Complementary Motivational Roles of Nigroaccumbens and Nigrostriatal Dopaminergic Pathways


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Word Count: 448

Keywords: Dopamine, striatum, substantia nigra, ventral tegmental area

Financial Disclosure/Conflict of Interest: None.

Funding Sources: P50NS091856, P30AG053760, Michael J. Fox Foundation

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1002/mds.27504

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Processes associated with striatal complex dopaminergic neurotransmission include reinforcement learning, habit formation, motivational processes, and vigor modulation. Prior experimental work focused usually on one of these aspects of striatal complex dopaminergic signaling. Saunders and colleagues present an elegant study suggesting that different populations of midbrain dopaminergic neurons mediate distinct but complementary functions.\(^1\)

Saunders et al. used a modification of the oldest reinforcement learning paradigm – Pavlovian conditioning. They employed a conventional conditioned stimulus (CS; light & tone cue) and optogenetic stimulation of midbrain dopaminergic neurons to replace the natural rewards used as unconditioned stimuli (US). Optogenetic activation was designed to mimic the phasic (burst) generation of dopaminergic neuron action potentials accompanying reward presentation. Using locomotion as the conditioned response (CR), Saunders et al. demonstrate that pairing of CS with optogenetic mimicry of phasic midbrain dopamine neuron activity reproduces all features of conventional Pavlovian conditioning. Phasic midbrain dopamine neuron activity appears both necessary and sufficient to induce Pavlovian conditioning – an impressive finding.

Targeting optogenetic activation at either substantia nigra pars compacta (SNc) neurons projecting to the dorsal striatum or ventral tegmental area (VTA) neurons projecting to the nucleus accumbens, Saunders et al. identified distinct functional contributions to the locomotion CR. Pairing CS presentation with VTA neuron activation induced CS evoked approach behavior towards the CS light. This approach behavior was absent in animals pairing CS presentation with SNc activation. These animals experienced general locomotion activation with CS cue presentation. The implication is that the VTA-accumbens projection subserves learning of cue...
values while the SNc-striatal projection modulates movement vigor. Both these functions are necessary for appropriate responses to an environmental cue signaling reward.

This functional differentiation of the VTA-accumbens and SNc-striatal projections is consistent with common clinical phenomena. The VTA-accumbens projection is relatively spared in Parkinson disease. Ventral striatal neurons also express higher levels of dopamine D3 receptors than dorsal striatal neurons. Dopamine replacement medications, particularly D2/D3 preferring dopamine agonists, will mimic robust activation of VTA-accumbens dopaminergic neurons, even in the face of poor motor performance secondary to advanced degeneration of the SNc-dorsal striatal projection. This is a situation analogous to selective optogenetic activation of VTA neurons. Treatment related complications such as punding and impulse control disorders are plausible analogues of enhanced CS presentation approach behavior described by Saunders et al., and may represent distorted learning of cue or action values.

Saunders et al. imply that functional differentiation is due to different properties of these dopaminergic neuron populations. These results, however, may reflect the functional differentiation of the striatal complex based on differing corticostriate inputs. The fact that identical optogenetic excitation of VTA and SNc neurons produced different behavioral consequences suggests that functional specificity resides in the highly differentiated striatal complex.
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Author Roles: RLA is responsible for all aspects of this article.

Financial Disclosure: Grant support from P50NS091856, P30AG053760, the Michael J. Fox Foundation, R25 NS089450, R21 NS088302. Service on Data Safety and Monitoring Boards for LEGATO-HD (Icon/Teva), HTT\textsubscript{R}X (Ionsis), and 251AD201 & 251PP301 (Icon/Biogen) trials.
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Date: 8/23/18

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Manuscript number: MDS-18-0907.R1

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