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Genetically defined cellular correlates of the baseline brain MRI signal

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fMRI revolutionized neuroscience by allowing in vivo real-time detection of human brain activity. While the nature of the fMRI signal is understood as resulting from variations in the MRI signal due to brain-activity-induced changes in the blood oxygenation level (BOLD effect), these variations constitute a very minor part of a baseline MRI signal. Hence, the fundamental (and not addressed) questions are how underlying brain cellular composition defines this baseline MRI signal and how a baseline MRI signal relates to fMRI. Herein we investigate these questions by using a multimodality approach that includes quantitative gradient recalled echo (qGRE), volumetric and functional connectivity MRI, and gene expression data from the Allen Human Brain Atlas. We demonstrate that in vivo measurement of the major baseline component of a GRE signal decay rate parameter (R2t*) provides a unique genetic perspective into the cellular constituents of the human cortex and serves as a previously unidentified link between cortical tissue composition and fMRI signal. Data show that areas of the brain cortex characterized by higher R2t* have high neuronal density and have stronger functional connections to other brain areas. Interestingly, these areas have a relatively smaller concentration of synapses and glial cells, suggesting that myelinated cortical axons are likely key cortical structures that contribute to functional connectivity. Given these associations, R2t* is expected to be a useful signal in assessing microstructural changes in the human brain during development and aging in health and disease.

Significance
Understanding the structure and function of the human brain at a cellular level is a fundamental aim of neuroscience. Tremendous progress has been made in recent years based on different in vivo and ex vivo approaches, including major advances in brain MRI. However, uncertainties remain in determining how brain MRI measurements relate to the brain’s underlying cellular composition. In this paper we use a recently developed MRI technique, quantitative gradient recalled echo (qGRE), and information on gene profiles in the human brain available from the Allen Human Brain Atlas. We demonstrate that qGRE and related MRI techniques can be used to probe the underlying cellular composition of the human brain in vivo.

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Herein we combine MRI measurements with gene expression information available from AHBA to explore the relationship between human brain gene networks and quantitatively metrics of GRE signal related to tissue microstructure and functioning. This allows us to identify the genetic underpinnings of the qGRE signal in human cerebral cortex. We found that three modules of correlated gene networks identified by weighted gene correlation network analysis (WGCNA) strongly correlate with microstructural qGRE metrics, allowing quantitative estimation of cellular contributions to the GRE signal. These modules represent two major types of cortical cells: neurons (two modules) and glial cells. The data also show that regions of the brain with higher R2* “govern” brain functional activity—they have higher concentration of neuronal processes and produce stronger functional connections with other brain regions. Since MRI is a broadly available noninvasive tool, we anticipate that our findings will open new opportunities for interpreting and applying MRI to the in vivo study of tissue cellular microstructure and functioning in health and disease.

Results

Microstructural and Macrostructural MRI. We used in vivo brain data obtained from 26 healthy volunteers (age range 23–76 y, 9 males, 17 females) with a Siemens 3T Trio MRI scanner. While the GRE signal decay is usually expressed in terms of the total transverse relaxation rate constant R2 (12), the so-called qGRE method of data analysis (12) allows disentanglement of tissue-cellular-specific (R2*) and BOLD-related contributions to the total GRE MRI signal decay:

\[ S(TE) = S(0) \cdot \exp(-R2^* \cdot TE) \cdot F_{BOLD}(TE) \cdot F(TE). \]  

In this equation, \( S(0) \) is the GRE signal intensity amplitude, \( TE \) is the gradient echo time, function \( F(TE) \) accounts for the adverse effects of macroscopic magnetic field inhomogeneities [herein accounted for by using a voxel spread function (VSF) method (14)], and function \( F_{BOLD}(TE) \) accounts for the BOLD contributions to the GRE signal decay (12, 15). Whereas in the literature the term BOLD is often attributed to the dynamic, activity-induced changes in the MRI signal, in this paper we adopt a more broad BOLD definition that also includes the effect of the baseline blood oxygenation level on the GRE signal (8, 15). The BOLD model (15) was previously validated in phantoms (16), in silico (17), and in vivo small animal (18) experiments. Details of qGRE data analysis are presented in Materials and Methods.

For all volunteers, we also obtained macrostructural measurements with a magnetization-prepared rapid gradient echo (MPRAGE) (19) sequence to calculate cortical thickness.

WGCNA Analysis of Gene Networks. To allow comparison with MRI, we summarized gene expression data obtained from six separate AHBA datasets into 68 Desikan–Killiany (20) cortical regions using FreeSurfer (Athinoula A. Martinos Center for Biomedical Imaging, Massachusetts General Hospital) and analyzed them using WGCNA software and a statistical approach similar to that proposed in ref. 4 (schematically shown in Fig. 1 and described in Materials and Methods). By using all six AHBA datasets, this analysis generated eight consensus gene expression networks (common to all six AHBA datasets) characterized by modules with assigned genes: Black (\( n = 462 \)), Blue (\( n = 1,536 \)), Brown (\( n = 628 \)), Green-yellow (\( n = 474 \)), Pink (\( n = 1,115 \)), Purple (\( n = 1,794 \)), Salmon (\( n = 978 \)), and Yellow (\( n = 1,099 \)). All unassigned genes were put into the Gray (\( n = 12,652 \)) module. Each module is characterized by a module eigengene (MG) that reflects the most common spatial pattern of expression for that module of genes. The resulting cluster dendrogram for the genes and their module assignment is shown in Fig. 24. The detailed gene assignments are listed in Dataset S1. The stability of this procedure was tested for which results are presented in SI Appendix, Figs. S1–S4.

Correlations Between Gene Networks and MRI Metrics. We used only those genes that have conserved expression profiles across all six AHBA brain data with high differential stability (DS) as described in ref. 4. Averaged Spearman correlation coefficients, \( r_s \), were calculated for all nine modules using six AHBA datasets and six age-matched in vivo MRI data (each dataset was averaged from a group of four or five healthy volunteers with ages matched to the AHBA datasets). As shown in Fig. 2B, only eigengenes of three modules showed significant correlations (with averaged \( |r_s| > 0.6 \) and \( P < 0.05 \) across all six AHBA datasets) with MRI (R2* and cortical thickness). Among them, module eigengene ME-Purple showed positive correlation for R2* and negative correlation with cortical thickness. Module eigengenes ME-Blue and ME-Brown negatively correlated with R2* and positively correlated with cortical thickness. Those significantly correlated modules were selected for further analysis.
Materials and Methods

We analyzed the gene expression profiles across all six AHBA datasets to identify consensus gene modules using Weighted Gene Coexpression Network Analysis (WGCNA) (21, 22). Consensus module eigengene expressions: ME-Purple, ME-Brown, and ME-Blue, correspondingly) were calculated and were summarized in FreeSurfer regions of interest (ROIs) for contributions of neurons, synapses, and glial cells to the MRI metrics we introduce the gene expression indices $Y_{\text{neuron}}$, $Y_{\text{synapse}}$, and $Y_{\text{glia}}$ (instead of module eigengenes ME-Purple, ME-Brown, and ME-Blue, correspondingly) that characterize normalized levels of their corresponding eigengene expressions:

$$ Y = \frac{1}{2} \left( 1 + \frac{\exp(ME) - \exp(-ME)}{\exp(ME) + \exp(-ME)} \right). $$

In this equation we use an inverse Fisher transform for ME but shifted corresponding values so that values of the expression index $Y$ vary between 0 (lowest expression level) and 1 (highest expression value).

Spatial Variation of MRI Metrics and Gene Networks. Mean values of R2+$^*$, R2′, and cortical thickness from all 26 healthy volunteers were summarized in FreeSurfer regions of interest (ROIs) for comparison with the gene expression indices. The surface maps are shown in Fig. 4 along with the surface maps of gene expression indices $Y$ for three modules (Purple/neuron, Brown/synapse, and Blue/glia). Fig. 4 also shows boxplots of MRI metrics and gene expression for cingulate, frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital cortices.

Contribution of Neurons, Synapses, and Glial Cells to Microstructural and Macrostructural MRI Metrics. The analysis above shows that modules representing neurons, glial cells (astrocyte, microglia, and

Cellular/Subcellular Affiliation of MRI-Essential Gene Networks. To understand the tissue substrate underlying the gene modules that are correlated with R2+$^*$, we employed a ToppGene tool (21) for gene enrichment analysis. To test stability of the enrichment analysis we also used DAVID Bioinformatics Resources (ref. 22; https://david.ncifcrf.gov/) with different background choices (see details in Materials and Methods). As shown in Datasets S3–S8, the selection of background has only a minor effect on the enrichment analysis. The results for cellular affiliation (Coexpression Atlas in ToppGene) shown in Fig. 3A demonstrate that genes in modules Purple and Brown are mainly related to neurons while genes in module Blue are mainly related to glial [including astrocytes, microglia, and oligodendrocyte progenitor cells (OPCs)] and endothelial cells.

Fig. 3A shows that both the Purple and the Brown modules are associated with neurons. However, these two modules correlate with R2+$^*$ with opposite signs. Subcellular [Gene Ontology (GO) Cellular Component in ToppGene] affiliation shown in Fig. 3B demonstrates that genes in module Purple are mainly associated with ion channels that are primarily distributed along neuronal processes—axons (myelinated and not myelinated) and dendrites (23) that typically occupy over 85% of the space comprised by neurons (24). Module Purple also contains gene NeuN, which is a commonly used neuronal marker (25). Noting these findings, the Purple module likely largely reflects a transcriptional correlate for major parts of the neuron—cell bodies and neuronal processes and will be treated in this paper as a representative of neuronal contribution to brain tissue cellular composition.

Conversely, genes in module Brown are mostly associated with the synaptic substructure of neurons. Genes in module Blue are associated with glial cells and also endothelial cells forming blood vessel walls. However, it is well known that blood vessels occupy a small portion of the cortical tissue, with the total blood volume fraction ranging from 2 to 5% (26). Hence, it is reasonable to assign module Blue to glial cells, keeping in mind that glial cells and endothelial cells have highly correlated genetic profiles across the brain.

To quantitatively characterize contributions of neurons, synapses, and glial cells to the MRI metrics we introduce the gene expression indices $Y_{\text{neuron}}$, $Y_{\text{synapse}}$, and $Y_{\text{glia}}$ (instead of module eigengenes ME-Purple, ME-Brown, and ME-Blue, correspondingly) that characterize normalized levels of their corresponding eigengene expressions:

$$ Y = \frac{1}{2} \left( 1 + \frac{\exp(ME) - \exp(-ME)}{\exp(ME) + \exp(-ME)} \right). $$

In this equation we use an inverse Fisher transform for ME but shifted corresponding values so that values of the expression index $Y$ vary between 0 (lowest expression level) and 1 (highest expression value).
A cellular affiliation

Module Purple

Module Blue

B sub-cellular affiliation

Module Brown

Module Blue

glia can be very useful for understanding neuronal contributions of neurons and values were shown in the ± is a particular case of Eq. = 1, Y = 0.01 are shown in the − are negatively correlated with Y = 1, Y = 0, and Y are in agreement with direct histological measurements (28, 29).

The data also show that across all ROIs (Y = 1, Y = 0). R2* would be R2*,max = 26.1 s⁻¹, while in the opposite case of pure glial tissue (Y = 1, R2*,max = 5.8 s⁻¹). These results allow introducing individual relaxivities r2* (relaxation rates per unit cellular volume fraction ζ) of neurons and glial cells with respect to arbitrary media with a given ζ:

\[
R2\*_{\text{neuron}} = R2\*_{\text{media}} + r2\*_{\text{neuron}} \cdot \zeta_{\text{neuron}};
\]

\[
r2\*_{\text{neuron}} = \left( R2\*_{\text{n, max}} - R2\*_{\text{media}} \right); \quad R2\*_{\text{n, max}} = 26.1
\]

\[
R2\*_{\text{glia}} = R2\*_{\text{media}} + r2\*_{\text{glia}} \cdot \zeta_{\text{glia}};
\]

\[
r2\*_{\text{glia}} = \left( R2\*_{\text{g, max}} - R2\*_{\text{media}} \right); \quad R2\*_{\text{g, max}} = 5.8.
\]

In fact, Eq. 4 is a particular case of Eq. 5 corresponding to a mixture of neuronal and glial cells (increased ζneurons corresponds to decreased ζglia as neurons replace glial cells). The R2* dependencies on different combinations of cells and media are illustrated in Fig. 5.

The major role of neurons in affecting R2* can be explained mostly by a contribution from myelinated axons that dominate in module Purple (Fig. 3 and Discussion). This is further demonstrated by a significant correlation between R2* and the myelin index (as defined as a ratio of T1 and T2 weighted images (27)) that we generated using data from the HCP (Materials and Methods), as shown in Fig. 6A.

Eq. 4 can be very useful for understanding neuronal contributions to the qGRE metrics in the brain. It represents a relationship between R2* and neuronal volume fraction with a caveat that neuronal features (cell body, axonal, dendritic, and synaptic sub-structures) in different brain regions can be quite different. This is illustrated in Fig. 6B and C, showing that the ratios of Yglia/ Yneuron and Ysynapse/Yneuron are negatively correlated with Yneuron that is, the brain regions with higher concentration of neurons (larger Yneuron) have lower concentration of glial cells relative to neurons (smaller Yglia/Yneuron) and lower concentration of synapses relative to neurons (smaller Ysynapse/Yneuron). These results are in agreement with direct histological measurements (28, 29).
The equations for the curves shown in Fig. 6 are

\[ R_{2t}^* = 2.81 + 7.09 \cdot \text{MI}; \]
\[ R_{2t}^* = 0.59 / C_0 \]
\[ Y_{\text{glia}} / Y_{\text{neuron}} = 0.38 \cdot Y_{\text{neuron}}^{-1.38}; \]
\[ Y_{\text{synapse}} / Y_{\text{neuron}} = 0.34 \cdot Y_{\text{neuron}}^{-1.51}; \]
\[ R^2 = 0.75 / C_1. \]  

In these equations, \( R_{2t}^* \) is measured in seconds\(^{-1}\), while all other variables [including myelin index MI (27)] are dimensionless.

**Relationships Between Cortical Tissue Microstructure and Functional Activity.** To establish relationships of cortical tissue microstructure (defined by \( R_{2t}^* \)) with functional activity, we used functional connectivity data from the HCP. Fig. 7 shows very strong associations between the cytostructure of cortical brain regions defined by cortical \( R_{2t}^* \) and functional connectivity between brain regions. The data show that regions with higher \( R_{2t}^* \) have stronger functional connections with other brain regions.

**Discussion**

The ability to obtain high-quality information on brain structure and functioning in vivo with MRI has contributed significantly to our understanding of the human brain and has offered new insights into multiple disease processes. However, due to the relatively low resolution of in vivo MRI (usually millimeter-sized voxels) it is challenging to connect MRI measurements to underlying cellular composition. Hence, one of the most important questions in this regard is how to relate MRI neuroimaging measurements to the underlying microstructural anatomy, biology, and neurophysiology of brain cells (3).

In this study we used AHBA data to establish genetic and cellular fingerprints of the GRE MRI signal that is widely used to study brain responses to stimulated and resting-state functional activity. A schematic structure of our approach is presented in Fig. 8. While the overwhelming majority of studies rely on analysis of stimulus-induced or resting-state-induced fluctuations of GRE signal, these fluctuations account for only a few percent above the baseline GRE signal. Herein, we focus on the nature of the baseline GRE signal and its relation to brain microstructure and function.

By comparing gene networks generated by weighted correlation network analysis with MRI metrics, we identified three important connectivity data from the HCP. Fig. 7 shows very strong associations between the cytostructure of cortical brain regions defined by cortical \( R_{2t}^* \) and functional connectivity between brain regions. The data show that regions with higher \( R_{2t}^* \) have stronger functional connections with other brain regions.

**Table 1. Multiple linear regression analysis of the contributions of \( Y_{\text{neuron}}, Y_{\text{synapse}}, \) and \( Y_{\text{glia}} \) to \( R_{2t}^* \) and cortical thickness models**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( R_{2t}^* ) (1/s)</th>
<th>Cortical thickness, mm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>16.1 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( Y_{\text{neuron}} )</td>
<td>10.0 ± 0.9</td>
<td>−2.1 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( Y_{\text{synapse}} )</td>
<td>1.4 ± 0.3</td>
<td>1.3 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( Y_{\text{glia}} )</td>
<td>−10.3 ± 0.9</td>
<td>1.3 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.61 ± 0.58</td>
<td>1.3 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The \( P \) values for all shown parameters are smaller than 0.0001. \( Y_{\text{synapse}} \) is not shown in the \( R_{2t}^* \) model because its contribution is not significant (\( P = 0.4 \)), although it contributes significantly to the cortical thickness model. Note that all indices \( Y \) are dimensionless.

---

Fig. 4. Cortical distribution of MRI metrics (A, \( R_{2t}^* \); B, \( R_2 \); C, cortical thickness) and gene expression indices (D, \( Y_{\text{neuron}} \); E, \( Y_{\text{synapse}} \); F, \( Y_{\text{glia}} \)). Maps represent values averaged across all corresponding datasets (26 for MRI metrics and 6 for gene modules) in FreeSurfer ROIs projected onto the brain surface. Box plots represent median values and variation across the same datasets for five cortical regions (cingulate, frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital). Surface maps and box plots show significant resemblance between distribution of \( R_{2t}^* \) and neuron index \( Y_{\text{neuron}} \), suggesting that neurons provide significant contribution to the brain tissue-specific \( R_{2t}^* \) relaxation. Detailed statistical analysis is provided in Table 1. Data also show a significantly smaller contribution of the BOLD effect \( (R_2) \) to the total relaxation \( (R_{2t}^* = R_{2t} + R_2) \) of the GRE signal.
modules, Purple (associated with neurons), Blue (associated with glia), and Brown (associated with synapsis), that were significantly associated with microstructural (R2t*) and macrostructural (cortical thickness) MRI metrics. Our results suggest that regional variation in R2t* relates to variation in neuronal and glial cellular composition, as indicated by the gene expression data. Importantly, higher R2t* reflects tissue containing more neurons with myelinated axons and relatively lower numbers of glial cells and synapses. It is possible that R2t* represents more “mature” cortical tissue, for example with more myelination and less immature synapses, which is also supported by our prior report indicating a gradual rise in R2t* with age in all cortical regions (13).

There are a number of reasons to suggest that the positive correlation between R2t* and the Purple module of genes related to voltage-gated channels likely reflects a contribution from myelin-covered axons. Indeed, the majority of voltage-gated channels are located along axons that are covered by myelin sheaths (23) and are enriched near the nodes of Ranvier (30). Thus, higher expression of voltage-gated-channel-related genes might indicate more myelin content. Also, module Purple includes gene NRG1, which has been shown to regulate myelin sheath thickness (31)—reduced NRG1 expression in mouse brain can cause hypomyelination and reduced nerve conduction velocity. All these properties point to myelin as a main neuron-related “relaxation agent” affecting the R2t* relaxation rate constant of the GRE signal. This conclusion is also supported by a strong correlation between R2t* and the T1/T2 evaluated myelin index as shown in Fig. 6A. Conversely, our data (Fig. 6) show that relatively unmyelinated cortex has more synapses and glia (relative to neurons), which is in agreement with direct histology (28, 29).

From a biophysical perspective, myelin also represents a cellular substructure with high relaxivity for water. Indeed, the tissue-cellular-specific (R2t*) MRI relaxation parameter depends on the environment of water molecules (the main source of MRI signal): higher concentrations of proteins, lipids, and other constituents of biological tissue and cellular constituents (sources of MRI signal relaxation) leading to higher relaxation rate constants. While the presence of high concentrations of macromolecules (relaxation agents) is a necessary condition for high R2t*, access of water molecules to these macromolecules is another important condition. From this perspective, myelin’s intermixed structure of water and lipid layers represents a significantly increased opportunity for water–macromolecule interaction.

In this paper we have introduced normalized quantitative module-related gene expression indices (Y, Eq. 3) that allowed derivation of quantitative relationships between R2t* measurements and cortical tissue cellular contents (Table 1 and Eqs. 4 and 6). It should be noted that glial cells and synapses contribute

![Fig. 5. Schematic relationship between R2t* and cellular volume fraction ζ for different combinations of media and cells. In the top row boxes represent the background media (water) filled with different concentrations of cells (glia and neurons). Media and cellular types are marked as indicated at the bottom of the figure. The bottom row shows R2t* dependence on cellular volume fraction for different combinations of media and cells. (A) Glial cells in water: R2t* increases with increasing glial cells volume fraction ζgila. (B) Neurons in water: R2t* increases with increasing neuronal cells volume fraction ζneuron. (C) Neurons and glial cells fill the whole volume with gradual increase of neuronal volume fraction ζneuron. R2t* increases as neurons replace glial cells. (D) Glial cells and neurons fill the whole volume with gradual increase of glial cells volume fraction ζgila. R2t* decreases as glial cells replace neurons. R2t_w, R2t_g, and R2t_neu represent the R2t* values when the whole volume is occupied by water molecules, glia cells, and neurons, respectively. Importantly, the negative correlation in D is due to the neurons with higher relaxivity r2t* neuron are replaced by glial cells with lower relaxivity r2t* gila.](image)

![Fig. 6. Correlation of R2t* with myelin index and correlations between neuronal, glial, and synaptic indices. (A) Correlation between R2t* (seconds−1) and myelin index (dimensionless). Myelin index (defined as a ratio of T1 and T2 weighted images [26]) values were generated using data from the HCP averaged across 1,018 healthy subjects. Regional R2t* values were calculated by averaging results from 12 healthy volunteers, ages 34 ± 7.6 y, approximately matching HCP age group. Each point represents a FreeSurfer region. (B and C) Scatter plots of relative (to neurons) concentrations of glial cells (Ygila/Yneuron) and synapses (Yeuro/Yneuron) vs. Yneuron for all six AHBA datasets. Each point represents the logarithm of gene expression in one FreeSurfer ROI in one AHBA dataset. In all panels blocks of FreeSurfer regions are marked by different colors: cingulate, red; frontal, orange; occipital, green; parietal, blue; and temporal, black. The shaded areas in the panels represent the 95% confidence bands.](image)
to relaxation effects governing R2t*, but the reason for the negative correlations (Table 1) is due to the relatively larger effects of myelinated axons compared with these other cellular structures (Fig. 5). Equations we derived account for this effect and allow evaluation of relative tissue cellular composition based on qGRE measurements: Using the relationship in Eq. 4 between R2t* and Yeuron we can first estimate the neuronal content. The corresponding fractions of glial cells and synaptic structures can then be estimated from Eq. 6. Thus, R2t* reflects unique cortical tissue characteristics that can be used in vivo to explore cortical structure and changes over time in health and disease in the human brain.

Cortical thickness is one of the most ubiquitous measures of MRI. Our data also show negative correlation between neuronal density and cortical thickness, which is also in agreement with previous studies (32–34). Data in Fig. 7 demonstrate significant positive correlations between tissue R2t* and the strength of functional connectivity defined by resting-state fMRI. Data show that the brain regions with higher R2t* provide a platform for stronger connections with other brain regions and potentially can be considered as hubs for such connections. Herein we have demonstrated this concept by providing relationships between R2t*, mFC (mean regional strength of functional connectivity), and cFC (strength of functional connectivity between symmetric contralateral brain regions in different hemispheres). These functional relationships may be related to the relationship between R2t* and underlying tissue cellular content—brain regions with higher R2t* have higher concentration of neurons (higher Yeuron), which are mainly responsible for structural brain connectivity. Interestingly enough, brain areas with a higher concentration of neurons have relatively lower concentration of synapses and glial cells (see negative correlation in Fig. 4). This suggests that a high concentration of neurons (especially myelinated axons) significantly contributes to brain functional connectivity, providing the structural support for signal transmission. Importantly, changes in cortical cellular composition due to development, aging, and/or disease states can be identified by qGRE R2t* measurements and thereby probing as potential causes of changes in functional connectivity.

Data in Fig. 4 A and B show that the BOLD-related part of the GRE signal relaxation rate parameter (R2*) constitutes only a small part of the tissue-cellular-related relaxation rate parameter (R2t*). About 40% of oxygen delivered to the brain by the blood vessel network is consumed by the brain, but only minor changes in oxygen consumption happen during stimulus-induced changes in functional brain activity (35). The rest is used to maintain the existing brain cytoarchitecture and default brain activity (36). Interestingly, this small change in oxygen consumption, and hence energy consumption, vs. baseline oxygen consumption resembles a small ratio between changes in the R2* GRE signal during brain activity and the baseline cellular-specific part of R2* (R2t*) defined by the brain basic cytoarchitecture. From this perspective, it would be interesting to investigate a potential relationship between baseline oxygen consumption and R2t*-defined brain cellular composition.

R2t* is a quantitative tissue-specific measure that has been successfully applied in studying different diseases in the central nervous system, including multiple sclerosis (37), Alzheimer disease (38), schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder (39). Our findings relating R2t* to tissue cellular content provide the potential for new insights on the results of these studies and corroborate potential use of R2t* as a biomarker of changes in the tissue cellular content. Indeed, findings of reduced cortical R2t* in Alzheimer disease (38) and multiple sclerosis (37) are consistent with the loss of neurons. Importantly, this loss was detected even in the cortical tissue spared of atrophy.

In conclusion, understanding the structure and function of the human cortex is a prominent goal of modern neuroscience. The analysis provided in this study offers a unique genetic perspective on the cellular contributions to the brain MRI signal in humans. This became possible by combining multimodality MRI data that include qGRE MRI, structural MRI, and resting-state fMRI with gene expression data from the AHBA. We demonstrated that the R2t* metric of qGRE signal provides an in vivo window into quantitative evaluation of the cellular components of cortical tissue. Data show that areas of the brain characterized by higher R2t* have high neuronal density and have stronger functional connections to other brain areas. Interestingly, these areas have a relatively smaller concentration of synapses and glial cells, suggesting that myelinated cortical axons are likely key cortical structures that contribute to functional connectivity. Given these associations, R2t* is likely to be a useful signal in assessing microstructural changes in the brain during development, aging, and in health or disease.

Materials and Methods

WGCNA Analysis of AHBA Data. We used data from all six human brains from the AHBA, namely H0351.2001, H0351.2002, H0351.1009, H0351.1012, H0351.1015, and H0351.1016 (for details see human.brain-map.org/mri_viewers/data). The AHBA provides a comprehensive view of the relationship between brain anatomy and gene expression (2). Because in AHBA some genes have more than one probe, the first step is to choose a single probe to represent a gene. This was completed by using the “collapseRows” function in WGCNA. Then, genes without entrez IDs were removed from the analysis. These steps reduce the original 58,692 measurements to 20,738 measurements. To simplify the complexity of the AHBA data and allow comparison with MRI R2t* measurements, the original AHBA data were summarized using the standard cortical atlas (20) built into FreeSurfer. A two-step procedure was employed to complete this task. (i) Segmentations were obtained by running FreeSurfer on each of the six AHBA MRI data. Tissue samples were assigned to 68 cortical regions based on their coordinates in their own MRI space. However, some
tissue cortical samples might fall outside the FreeSurfer cortical ROIs; these samples were assigned to the adjacent FreeSurfer cortical ROI. (i) For each FreeSurfer ROI and each brain, median values were calculated from the gene expression profiles that were located inside the ROI. Since the six AHBA datasets have different numbers of anatomical samples, this procedure resulted in gene expression profiles assigned in 35–66 FreeSurfer cortical ROIs for different AHBA datasets. These summarized gene expression datasets were used to construct a consensus network. We used a general framework of WGCNA similar to that previously described (40). To use all six AHBA datasets and improve the accuracy and power of the analysis, we only chose those genes that had similar expression patterns across all six brains (4). Specifically, pairwise correlations using Pearson method were calculated between gene expression profiles of all six AHBA brains for each gene. Then, averaged correlation coefficients (so-called DS) were calculated and only those genes with DS > 0.5 (n = 1,995) were used in WGCNA analysis. This DS value was used as a compromise between distinguishing detailed cellular affiliation of different gene modules and the ability of using all six Allen brain datasets for analysis. Different DS thresholds were also tested and results are shown in SI Appendix, Fig. S1. The value DS = 0.5 is also similar to previously used in ref. 4. A consensus network was constructed from these 1,995 genes using a previously established framework (40) (soft-thresholding power = 14, reference percentile to rescale different datasets = 0.95, deepSplit = 4, cutHeight = 0.999, minClusterSize = 30, and pamRespectsDendro = FALSE), This procedure resulted in identifying nine modules represented by nine MEs.

The next step was to reassign each of original 20,738 genes from AHBA to the module to which it is most highly correlated. Pearson correlations were calculated between each gene expression profile and each ME in each brain. As a result, 8,086 genes were reassigned to WGCNA modules based on their mean (across six brains) correlation coefficients ≥0.5 with MEs. Different thresholds were also tested and results are shown in SI Appendix, Figs. S2 and S3. All genes with mean correlation coefficients <0.5 against all modules were considered unassigned. MEs were recalculated using the new modules. After this step, all nongray modules preserved more than 70% (Black, 87.0%; Blue, 75.2%; Brown, 86.2%; Green-yellow, 89.6%; Pink, 90.1%; Purple, 88.2%; Salmon, 97.3%; and Yellow, 79.1%) of the original genes assigned in the first step. These numbers are comparable with a previous study (4), demonstrating the stability of these modules.

Genome Annotation. The ToppGene portal (21) was used to access an extensive list of databases and to calculate P values from hypergeometric tests and corrected for multiple comparison. In this study, we used cellular component in GO annotations and coexpression atlas developed in Barres’s laboratory (41, 42). We used default background settings in ToppGene, which includes 19061 genes in the "Cellular Component" category and 23956 genes in the "Coexpression Atlas" category. To test the sensitivity of the enrichment analysis with different background settings, we performed gene enrichment analysis using DAVID Bioinformatics Resources (ref. 22; https://david.ncifcrf.gov) with the default background and a background that contains genes in the AHBA datasets. As shown in Datasets S3-S8, the selection of background has only minor effect on the enrichment analysis.

MRI. For qGRE and structural analysis we used previously published (13) brain image data collected from 26 healthy volunteers (age range 23–76 y) using Siemens 3T Trio MRI scanner and a 32-channel phased-array head coil. Studies were conducted with approval of the local IRB of Washington University. All volunteers provided informed consent. All data were obtained using a 3D version of the GRE sequence with 10 gradient echoes followed by a navigator echo (43) used to reduce image artifacts induced by physiological fluctuations during the scan. Sequence parameters were flip angle FA = 30°, voxel size of 1 × 1 × 2 mm², first echo time TE1 = 4 ms, echo spacing 2TE = 4 ms (monopolar readout gradients), repetition time TR = 50 ms, and the total imaging time for each acquisition was around 10 min. Standard clinical MPRAge (19) images with a resolution of 1 × 1 × 1 mm³ were also collected for brain segmentation purposes. The total acquisition time of MPRAge is about 6 min.

qGRE Data Analysis. Raw k-space data were read into MATLAB (The MathWorks, Inc.) for processing. After applying Fourier transform to the k-space, data from different channels were combined for each voxel in a single data set $S(TE)$ using a previously developed strategy (44, 45):

$$S(TE) = \sum_{m=1}^{M} \lambda_m S_m(TE) \cdot S_m(TE); \quad \lambda_m = \frac{1}{M} \sum_{n=1}^{M} \lambda_n^2$$

where the sum is taken over all M rf channels (m), $T_E$ is the gradient echo time ($T_E$ is the time of the first gradient echo), S denotes complex conjugate
of S, and \( \delta_0 \) are the rf channel-specific weighting parameters defined by the noise amplitudes \( s_{\text{rms}} \). We omit index corresponding to voxel position for clarity. This algorithm allows for the optimal estimation of model parameters and also removes the initial phase incoherence between channels (44, 45). A Hanning filter was also applied to further decrease noise and reduce Gibbs ringing artifacts. Maps of model parameters were obtained by fitting theoretical model in Eq. 2 to experimental data, Eq. 7, on a voxel-by-voxel basis.

The function \( F_{\text{BOLD}}(TE) \) in Eq. 2 describes GRE signal decay due to the presence of the blood vessel network with deoxygenated blood (veins and adjacent to them part of capillaries) – the baseline BOLD effect, and the function \( F(TE) \) in Eq. 2 describes effect of macroscopic magnetic field inhomogeneities. In this study, we use a VSF method (14) for calculating \( F(TE) \) and an expression \( F_{\text{BOLD}}(TE) \) from ref. 12:

\[
F_{\text{BOLD}}(TE) = 1 - \frac{1}{\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{\chi}} f_1(\delta_0 \cdot TE) + \frac{1}{1 - \frac{1}{\chi}} f_2(\zeta \cdot \delta_0 \cdot TE),
\]

where \( \zeta \) is the deoxygenated cerebral blood volume fraction and \( \delta_0 \) is the characteristic frequency determined by the susceptibility difference between deoxygenated blood and surrounding tissue (15):

\[
\delta_0 = \frac{4}{3} \pi \gamma B_0 Hc - \Delta \chi_0 (1 - Y_0).
\]

In this equation, \( \Delta \chi_0 = 0.27\text{ppm} \) (46) is the susceptibility difference between fully oxygenated and fully deoxygenated red blood cells, \( Y_0 \) is the blood oxygen level (with \( Y_0 = 0 \) corresponding to fully deoxygenated and \( Y_0 = 1 \) to fully oxygenated red blood cells), \( Hc \) is the blood hematocrit, and \( \gamma \) is the gyromagnetic ratio. Function \( f_1 \) was defined in ref. 15 and can also be expressed in terms of a generalized hypergeometric function \( f_2(47) \):

\[
f_1(\delta_0 \cdot TE) = f_2\left[\frac{1}{2}, \frac{3}{2}, 1; \frac{\delta_0 \cdot TE}{16}\right].
\]

The function \( f_2 \) has a characteristic quadratic behavior at short TE and then becomes linear (15). The nonlinearity of \( f_2 \) is very important for our method because it allows separation of BOLD and cellular \( (R2^* \) contributions from FreeSurfer and GRE signal decay (16). Eq. 2 with definitions in Eqs. 8–10 is used to fit to experimental data and extract model parameters \( R2^*, \zeta \), and \( \delta_0 \). \( R2^* \) is then calculated as

\[
R2^* \equiv \zeta \cdot \delta_0.
\]

Signal amplitude and global frequency shifts are also evaluated from this fitting routine (we are using complex data). The image of the signal amplitudes represents a qGRE T1-weighted (T1W) image and is used herein for coregistration with MPRAGE images. The stability of the WGCNA analysis was also tested using different thresholds. The results are shown in SI Appendix, Figs. S1–S3.

### Functional Connectivity and Myelin Index Data Analysis

We used the HCP1200 dataset (March 1, 2017 data release) of adults aged 22–35 y (50). We selected only subjects that had all four (15 min each) fully preprocessed resting state (fMRI) scans (1,017 subjects). HCP preprocessing pipelines used by HCP team (50) to analyze the data (see ref. 51 for the detailed description) before release of the HCP1200 dataset included three structural pipelines (PreFreeSurfer, FreeSurfer, and PostFreeSurfer) and two functional pipelines (fMRIVolume and fMRISurface) (51, 52). We used data after an initial stringent nonrigid surface registration based on folding patterns (MSMSulc) was performed. This supplanted the FreeSurfer folding-based registration previously used (52), because it achieved slightly better initial alignment of functional data with the structural pipelines while inducing much lower local distortions (53). This registration, together with the FNIRT nonlinear registration, was used to bring an initial version of the data [fMRI, myelin maps, and individually defined FreeSurfer regions based on Desikan–Killiany Atlas (20)] into standard grayordinates space (32k standard mesh for each hemisphere’s cortical surface at 2 mm average vertex spacing and 2 mm isotropic MNI-space voxels for the subcortical volume data). For fMRI data, the ICA-FIX pipeline (54–57) was also used to remove spatially specific temporally structured artifacts (see ref. 51 for the detailed description). Because the HCP fMRI data were collected in four runs, the following steps were performed by using HCP tools (wb-command): (i) demean and normalize the individual time series (subtracting the mean of each subject’s time course, multiplying by the bias field, and dividing by the variance normalization map); (ii) temporally concatenating the individual subject time series data (1,200 time points × four runs) and (iii) for each subject, time series were extracted from cortical individually defined 68 FreeSurfer regions based on the Desikan–Killiany Atlas. Data for 1,017 subjects were concatenated and correlation analysis was performed in MATLAB (The MathWorks, Inc.) by using Pearson correlation coefficient.

Mean FC map (mFC) was calculated as follows:

\[
mFC_{nm} = \sum_{r} f_{nm, r} \cdot \zeta_{r} ,
\]

where mFC\(_{nm}\) is the mean correlation coefficient in region \( n \) with all other regions, \( f_{nm, r} \) is the correlation coefficient between region \( n \) and region \( m \), and \( \zeta_{r} \) is the volume fraction of FreeSurfer defined region \( r \).

Myelin index maps were generated by using the ratio of T1W/T2W images and were normalized for residual transmit field inhomogeneity (see ref. 51 for the detailed description). For each subject, the myelin index was naturally coregistered with R2\(^*\) maps. Cortical thickness was also obtained from FreeSurfer. To minimize contamination of signals from CSF, CSF masks were generated based on the qGRE T1W images using FSL and only those voxels with R2\(^*\) bigger than 3 s\(^{-1}\) were used to calculate median R2\(^*\) values.
extracted from cortical individually defined 68 FreeSurfer regions based on the Desikan–Killiany Atlas (20). Then, individual myelin indexes were averaged in each FreeSurfer ROI across all subjects.


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