

Cortical regions involved in proactive control of task-set

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Abstract

This thesis is about what happens in the brain when people switch between tasks. Each task requires a particular assembly of cognitive processes, an orientation of attention and set of rules relating action to input — a "task-set". The research reported used a task-cueing paradigm to study preparatory control of task-set. On each trial a stimulus (a coloured shape) was preceded by a verbal task-cue specifying which task to do (judge the shape or the colour of the stimulus). Reaction time and error rate increase on trials when the task changes relative to trials on which it does not. When the cue stimulus interval (CSI) is increased, this "switch cost" is reduced, indexing a process of task-set reconfiguration in which top-down control is employed to reconfigure the task-set parameters. Effective reconfiguration may also be indicated by a reduction in the "response congruence effect" — poorer performance on stimuli mapped to different responses for the two tasks than for stimuli mapped to the same response. I present six experiments using transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), a technique for interfering briefly and harmlessly with neuronal activity in a small region of cortex, to address the question of which brain regions contribute to anticipatory control of task-set as indexed by these behavioural measures.

To help guide the selection of candidate brain regions, I first present a review and meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies of task-switching in the literature. Many fMRI studies, comparing brain activation on task-switch and -repeat trials have been published. Some have also tried to isolate activations related specifically to pro-active control of task-set. The activations reported are quite inconsistent over studies. I used a quantitative meta-analysis technique to identify which brain regions are most consistently found by studies reporting switch minus repeat contrasts and which may be specifically important for preparation on switch trials.

The experiments examined the effect of stimulating several regions during the long cue-stimulus interval of a task-cueing paradigm, relative to control conditions. A first pair of experiments suggests an important role in proactive task-set control for two regions in dorsal medial frontal cortex, the supplementary motor area (SMA) and an area known as pre-SMA, though the former region appeared to contribute to reducing the switch cost while the latter appeared to reduce the effects of response congruence. In a further three experiments, I examined the role of the right intra-parietal sulcus (rIPS); this appears to play a crucial role in preparation for a task-switch but not post-stimulus task-set reconfiguration. In a final

experiment, I used TMS guided by fMRI activations in the same participants to study the effects of stimulation over the left inferior frontal junction (IFJ). The results indicate that a region just anterior to the left IFJ is specifically important for preparing for a switch trial. I discuss the roles that may be played by these three regions in task-set control.

Index

Chapter 1: General introduction.....	21
1.1 Executive control.....	21
1.2 Mental set shifting.....	22
1.3 Task-switching paradigms.....	23
1.4 The behavioural phenomena of task-switching.....	24
1.5 Theories of preparation	27
1.6 Neural correlates of task set control.....	30
1.7 Brain regions associated with a switch of task.....	31
1.8 Studies attempting to image preparatory processes	34
1.9 Conclusions about the preparatory network.....	40
1.10 Neuropsychology of task-set control.....	42
1.11 Potential functions of candidate regions	43
1.12 Relations between the parietal and frontal cortex in TSR.....	59
1.13 EEG research on TSR	60
1.14 Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation studies of TSR	63
Chapter 2: Methods	65
2.1 Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation	65
2.1.1 <i>Monophasic and biphasic TMS.</i>	66
2.1.2 <i>Effect of the induced current on the axons.</i>	67
2.1.3 <i>Effect of coil direction</i>	68
2.1.4 <i>Virtual lesioning</i>	68
2.1.5 <i>Spatial resolution</i>	70
2.1.6 <i>Temporal resolution</i>	72
2.1.7 <i>Experimental control and the accessory sensations generated by TMS</i>	73
2.1.8 <i>Ways of targeting the desired brain region.</i>	75
2.1.9 <i>How will I use TMS.</i>	77
2.2 Meta-analysis	79
2.2.1 <i>Introduction</i>	79
2.2.2 <i>Early ways of addressing consistency in imaging data</i>	82
2.2.3 <i>Activation Likelihood Estimate</i>	82
2.2.4 <i>Multilevel Kernel Density Analysis</i>	83
2.2.5 <i>Limitations of meta-analysis of imaging data</i>	85

Chapter 3: Meta Analysis.....	87
3.1 Introduction	87
3.1.1 <i>Meta-analysis of switch minus repeat contrasts.</i>	91
3.1.2 <i>Meta-analyses of preparatory activations.</i>	92
3.2 Methods	96
3.2.1 <i>Selection of fMRI studies</i>	97
3.2.2 <i>Multi-level Kernel Density Analysis (MKDA)</i>	99
3.2.3 <i>Specific analyses</i>	100
3.3 Results	101
3.3.1 <i>Switch-Repeat</i>	101
3.3.2 <i>Preparation</i>	103
3.4 Discussion	106
3.4.1 <i>The frontal-parietal network</i>	106
3.4.2 <i>Standard Sw>Rep group.</i>	106
3.4.3 <i>Switch related preparation</i>	106
3.4.4 <i>Non switch-specific preparation</i>	107
3.4.5 <i>Left inferior frontal junction</i>	108
3.4.6 <i>Medial frontal cortex</i>	109
3.4.7 <i>Parietal Cortex</i>	110
3.4.8 <i>The right frontal cortex</i>	112
3.4.9 <i>The same, just earlier?</i>	112
3.4.10 <i>Earlier meta analyses</i>	113
3.4.11 <i>Conclusion</i>	114
Chapter 4: The role of dorsal medial frontal cortex.....	115
4.1 General introduction.....	115
4.2 Experiment 1	116
4.2.1 <i>Participants</i>	117
4.2.2 <i>Procedure</i>	117
4.2.3 <i>Design</i>	119
4.2.4 <i>TMS</i>	120
4.2.5 <i>Results</i>	123
4.2.6 <i>Discussion</i>	124
4.3 Experiment 2	129
4.3.1 <i>Participants</i>	130

4.3.2 Procedure	130
4.3.3 Design.....	131
4.3.4 TMS	132
4.3.5 Results	135
4.3.6 Discussion	136
4.7 General Discussion.....	138
Chapter 5: TMS over the rightIPS attenuates preparatory task-set control.....	141
5.1 Introduction	141
5.2 Experiment 3 Pilot study (thesis only).....	147
5.2.1 Participants	148
5.2.2 Procedure & Design.....	148
5.2.3 Results	148
5.2.4 Discussion	151
5.3 Experiment 4	151
5.3.1 Participants	151
5.3.2 Procedure	152
5.3.3 Design.....	153
5.3.4 TMS	154
5.3.5 Results	155
5.3.6 Discussion	157
5.4 Experiment 5	157
5.4.1 Participants	157
5.4.2 Procedure & Design.....	158
5.4.3 Results	159
5.4.4 Discussion	161
Chapter 6: Stimulation of the left inferior frontal junction during the CSI using TMS....	169
6.1 Methods.....	172
6.1.1 Participants	172
6.1.2 Procedure	172
6.1.3 Design of the fMRI phase	173
6.1.4 Design of the TMS phase.....	173
6.1.5 fMRI data acquisition.....	174
6.1.6 fMRI guided targeting	174
6.1.7 TMS	174

6.2 Results	175
6.2.1 <i>fMRI behavioural results</i>	175
6.2.2 <i>fMRI data analysis and results</i>	176
6.2.3 <i>TMS results</i>	180
6.2.4 <i>Localisation of the TMS site</i>	183
6.3 Discussion	188
6.3.1 <i>Discomfort due to stimulation</i>	189
6.3.2 <i>Concurrence with the imaging literature</i>	190
6.3.3 <i>fMRI behavioural results</i>	190
6.3.4 <i>Is TMS guided by individual fMRI activations the gold standard?</i>	191
6.3.5 <i>Task specific effects</i>	192
6.3.6 <i>The possible role of the left IFJ in task-set reconfiguration</i>	193
Chapter 7: General Discussion	195
7.1 Summary of results & conclusion	195
7.2 Methodological issues	201
7.3 Task related processes	202
7.4 Future research	203
7.4.1 <i>Other brain regions</i>	203
7.4.2 <i>Relationship between the RISC effect and reduction in the congruence effect with increasing CSI</i>	204
7.4.3 <i>Chronometric properties</i>	204
7.4.4 <i>Functional contributions of brain regions to task-set preparation</i>	205
References	209
Appendix	225