Genetic effects influencing risk for major depressive disorder in China and Europe

A. C. Heath  
*Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis*

J. P. Rice  
*Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis*

et al

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Genetic effects influencing risk for major depressive disorder in China and Europe

TB Bigdeli1, S Ripke2-3, RE Peterson1, M Trzaskowski4-6, S-A Bacanu1, A Abdellaoui7, TFM Andlaua8,9, ATF Beekman10, K Berger11, DHR Blackwood12, DI Boomsma7, G Breen13,14, BN Buttenschøn15, EM Byrne5, S Cichon5,6,17,18,19, T-K Clarke12, B Couvy-Duchesne6,20,21, SD Gordon20, HJ Grabe31, SP Hamilton32, O Hardiman33, C Hayward34, AC Heath35, AK Henders6, S Herms19,24,36, IB Hickie37, N Craddock22, EJC de Geus7,23, F Degenhardt19,24, EC Dunn25,26,27, AC Edwards1, AH Fanous28, AJ Forstner19,24, J Frank29, M Gill30, P Hoffmann19,24,38, G Homuth39, J-J Hottenga7, M Ising40, R Jansen10, S Kloiber40, JA Knowles41, M Lange29, Q SLi42, S Lucae40, MJ Owen52, BWJH Penninx10, ML Pergadia53, RH Perlis54,55, WJ Peyrot10, DJ Porteous56, JB Potash57, JP Rice58, M Rietschel29, BP Riley1,59, A Teumer69, J Treutlein29, S Van der Auwera31, G van Grootheest10, AM van Hemert70, H Völzke69, BT Webb1, MM Weissman71,72, CM Middeldorp7, Y Milaneschi10, GW Montgomery47, O Mors18, B Müller-Myhsok8,9,49, M Nauck50, DR Nyholt10, S Kloiber40, JA Knowles41, M Lange29, Q SLi42, S Lucae40, MJ Owen52, BWJH Penninx10, ML Pergadia53, RH Perlis54,55, WJ Peyrot10, DJ Porteous56, JB Potash57, JP Rice58, M Rietschel29, BP Riley1,59, A Teumer69, J Treutlein29, S Van der Auwera31, G van Grootheest10, AM van Hemert70, H Völzke69, BT Webb1, MM Weissman71,72, C Wellman11, G Willemsen7, SH Witt29, DF Levinson73, CM Lewis14,74, NR Wray5,6, J Flint75,76, PF Sullivan77,78,79, and KS Kendler15,9 on behalf of the CONVERGE consortium and Major Depressive Disorder Working Group of the Psychiatric Genomics Consortium

1Department of Psychiatry, Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, Richmond, VA, USA; 2Department of Psychiatry, Charite Universitätsmedizin Berlin Campus Benjamin Franklin, Berlin, Germany; 3Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute, Cambridge, MA, USA; 4Analytic and Translational Genetics Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; 5Department of Molecular Biosciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 6Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 7Department of Biological Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; 8Department of Translational Research in Psychiatry, Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry, Munich, Germany; 9Munich Cluster for Systems Neurology (SyNergy), Munich, Germany; 10Department of Psychiatry, VU University Medical Center and GGZ inEst, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; 11Institute of Epidemiology and Social Medicine, University of Muenster, Münster, Germany; 12Division of Psychiatry, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; 13King’s College London, NIHR BRC for Mental Health, London, UK; 14King’s College London, MRC Social Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, London, UK; 15Department of Clinical Medicine, Translational Neuropsychiatry Unit, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; 16Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA; 17Division of Medical Genetics, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland; 18Institute of Neuroscience and Medicine (INM-1), Research Center Juelich, Jülich, Germany; 19Institute of Human Genetics, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany; 20Department of Genetics and Computational Biology, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 21Centre for Advanced Imaging, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 22Department of Psychological Medicine, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK; 23EMGO+ Institute, VU University Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; 24Department of Genomics, Life and Brain Center, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany; 25Stanley Center for Psychiatric Research, Broad Institute, Cambridge, MA, USA; 26Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; 27Psychiatric and Neurodevelopmental Genetics Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; 28Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, State University of New York Downstate Medical Center, Brooklyn, NY, USA; 29Department of Genetic Epidemiology in Psychiatry, Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany; 30Department of Psychiatry, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; 31Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany; 32Department of Psychiatry, Kaiser-Permanente Northern California, San Francisco, CA, USA; 33Institute of Neuroscience, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; 34Medical Research Council Human Genetics Unit, Institute of Genetics and Molecular Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; 35Department of Psychiatry, Washington University in Saint Louis School of Medicine, St Louis, MO, USA; 36Division of Medical Genetics, Department of Biomedicine, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland; 37Brain and Mind Research Institute, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia; 38Human Genomics Research Group, Department of Biomedicine, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland; 39Department of Functional Genomics, Interfaculty Institute for Genetics and Functional Genomics, University Medicine and Erasmus Medical Center, University of Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; 40Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry, Munich, Germany; 41Department of Psychiatry and The Behavioral Sciences, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA; 42Neuroscience Therapeutic Area, Janssen Research and Development, LLC, Titusville, NJ, USA; 43Department of Psychiatry, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, MO, USA; 44School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 45Department of Psychiatry, New York State Psychiatric Institute, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, NY, USA; 46Centre for Cognitive Ageing and Cognitive Epidemiology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; 47Institute for Molecular Biology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 48Psychosis Research Unit, Aarhus University Hospital, Risskov, Denmark; 49Department of Molecular and Clinical Pharmacology, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK; 50Institute of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany; 51Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; 52MRC Centre for Neuropsychiatric Genetics and Genomics, Cardiff University School of Medicine, Cardiff, UK; 53Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA; 54Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA; 55Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; 56Medical Genetics Section, CGEM, IGMM, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; 57Department of Psychiatry, University of Iowa, Iowa, IA, USA; 58Department of Psychiatry, Washington University School of Medicine in Saint Louis, St Louis, MO, USA; 59Department of Human and Molecular Genetics, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, Richmond, VA, USA; 60Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology II, Institute of Neurosciences, Center for Biomedical Research, University of Granada, Granada, Spain; 61King’s College London, MRC Social Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, London, UK; 62Department of Psychiatry, University of Groningen, University of Maastricht, University of Twente, Groningen, The Netherlands; 63Institute of Psychiatric Phenomics and Genomics, Medical Center of the University of Vienna, Campus Innenstadt, Vienna, Austria; 64Division of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center Göttingen, Göttingen, The Netherlands; 65Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA; 66Human Genetics Branch, NHGRI Division of Intramural Research Programs, Bethesda, MD, USA; 67Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD, USA; 68Division of Psychiatry, Group Health, Seattle, WA, USA; 69Institute for Community Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany; 70Department of Psychiatry, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands; 71Division of Epidemiology, New York State Psychiatric Institute, New York, NY, USA; 72Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, NY, USA; 73Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA; 74King’s College London, Department of Medical and Molecular Genetics, London, UK; 75Merton College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; 76Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; 77Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Karolinska Institutet, Solna, Sweden; 78Department of Genetics, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA; 79Department of Psychiatry, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA; 80Correspondence: Dr TB Bigdeli, Department of Psychiatry, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, 800 E. Leigh Street, Biotech One, Suite 101, Richmond, VA 23219-1534, USA.

E-mail: tim.bigdeli@gmail.com

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Major depressive disorder (MDD) is the most common psychiatric illness and a leading cause of disability worldwide. Despite twin studies indicating its modest heritability (~30–40%), extensive heterogeneity and a complex genetic architecture have complicated efforts to detect associated genetic risk variants. We combined single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) summary statistics from the CONVERGE and PGC studies of MDD, representing 10,502 Chinese (5282 cases and 5220 controls) and 18,663 European (9447 cases and 9215 controls) subjects. We determined the fraction of SNPs displaying consistent directions of effect, assessed the significance of polygenic risk scores and estimated the genetic correlation of MDD across ancestries. Subsequent trans-ancestry meta-analyses combined SNP-level evidence of association. Sign tests and polygenic score profiling weakly support an overlap of SNP effects between East Asian and European populations. We estimated the trans-ancestry genetic correlation of lifetime MDD as 0.33; female-only and recurrent MDD yielded estimates of 0.40 and 0.41, respectively. Common variants downstream of GPHN achieved genome-wide significance by Bayesian trans-ancestry meta-analysis (rs93234947; log_{10} Bayes Factor = 8.08) but failed to replicate in an independent European sample (P = 0.911). Gene-set enrichment analyses indicate enrichment of genes involved in neuronal development and axonal trafficking. We successfully demonstrate a partially shared polygenic basis of MDD in East Asian and European populations. Taken together, these findings support a complex etiology for MDD and possible population differences in predisposing genetic factors, with important implications for future genetic studies.

INTRODUCTION

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is the most common psychiatric illness and a leading cause of disability worldwide.1,2 MDD is modestly heritable (30–40%), may be genetically complex and likely heterogeneous, complicating efforts to identify replicable risk loci.3,4 The successful detection and interpretation of genetic variation requires both increased sample sizes5 and empirically driven efforts to reduce phenotypic heterogeneity.6

Underpinning the success of genome-wide association studies (GWAS) of numerous traits has been the emergence of large research consortia.7 In addition to facilitating larger sample sizes, many consortia are increasingly ancestrally diverse, enabling identification of novel associations8–10 and independent replication of reported findings,11,12 as well as improving fine mapping of implicated loci.13–15 Consistent associations at replicated loci have been reported for psychiatric disorders13 and non-psychiatric traits.8,11,16–18 and shared liabilities are often borne out by genome-wide polygenic analyses.19–21

Whether genetic factors predisposing to MDD are shared across ancestries is not well established, and two replicated genome-wide significant associations for MDD in China had markedly lower allele frequencies in Europeans and thus did not replicate.22–24 Allelic heterogeneity and population-specific genetic effects have been reported for several complex traits;8,25–26 however, the extent of differences across ancestries remains relatively unexplored.

We sought to clarify the extent to which liability to MDD is shared between European and East Asian populations via collaboration between the Psychiatric Genomics Consortium (PGC)22 and CONVERGE6 studies of MDD. We asked whether observed directions of allelic effects are consistent across populations, assessed the significance of cross-ancestry polygenic scores and estimated the trans-ancestry genetic correlation of MDD. We attempted to disentangle population differences from those arising from ascertainment or phenotypic definition through analyses of recurrent MDD and in female subjects. These meta-analyses represent the largest trans-ancestry genetic study of MDD to date.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ascertainment and genotyping

Sample ascertainment, SNP genotyping and quality-control procedures for PGC and CONVERGE have been described previously.6,22 Individual sites and sample sizes are presented in Table 1.
We attempted to address possible heterogeneity by examining estimates of genetic correlation within- and across-ancestries, and for varying phenotypic definitions. Briefly, we divided the PGC and CONVERGE studies into approximate halves, performing association analysis in each subsample as described above, and subsequently estimating the genetic correlations between these nonoverlapping halves. Within the PGC, we randomly selected 5 of 10 studies ($S_{EUR}$), with the remaining five studies taken as a comparison sample ($S_{AS}$). We selected $N = 30$ of a possible 126 paired comparisons for which the sample sizes of each subset were equivalent ($\sim 1:1$). We followed an analogous procedure in CONVERGE, selecting 12 of 24 sequencing batches ($S_{ASN2}$), with the remaining 12 batches taken as a comparison sample ($S_{EURS}$). Within-ancestry comparisons were between nonoverlapping subsets (for example, $S_{EUR}$ versus $S_{AS}$) and utilized reference scores based on a single population, calculated as described above. Cross-ancestry estimates were based on comparisons of the full set of CONVERGE results to each of $N = 60$ subsets from the within-PGC analysis. We compared cross-ancestry estimates for lifetime MDD, recurrent MDD and females-only by paired Student’s $t$-tests.

### Table 1. Sample sizes by participating study site in discovery and replication phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Ancestry</th>
<th>No. of controls</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>No. of recurrent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Bonn Mannheim</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1072 (48.3)</td>
<td>588 (64.1)</td>
<td>408 (66.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GenRED1</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1097 (42.7)</td>
<td>1020 (70.8)</td>
<td>1020 (70.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GSK MPiP</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>859 (67.6)</td>
<td>861 (67.4)</td>
<td>831 (67.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MPiP MARS 650</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>539 (54.5)</td>
<td>373 (55.2)</td>
<td>128 (59.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NIH NHLBI/RETR/NESDA</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1727 (62.0)</td>
<td>1685 (69.2)</td>
<td>1934 (71.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QIMR I317</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>960 (55.2)</td>
<td>1017 (61.0)</td>
<td>524 (65.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QIMR I617</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>748 (61.9)</td>
<td>433 (72.3)</td>
<td>250 (72.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RADIANT</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1549 (54.2)</td>
<td>1903 (70.5)</td>
<td>1441 (70.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RADIANT—Germany</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>217 (53.9)</td>
<td>327 (65.7)</td>
<td>254 (70.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>STAR*D</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>447 (43.8)</td>
<td>1240 (58.6)</td>
<td>912 (59.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replication &amp;</td>
<td>CONVERGE$^a$</td>
<td>EAS</td>
<td>5220</td>
<td>5282</td>
<td>5282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>285 (48.8)</td>
<td>372 (59.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DepGenesNetwork</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>470 (62.6)</td>
<td>471 (77.5)</td>
<td>471 (77.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GenRED2</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>474 (48.9)</td>
<td>830 (82.8)</td>
<td>830 (82.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harvard i2b2</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1067 (50.1)</td>
<td>806 (66.9)</td>
<td>806 (66.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Janssen</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1380 (60.5)</td>
<td>466 (68.2)</td>
<td>466 (68.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QIMR COEX</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>526 (57.6)</td>
<td>565 (71.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RADIANT—Irish cases</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>340 (52.4)</td>
<td>109 (66.6)</td>
<td>109 (82.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RADIANT—US cases</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>378 (51.9)</td>
<td>223 (78.5)</td>
<td>223 (78.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RADIANT—Denmark cases</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>516 (40.7)</td>
<td>133 (69.9)</td>
<td>133 (69.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SHIP-LEGEND</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>1087 (44.0)</td>
<td>366 (67.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SHIP-TREND-0</td>
<td>EUR</td>
<td>484 (44.6)</td>
<td>163 (71.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td></td>
<td>14 435 (71.3)</td>
<td>14 729 (78.4)</td>
<td>11 894 (82.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Replication</td>
<td></td>
<td>7007 (51.6)</td>
<td>4504 (72.3)</td>
<td>2572 (75.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: EAS, East Asian; EUR, European. Numbers of female subjects are displayed parenthetically. $^a$All cases and controls were female. $^b$See note in Materials and methods section.

### Gene-set enrichment analyses

We applied DEPICT$^{34}$ to identify significantly enriched gene sets and pathways in specific tissues and cell types. Briefly, genes in the vicinity of associated SNPs are tested for enrichment for 'reconstituted' gene sets, comprising curated sets expanded to include co-regulated loci. Tissue and cell-type enrichment analysis is conducted by testing whether genes were highly expressed in any of 209 MeSH annotations based on microarray data for the Affymetrix U133 Plus 2.0 Array platform (Santa Clara, CA, USA).$^{35}$

Because DEPICT adjusts for potential sources of confounding and multiple testing using precomputed GWAS of randomly distributed phenotypes, we elected to use as input $P$-values from inverse variance weighted (that is, fixed effects) meta-analysis of PGC and CONVERGE. Recalling that MANTRA is effectively a Bayesian implementation of fixed-effects meta-analysis when allele frequencies are similar between populations, we considered this to be an appropriate strategy, if not somewhat conservative.

### Replication analyses

A total of 4504 cases and 7007 controls from 10 independent, European-ancestry cohorts were available for replication (Table 1). These studies represent recent additions to the PGC that were not included in the previously published analysis.$^{22}$ A brief description of each study site is given in the Supplementary Material. At the time of writing, neither comparable East Asian GWAS data sets nor subject-level data on the number of depressive episodes were readily available. For analyses of recurrent illness, we included those replication studies that specifically ascertained recurrent cases.

For each phenotype definition, we identified independent (pairwise $\chi^2 < 0.1$ within 500-kb windows based on European 1000 Genomes Project samples), significant autosomal SNPs (log$_{10}$BF $> 5$) from the trans-ancestry meta-analyses (10, 7 and 7 for MDD, female-only and recurrent MDD, respectively). We tested these SNPs for association using logistic regression and including ancestry principal components as covariates. We performed inverse-variance weighted meta-analyses of the replication samples using METAL. We also performed binomial sign tests comparing the directions of allelic effects across discovery and replication stages.
RESULTS
Polygenic risk score profiling and binomial sign tests
We employed polygenic risk score profiling to determine whether findings from CONVERGE or the PGC are, in aggregate, significantly associated with the MDD status in the other study. Scores based on PGC results were nominally associated with MDD in CONVERGE (Figure 1; Supplementary Tables S1–S3), accounting for ~0.1% of risk (Nagelkerke pseudo-$R^2 = 7.46 \times 10^{-4}$; $P = 0.02$). Scores based on results for female-only yielded similar results (Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2 = 7.60 \times 10^{-4}; P = 0.014$), whereas scores for recurrent MDD were most strongly associated overall (Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2 = 0.00201; P = 6.56 \times 10^{-5}$). Scores from CONVERGE were nominally associated with MDD status in the PGC data (Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2 = 6.08 \times 10^{-3}; P = 6.66 \times 10^{-3}$); these scores yielded similar results when considering female-only (Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2 = 0.00111; P = 4.15 \times 10^{-3}$), and recurrent MDD (Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2 = 9.13 \times 10^{-4}; P = 2.02 \times 10^{-3}$). However, only the results based on PGC-trained polygenic scores for recurrent MDD remained significant after correction for multiple testing (Supplementary Table S2).

We evaluated whether the observed fraction of results displaying the same direction of allelic effects across studies was significantly greater than expected by chance (that is, 50%) using binomial sign tests. Supplementary Table S4 gives the number of LD-independent SNPs considered, fraction of these SNPs displaying the same direction of effect in the other study and a one-sided binomial test $P$-value. For lifetime MDD, we observed the largest excess of same-direction effects in PGC for SNPs significant at $P < 0.2$ in CONVERGE (50.7%; binomial $P = 1.11 \times 10^{-5}$). How- ever, only the results based on PGC-trained polygenic scores for recurrent MDD remained significant after correction for multiple testing (Supplementary Table S2).

Overall, the greatest excess of same-direction effects in CONVERGE was observed for SNPs significant at $P < 0.1$ in the PGC recurrent MDD analysis (51.1%; binomial $P = 3.05 \times 10^{-5}$); the fraction of same-direction effects in the PGC was largest in the female-only analysis, for SNPs significant at $P < 0.2$ in CONVERGE (50.9%; binomial $P = 1.11 \times 10^{-5}$). Although statistically significant after correcting for multiple tests (Supplementary Table S4), the observed excess of same-direction effects represents only a very small deviation from expectation under the null hypothesis.

Trans-ancestry genetic correlation
Table 2 displays the results of the trans-ancestry genetic correlation between East Asian and European populations. For lifetime MDD ($\rho_g = 0.332$, 95% confidence interval (CI): (0.270, 0.394)), this was both significantly greater than zero ($P_{\rho_g > 0} = 7.23 \times 10^{-26}$) and significantly less than one ($P_{\rho_g < 1} = 1.40 \times 10^{-26}$), indicating a partially shared polygenic basis of MDD risk between East Asians and Europeans. These findings remain significant after correction for multiple tests.

By comparison, recurrent MDD and females-only yielded slightly higher estimates of genetic correlation (Table 2). We compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait*</th>
<th>$\rho_g$</th>
<th>$P_{\rho_g &gt; 0}$</th>
<th>$P_{\rho_g &lt; 1}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime MDD</td>
<td>0.332 (0.270, 0.394)</td>
<td>$7.23 \times 10^{-26}$</td>
<td>$1.40 \times 10^{-26}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-only MDD</td>
<td>0.402 (0.326, 0.477)</td>
<td>$2.04 \times 10^{-25}$</td>
<td>$2.59 \times 10^{-54}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recurrent MDD</td>
<td>0.410 (0.343, 0.477)</td>
<td>$5.40 \times 10^{-33}$</td>
<td>$2.23 \times 10^{-66}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*European prevalences of lifetime, females-only and recurrent MDD were assumed to be 0.15, 0.20 and 0.105, respectively; prevalence of recurrent MDD among Chinese women was assumed to be 0.08. Estimates of $\rho_g$ are displayed with corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1. Trans-ancestry association of polygenic risk scores with major depressive disorder. For scores based on results from PGC or CONVERGE, the variance in risk explained in the other study is shown on the y axis in terms of Nagelkerke’s pseudo-$R^2$; scores based on various $P$-value inclusion thresholds are displayed as shaded bars. CONVERGE, China, Oxford and Virginia Commonwealth University Experimental Research on Genetic Epidemiology; MDD, major depressive disorder; PGC, Psychiatric Genomics Consortium.
these estimates by assuming an approximately normal distribution for $\rho_o$ and obtaining a $Z$-score for the difference in values; these differences were found to be nominally significant for both recurrent MDD ($P_{one-sided} = 0.023$) and females-only ($P_{one-sided} = 0.044$). We followed up these results by calculating genetic effect correlation estimates based on comparisons of CONVERGE to $N = 60$ random subsets of the PGC data (Supplementary Figure S1). Compared with lifetime MDD ($\rho = 0.309$; 95% CI: (0.290, 0.327)), estimates of $\rho_o$ were significantly higher for females-only ($\rho = 0.372$, 95% CI: (0.344, 0.401); $t(59) = 7.41$, $P_{one-sided} = 2.69 \times 10^{-10}$) and recurrent MDD ($\rho = 0.375$, 95% CI: (0.362, 0.389); $t(59) = 15.29$, $P_{one-sided} = 1.74 \times 10^{-22}$).

To aid our interpretation of the cross-ancestry results, we derived analogous within-ancestry estimates for East Asians ($\rho = 0.926$, 95% CI: (0.967, 0.967)) and Europeans ($\rho = 0.807$, 95% CI: (0.856, 0.856); Supplementary Figure S2). Notably, within-ancestry analysis of East Asians yielded significantly greater estimates of $\rho_o$ ($t(56.45) = 3.70$, $P_{two-sided} = 0.0005$). However, as CONVERGE represents a single study, actual population differences are confounded here with those arising from ascertainment or heterogeneity in assessment methods and instruments among participating PGC studies.

**SNP-based meta-analyses**

We observed the strongest overall evidence of association experiment-wide between SNPs upstream of gephyrin (GPHN) at 14q23.3 (rs9323497; log$_{10}$BF = 8.08) and lifetime MDD (Supplementary Figures S3 and S4). Associated SNPs show marked differences in allele frequencies between East Asian and European populations and opposing directions of allelic effect in CONVERGE and PGC (Supplementary Figure 4). This locus encodes a neuronal assembly protein that anchors glycine and GABAA receptors to the postsynaptic density in inhibitory neurons. Intriguingly, the gephrin region exhibits an unusual ‘yin-yang’ haplotype structure reflecting strong positive selection related to recent, rapid human evolution, and has previously yielded suggestive evidence of association with depressive symptoms in the general population.

A total of 10 independent associated SNPs (log$_{10}$BF > 5) were prioritized for replication (Supplementary Table S5; Supplementary Figure S4); of these, three were in or near GPHN, two represent previously reported associations in CONVERGE that did not replicate in PGC and one was the strongest reported association in the original PGC study. No single SNP in either the females-only or recurrent MDD analyses attained genome-wide significance (Supplementary Figure S3). From each of these analyses, seven independent associated SNPs were taken forward to the replication stage (Supplementary Tables S6 and S7).

We attempted to replicate these single-SNP associations in a collection of independent replication samples (4504 MDD cases and 7007 controls). For lifetime MDD, no single SNP yielded nominally significant evidence of association ($P < 0.05$) in fixed-effects meta-analysis of these replication samples (Supplementary Table S5). Replication analyses also failed to generate replication support for SNP associations identified for females-only or recurrent MDD (Supplementary Tables S6 and S7). Regional association and forest plots for these SNPs are provided in the Supplementary Figures S4–S6.

For selected SNPs from the trans-ancestry meta-analyses, we assessed the significance of the observed fraction of SNPs showing the same direction of effect across discovery and replication phases; these fractions were 0.30 ($P = 0.9453$), 0.286 ($P = 0.9375$) and 0.571 ($P = 0.5$) for lifetime, females-only and recurrent MDD, respectively.

**Gene-set enrichment analyses**

We used DEPICT to investigate whether particular pathways or gene sets were enriched for associations with any of the phenotypic definitions considered. For SNPs significant at $P < 10^{-5}$ in meta-analyses of lifetime, females-only and recurrent MDD (29, 24 and 27 independent loci, respectively), no single pathway or gene set was significantly enriched, or contained more significant genes than expected by chance, after correction for multiple testing ($q \geq 0.20$).

When we considered a more inclusive threshold ($P < 10^{-4}$), there were 167, 161 and 161 independent loci for lifetime, females-only and recurrent MDD, respectively. Following correction for multiple testing, only central nervous system neuron differentiation (GO:0021953) and axon cargo transport pathways (GO:0008088) were found to be significantly enriched ($q < 0.05$) in the analysis of lifetime MDD. An additional 11 gene sets were suggestively enriched ($q < 0.20$) and included several ontology terms related to neurodevelopmental processes (Supplementary Table S8). Finally, no tissue or cell types were enriched for associations with any definition of MDD ($q \geq 0.20$), irrespective of the significance threshold applied.

**DISCUSSION**

We have conducted a large, trans-ancestry meta-analysis representing, to our knowledge, the first systematic effort to analyze European and Han Chinese studies of MDD. As expected, we identified a shared, common polygenic basis of MDD between these populations, as exemplified by an excess of same-direction allelic effects, significant polygenic risk score profiling results and modest estimates of genetic correlation.

We initially considered the simple hypothesis that disease-relevant SNP effects would have similar sizes and directions of effect across European and Han Chinese studies, without explicit consideration of population differences arising from genetic drift or divergent genetic architectures. Scores constructed from either PGC or CONVERGE results were significantly associated with lifetime MDD in the other study, albeit explaining a diminutive fraction of risk. However, it is commonly observed that polygenic prediction is generally poorer when ‘training’ and ‘testing’ data sets do not originate from a single ancestral population, likely attributable to differences in allele frequencies and patterns of LD.

Next, we applied the recently developed popcorn method to obtain estimates of the genetic effect correlation between these populations. Briefly, the genetic correlation is the correlation coefficient of per-allele SNP effect sizes across populations. We found that the genetic correlation of lifetime MDD was significantly different from both zero and one, suggesting that there is substantial but incomplete overlap in common SNP effects predisposing to MDD in Europe and China. Of particular interest, comparisons based on females-only or recurrent MDD, which better recapitulated the ascertainment strategy in CONVERGE, yielded significantly higher estimates of genetic correlation despite an attendant reduction in sample size.

Given the extensive heterogeneity of MDD, and an expected and demonstrable loss of power arising from between-study differences in ancestry and ascertainment, our limited success in identifying novel, replicable evidence of genome-wide significant association is perhaps unsurprising. It is well understood that a trait’s heritability—and by extension, a shared polygenic liability—is a less important determinant of successful identification of relevant associations than its underlying genetic architecture. Considering the relatively low genetic correlations reported here, we might expect an attenuation of statistical power to detect individual variants, that is, as compared with a similarly sized studies of the same ancestry. A concomitant, statistically
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