choice in the first trial (in other words, a bias to choose the right-hand choice in the first trial) was also estimated individually; thus, the algorithm had a total of four free parameters $0 = [iQ, \beta_{\text{rew}}, \beta_{\text{pun}}, iQ']$. Here, we report the maximum a posteriori estimates of these parameters by using a Gaussian prior with mean and variance parameters, $\mu$ and $\sigma$. By the use of expectation maximisation, the priors were set empirically, as described in more detail elsewhere (Huys et al., 2011, 2012). The two groups did not differ in terms of the inferred parameters (Table 2, group means with standard deviations: $\beta_{\text{rew}}$, controls, 3.88 ± 2.45; $\beta_{\text{rew}}$, patients, 2.96 ± 1.69; $\beta_{\text{pun}}$, controls, −0.17 ± 0.14; $\beta_{\text{pun}}$, patients, −0.13 ± 0.23; $\alpha$, controls, 0.62 ± 0.25; $\alpha$, patients, 0.59 ± 0.24; $iQ$, controls, 0.39 ± 0.32; $iQ$, patients, 0.21 ± 0.53) or with respect to the likelihood (Table 2), −LL, controls, 80.49 ± 35.58; −LL, patients, 96.48 ± 26.29) that the observed data are given by the parameters (each $P > 0.2$). On the basis of the individually fitted parameters ($\hat{\theta}$) for each subject, a time series of signed RPEs was computed for each subject i and then subjected to the fMRI analysis as a regressor:

$$\text{PET}_i = R_{\text{rew}}^i - Q_{\text{rew}}^i(a_i)$$

PET

Subjects were positioned within the aperture of the PET/computed tomography (Siemens Biograph 16) scanner in 3D mode. After a low-dose transmission computed tomography scan, a dynamic 3D ‘list-mode’ emission recording lasting for 124 min was started immediately after intravenous bolus administration of 200 MBq of FDOPA. After computed tomography-based tissue attenuation correction and scatter correction, list-mode data were iteratively reconstructed (ordered subset expectation maximization, 16 iterations with
six subsets) and framed (30 frames: 3 × 20 s, 3 × 1 min, 3 × 2 min, 3 × 3 min, 15 × 5 min, 3 × 10 min). Arterial blood samples were collected during the emission recording, with continuous on-line measurements for the first 6 min and with manual sampling thereafter. The total radioactivity concentration in plasma samples was measured with a well counter cross-calibrated to the PET scanner. The fractions of untransformed FDOPA and the main metabolite, O-methyl-[18F]fluoro-L-DOPA, were measured by reversed-phase high-performance liquid chromatography in plasma extracts from blood collected at 5, 15, 30, 45 and 60 min post-injection, and the continuous arterial FDOPA input function was calculated through bi-exponential fitting of the measured parent fractions (Gillings et al., 2001).

Analysis of PET data

PET data were analysed with spm8 (Wellcome Department of Imaging Neuroscience, Institute of Neurology, London, UK; http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm/). The emission recording frames and the individual T1 image were coregistered to frame 12. The individual anatomical T1 image was spatially normalised by use of the segmented approach of SPM (Ashburner & Friston, 2005), and the computed normalisation parameters were applied to all frames.

For statistical analysis, dopamine synthesis capacity was quantified voxelwise as FDOPA net influx ($K_{in\_app}$; mL/g/min) calculated for emission recording frames from 20 min to 60 min. As is conventional for FDOPA PET, we used Gjedde–Patlak linear graphic analysis (Patlak & Blasberg, 1985) modified with framewise subtraction of the total radioactivity concentration measured in a standard cerebellum mask, which was defined in the WFU Pick Atlas (Wake Forest University; http://fmri.wfubmc.edu/software/PickAtlas); this resulted in VOIs of volume 362 mm$^3$ on the right side [centre of mass (range): 14.7 (9–20), 7.08 (0–14), and −6.23 (−8 to 4)] and 648 mm$^3$ on the left side [centre of mass (range): −14.7 (−9 to −20), 8.22 (3–13), and −4.73 (−9 to −1)]. All subsequent between-group and within-group correlation analyses were performed with average parameter estimates for the effect of RPEs in the right ventral striatum as defined by the VOI described above. Our emphasis on RPEs in the right ventral striatum was motivated by two factors: (i) RPE time-series have been reported to be more robustly correlated with blood oxygen level-dependent changes in the right ventral striatum (Daw et al., 2011); and (ii) we previously found that dopamine synthesis capacity in the right ventral striatum is negatively correlated with right ventral striatal RPEs in healthy controls (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013).

On the basis of previous observations that ventral striatal activation by monetary reward is negatively associated with craving for alcohol (Wrase et al., 2007), we a priori expected a negative correlation between mean parameter estimates of the RPE contrast (as extracted for the literature-based right ventral striatal VOI) and craving scores from the OCDS, as in Wrase et al. (2007). Therefore, one-tailed $P < 0.05$ was applied as the criterion of significance. With respect to dopamine synthesis capacity in the right ventral striatum, we probed an interaction of group and dopamine synthesis capacity and applied two-tailed $P < 0.05$ as the criterion of significance. To explore further the latter interaction, we set up another moderation analysis across the entire sample. This regression model included mean beta-weights of the RPE contrast in the right ventral striatum as the dependent variable, and group, right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity, the amount of previous chronic alcohol intake in the last year (evaluated by use of the LDH) and craving (OCDS) as independent variables. Interaction of dopamine synthesis capacity and alcohol intake was additionally entered into the model (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). In order to meet variance homogeneity and sphericity assumptions, all variables were z-transformed, which results in standardised regression coefficients. We also tested for...
power remains a critical statistical issue. With respect to the negative correlation between dopamine synthesis capacity and RPEs in the right ventral striatum, the achieved power and implied power (when assuming a doubled sample size) were computed with the software G-POWER. In a permutation analysis, as requested by a reviewer, we calculated the probability of observing the reported moderation effect, i.e. the interaction of ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and chronic, habitual alcohol intake, by chance. To this end, we performed a regression analysis with right ventral striatal RPEs as dependent variables and right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity, chronic, habitual alcohol intake and the interaction of both as independent variables. For chronic, habitual alcohol intake, the original records of intake by the 14 controls and 13 patients were not (group \( b = 0.07, t = 0.28, P = 0.36 \); group \( b = 1.01, t = 3.17, P < 0.05 \); RPE \( \times \) group \( b = -0.65, t = 2.01, P < 0.05 \); \( R^2 = 0.42, R^2 \) change \( =0.10 \)). When chronic, habitual alcohol intake and smoking status were included in the model, this interaction remained significant (RPE \( b = -0.07, t = 0.27, P = 0.38 \); group \( b = 1.10, t = 2.74, P < 0.05 \); RPE \( \times \) group \( b = -0.65, t = 1.92, P < 0.05 \); alcohol intake \( b = -0.13, t = 0.63, P = 0.27 \); smoking \( b = 0.22, t = 0.66, P = 0.26, R^2 = 0.44, R^2 \) change \( =0.10 \). Post hoc analysis within the group of alcohol-dependent patients confirmed the hypothesised negative relationship between \( \beta \) weights of RPEs in the right ventral striatum and craving for alcohol (Pearson \( r = -0.51, P < 0.05 \); Spearman \( r = -0.41, P = 0.08 \), one-tailed; Fig. 2).

**Combined fMRI and PET results**

When we tested for a difference in the relationship between right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and right ventral striatal RPEs between groups, the interaction of group and right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity reached significance (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \beta = -0.98, t = 2.27, P < 0.05 \); group \( \beta = 0.43, t = 1.14, P = 0.27 \); dopamine synthesis capacity \( \times \) group \( \beta = 1.06, t = 2.21, P < 0.05; R^2 = 0.20, R^2 \) change \( =0.17 \)). This effect remained significant when smoking was included as an additional covariate (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \beta = -1.05, t = 2.32, P < 0.05 \); group \( \beta = 0.49, t = 1.23, P = 0.23 \); smoking \( \beta = -0.26, t = 0.63, P = 0.54 \); dopamine synthesis capacity \( \times \) group \( \beta = 1.18, t = 2.26, P < 0.05; R^2 = 0.21, R^2 \) change \( =0.18 \). As previously reported (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013), right ventral striatal RPEs correlated inversely with right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity in 14 healthy controls (Pearson \( r = -0.64, P = 0.01 \); Spearman \( r = -0.53, P = 0.05 \); Fig. 3), 13 of whom had been taken from the previous publication. This correlation was not significant in 13 alcohol-dependent patients (Pearson \( r = -0.10, P = 0.74 \); Spearman \( r = -0.10, P = 0.74 \); Fig. 3).

We next tested for a moderation of the relationship between ventral striatal RPEs and FDOPA \( K_{in}^{app} \) by either chronic alcohol intake or craving across the entire sample (controls and patients). In this regression model, dopamine synthesis capacity was significantly and craving was trendwise significantly associated with RPEs (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \beta = -0.47, t = 2.11, P < 0.05 \); craving \( \beta = -0.36, t = 1.78, P = 0.09 \), whereas group and chronic alcohol intake were not (group \( \beta = 0.46, t = 0.98, P = 0.34 \); chronic alcohol intake \( \beta = 0.03, t = 0.15, P = 0.89 \). Crucially, the interaction of dopamine synthesis capacity and chronic alcohol intake reached significance (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \times \) chronic alcohol intake \( \beta = 0.65, t = 2.62, P < 0.05; R^2 = 0.36, R^2 \) change \( =0.21 \)), demonstrating a moderation of the relationship between RPEs and dopamine synthesis capacity in the right ventral striatum by chronic alcohol intake. No such interaction was observed for the interaction of craving and dopamine synthesis capacity (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \times \) craving \( \beta = 0.07, t = 0.24, P = 0.81; R^2 = 0.15, R^2 \) change \( =0.002 \)). This significant moderation effect was obtained when group and craving were controlled for, and also remained significant when smoking status was included as an additional covariate (dopamine synthesis capacity \( \beta = -0.47, t = 2.07, P = 0.05 \); group \( \beta = 0.47, t = 0.99, P = 0.34 \);
Disrupted dopaminergic regulation of reward prediction errors in the right ventral striatum of alcohol-dependent patients. The interaction of group and right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity reached significance in a regression model with right ventral striatal prediction errors (RPEs) as dependent variable. In controls (shown as asterisks), right ventral striatal RPEs were negatively correlated with right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity (Pearson $r = -0.64$, $P = 0.01$; Spearman $r = -0.53$, $P = 0.05$); this correlation was not significant in 13 alcohol-dependent patients (shown as circles, Pearson $r = -0.10$, $P = 0.74$; Spearman $r = -0.10$, $P = 0.74$). Mean parameter estimates of ventral striatal RPEs and dopamine synthesis capacity (mean Kinapp) were extracted by using the literature-based right ventral striatal VOI.

chronic alcohol intake $\beta = 0.01$, $t = 0.05$, $P = 0.96$; craving $\beta = -0.34$, $t = 1.60$, $P = 0.13$; smoking $\beta = -0.16$, $t = 0.39$, $P = 0.70$; dopamine synthesis capacity $\times$ chronic alcohol intake $\beta = 0.69$, $t = 2.5$, $P < 0.05$; $R^2 = 0.36$, $R^2$ change = 0.20). Splitting the entire sample into two groups at the median of chronic alcohol intake (6.02 kg) resulted in high-intake and low-intake groups that closely mapped onto diagnostic groups (13 participants including one patient with low chronic alcohol intake vs. 14 participants including two controls with high chronic alcohol intake). After correction for group and craving, the post hoc partial correlations between dopamine synthesis capacity and RPE reached significance in the group with low chronic alcohol intake ($r = -0.69$, $P < 0.05$) but not in the group with high chronic alcohol intake ($r = -0.06$, $P = 0.86$).

Power and permutation analysis

With respect to the negative correlation between dopamine synthesis capacity and RPEs in the right ventral striatum, healthy participants, who were reported in a previous publication (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013), were included as a control group in the present study. In these 14 healthy participants, we observed a strong negative correlation between right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and right ventral striatal RPEs ($r = -0.64$, $P = 0.01$, two-tailed). A power analysis based on this effect revealed an achieved power (1 $-$ $\beta$ error probability) of 0.82. Computation of the implied $\alpha$ error and power based on the $\beta/\alpha$ ratio of the initial power analysis, but assuming a doubled sample size of healthy participants ($n = 28$), showed an $\alpha$ error probability of 0.01 and a $\beta$ probability of 0.05, resulting in a power (1 $-$ $\beta$ probability) of 0.95. However, we acknowledge that low sample sizes generally tend to exaggerate effect sizes, even in cases where the observed effect is likely to be true (Button et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that we have replicated this negative correlation between right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and right ventral striatal RPEs in an independent sample of 29 healthy participants who underwent FDOPA PET and a different learning task during fMRI (L. Deserno, 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that we have replicated this negative correlation between right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and right ventral striatal RPEs in an independent sample of 29 healthy participants who underwent FDOPA PET and a different learning task during fMRI (L. Deserno, 2013).
Table 2. Distribution of best-fitting parameters and the negative log-likelihood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\beta_{\text{low}}$</th>
<th>$\beta_{\text{high}}$</th>
<th>$\gamma$</th>
<th>$iQ$</th>
<th>$-LL$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25th percentile</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-111.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-89.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th percentile</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-62.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$q$, learning; $\beta_{\text{low}}$ and $\beta_{\text{high}}$, sensitivity to reward or punishment; $-LL$, negative log-likelihood.


Furthermore, we calculated the probability of observing the reported moderation effect, i.e. the interaction of ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and chronic, habitual alcohol intake, by chance. To this end, we performed a regression analysis with right ventral striatal RPEs as dependent variables and right ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity, chronic, habitual alcohol intake and the interaction of both as independent variables. The patients’ measurements for right ventral striatal RPEs and dopamine synthesis capacity were replaced by randomly drawing from the control. This simulation was based on 10 000 permutations, and revealed an interaction of dopamine synthesis capacity and chronic, habitual alcohol intake in only 3.6% of cases, indicating a low probability of obtaining the observed moderation effect by chance.

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first molecular imaging study demonstrating that disrupted dopaminergic regulation of neural learning signals is linked to the amount of chronic alcohol intake. Combining FDOPA PET and fMRI, we observed that chronic alcohol intake abolishes a negative association between dopamine synthesis capacity and ventral striatal RPEs, which we had reported previously (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). Also, dopamine-dysregulated ventral striatal RPEs correlated negatively with craving for alcohol in patients.

The observation of disrupted modulation of ventral striatal RPEs, correlating with a long-term measure of dopamine synthesis capacity in controls (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013), sheds light on the dysregulation of ventral striatal dopaminergic neurotransmission in detoxified alcohol-dependent patients. We previously observed in healthy controls that levels of baseline dopamine synthesis capacity were inversely related to the encoding of event-related ventral striatal RPEs, a potential proxy of phasic dopamine release (Schlagenhauf et al., 2013). This is in keeping with the hypothesis that baseline, tonic (extracellular) dopamine levels reduce event-related, phasic dopamine release (Grace, 1991; Ito et al., 2011). We now demonstrate that this interaction is absent in detoxified alcohol-dependent patients, suggesting impaired interactions between different aspects (e.g. tonic and phasic) of dopamine neurotransmission in alcohol dependence.

Previous human PET studies support the hypothesis that acute and chronic alcohol intake alter dopaminergic neurotransmission in the ventral striatum: relative to orange juice consumption, acute alcohol intake reduced ventral striatal D2/D3 receptor availability (Boileau et al., 2003), as did alcohol infusion (Yoder et al., 2009), which is consistent with radiotracer displacement by stimulated dopamine release. Furthermore, the baseline availability of ventral striatal D2/D3 receptors predicted subjective responses to acute alcohol infusion (Yoder et al., 2005). Interestingly, naturalistic alcohol cues not followed by alcohol infusion during PET scanning resulted in increased D2/D3 availability relative to baseline, which is suggestive of declining dopamine release. As proposed by the authors, these findings do indeed mirror some properties of RPEs (Yoder et al., 2009). As distinct from acute effects of alcohol, chronic consumption in alcohol dependence was also characterised by reduced availability of (ventral) striatal D2/D3 receptors (Volkow et al., 1996; Heinz et al., 2004), plausibly reflecting possibly counter-adaptive homeostatic downregulation in the presence of long-term alcohol-induced dopamine release (Koob & Le Moal, 1997). Dual tracer studies have shown that D2/D3 receptor availability in healthy controls is inversely related to both dopamine synthesis capacity and amphetamine-induced dopamine release. Indeed, direct evidence for such an interaction is provided by recent animal research: D2 autoreceptor-deficient mice showed elevated dopamine synthesis and disinhibited dopamine release in the striatum (Bello et al., 2011). Thus, alcohol dependence might be expected to be characterised both by elevated synthesis and release of dopamine and by reduced availability of dopamine striatal D2/D3 receptors (Volkow et al., 1996; Heinz et al., 2004). Increased striatal dopamine synthesis capacity was reported in one FDOPA PET study of detoxified alcohol-dependent patients (Tuholmen et al., 1998). However, this finding was not replicated, either in our previous study (Heinz et al., 2005) or in the present sample. Presynaptic dopamine release evoked by psychostimulants was blunted in a PET depletion paradigm in recently detoxified alcohol-dependent patients (Martinez et al., 2005), suggesting that presynaptic dopamine storage and release are impaired in recently detoxified patients. Indeed, microdialysis experiments have confirmed substantial reductions in ventral striatal dopamine levels in detoxified rodents (Diana et al., 1993). Neurotoxic effects of chronic ethanol on dopamine neurons and their striatal terminals may help to explain these observations. This latter interpretation is supported by a few longitudinal studies indicating that reduced D2/D3 receptor availability recovers slowly if at all (Volkow et al., 2002), probably imparting an increased risk for subsequent relapse (Heinz et al., 1996). Persistent reductions in dopamine release, receptor binding or synthesis can contribute to mood impairments (Chang & Grace, 2014) and impaired reward-associated learning (Schultz et al., 1997; Steinberg et al., 2013).

On the basis of these considerations, two questions arise: first, why is ventral striatal RPE signaling in the present sample and in a previous sample (Park et al., 2010) of alcohol-dependent patients still in the same range as in healthy controls; and second, what are the implications of the observed lack of an association between long-term ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and phasic, event-related ventral striatal RPEs?

With respect to the first question, patients and controls showed no group difference in ventral striatal RPE signals, and this replicates findings in a previous sample (Park et al., 2010). Notably, the reinforcement learning model used to fit the observed choice behavior and to generate regressors for the fMRI analysis explained learning equally well in both of our groups. Thus, learning based on RPEs is equally well described by this particular type of model, which may be one reason why the neural correlates were similar between patients and controls. Despite the similar model fits, behavior differed substantially between groups, in that patients showed impaired flexible behavioral adaptation. This, in turn, sug-
gests the possibility that RPEs in alcohol-dependent patients are incorporated into behavior in a manner that differs from healthy controls. One contemporary model holds that addiction involves enhanced transfer of drug-related signals from ventral to dorsal striatal areas (Wong et al., 2006; Belin & Everitt, 2008), which is seen in the disrupted acquisition of new non-drug behavioral patterns (Park et al., 2010; Ersche et al., 2011). In agreement with this, when using advanced F.D.O.P.A kinetic modeling, we have seen reduced dopamine storage capacity in the right caudate nucleus of alcohol-dependent patients (Kumakura et al., 2013). The converse of this conclusion would be to contend that RPEs determine behavior less effectively in patients, because gating of non-drug-associated learning signals from the ventral to dorsal striatum controlled by loops via the lateral prefrontal cortex is reduced (Haber & Knutson, 2010; Park et al., 2010). At this point, it is important to note that craving scores correlated negatively with ventral striatal RPE signals in the present detoxified patients. In this regard, we suggest that reduced coding of new, reward-related information via RPEs facilitates craving for habitual consumption of alcohol. Previous studies have shown that craving severity reflects drug-associated cue reactivity (Volkow et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2006), and is inversely related to non-drug-associated cue reactivity (Wrase et al., 2007). The latter observation is consistent with the negative relationship between craving and ventral striatal RPE signals reported here. Overall, this suggests that craving for a habitually consumed drug of abuse (thought to be associated with the dorsal striatum) is increased when an individual’s ability to encode RPEs in other tasks related to drugs is low.

With respect to the second question, our results suggest that (phasic) ventral striatal learning signals (measured via fMRI) are substantially intact in alcohol-dependent patients, whereas their relationship with (tonic) dopamine synthesis capacity is disrupted. On the basis of animal research, it has been proposed that tonic extracellular dopamine concentrations inhibit presynaptic (phasic) dopamine release (Grace, 1991). Recent work has provided evidence for the crucial involvement of D2 autoreceptors in this autoregulatory process (Bello et al., 2011). Although the precise role of midbrain somatodendritic autoreceptors (Bello et al., 2011) vs. presynaptic terminal autoreceptors (Grace, 1991) in regulating firing and synthesis rates of dopamine neurons is unclear, the fact that alterations in dopamine neuron firing induced by somatodendritic autoreceptor stimulation will change tonic dopamine stimulation in the striatum (Floresco et al., 2003) shows that these factors are highly interdependent. Furthermore, the idea of an inhibitory relationship between tonic and phasic dopamine release does not exclude the possibility that changes in dopamine neuron activity, as reflected by changes in synthesis, could also be considered to have a positive effect on phasic release. Again, the precise mechanisms remain elusive so far. However, the present study shows that the association of dopamine synthesis capacity and RPEs is disrupted in the ventral striatum of alcohol-dependent patients, and that the degree of this impairment is moderated by the amount of chronic alcohol intake. This disrupted balance of different aspects of dopamine neurotransmission might conceivably impair the propagation of feedback-driven learning signals to the prefrontal cortex (Braver & Cohen, 1999; Frank, 2011). This notion is supported by a previous study, which also reported intact ventral striatal RPE coding but observed diminished functional connectivity between the ventral striatum and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex in patients that was related to the observed behavioral impairment in patients (Park et al., 2010). Indeed, a profound decrease in prefrontal energy metabolism was reported in alcohol-dependent patients as compared with controls (Volkow et al., 2007). Future studies should explore whether a lack of (tonic) dopaminergic regulation of phasic learning signals impairs striatal–prefrontal connectivity and executive behavioral control.

Limitations of our study include the correlational nature of our results and the relatively small sample size resulting from the requirement to scan patients with both PET and fMRI in separate sessions, although our power and permutation analyses support the presented findings. The restriction to men was intended to avoid variance resulting from gender differences in PET dopamine measures (Laakso et al., 2002). Also, it would be desirable to measure the entire triad of D2/D3 receptors, dopamine synthesis capacity and fMRI prediction errors to test more definitively the relationship between these variables within subjects rather than across studies. Future studies could also benefit from longitudinal designs to examine temporal dynamics in the dopaminergic system during withdrawal. Dopamine is not the sole mediator of striatal circuits, and recent animal research suggests that associative learning signals in the ventral striatum are also modulated by cholinergic inputs and the activation of GABAergic neurons in the ventral tegmental area (Brown et al., 2012). The interaction of these neurotransmitter systems and their contribution to dysfunctional flexible learning in alcohol dependence is also an important target for future studies.

In conclusion, we observed that an association between ventral striatal dopamine synthesis capacity and RPEs, although prominent in healthy individuals, is abolished in alcohol-dependent patients. This disruption was modulated by chronic alcohol intake, resulting in a lack of an association between the two measures in individuals with high levels of alcohol intake. Furthermore, we observed that weaker ventral striatal coding of RPEs predicts higher craving for alcohol. Together, these two findings support the hypothesis that abolished interactions between tonic dopamine measures and phasic learning signals interfere with the ability of recently detoxified patients to flexibly adapt behavior to non-drug rewards and pursue reinforcers other than the habitually consumed drugs of abuse.

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Abbreviations
FDOPA, 6-L[3H]fluoro-DOPA; fMRI, functional magnetic resonance imaging; FWE, familywise-error; LDH, Lifetime Drinking History; MNI, Montreal Neurological Institute; OCBS, Obsessive Compulsive Drinking Scale; PET, positron emission tomography; RPE, reward prediction error; VOI, volume of interest.

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