Unravelling the complexity of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: a behavioural genomic approach*

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Summary  International research has established that there is a strong genetically inherited contribution to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the genetic mechanisms involved are being sought with considerable success. It is now established that certain alleles of the genes coding for the dopamine D4 receptor and the dopamine transporter occur more frequently in children with ADHD than in healthy controls, and we are finding other DNA changes associated with ADHD. A major challenge for the field now is to clarify how genetic susceptibility is translated into disorder by integrating the fields of quantitative and molecular genetics, neuropsychology and environmental risks.

Declaration of interest  The authors’ research is funded by the Medical Research Council, the Wellcome Trust and research started with the recognition by Morrison & Stewart (1971) and Cantwell (1972) that hyperactivity aggregates in families. More recent studies estimate a four- to eight-fold increase in risk for ADHD among first-degree relatives of ADHD probands compared with the general population risk (Faraone et al, 2000a; Willcutt, 2005). Numerous twin studies demonstrate that familial segregation is influenced by genetic factors with heritability estimates in the range 60–90% (Thapar et al, 1999). Twin studies support conceptualisation of ADHD as the extreme of a continuously distributed trait, with genetic risk distributed throughout the population.

Our quantitative genetic studies have moved beyond simple estimations of heritability to answer more complex questions about genetic and environmental influences on course and development. Analysis of ADHD symptoms in the Twins Early Development Study found that stability of ADHD symptoms from age 2 years to 8 years is accounted for mainly by shared genetic influences (Kuntsi et al, 2005). Whether the genes associated with ADHD in childhood are the same as those associated with the disorder in adults is an empirical question that has not yet been answered.

Shared genetic factors also explain familial associations between ADHD and comorbid disorders and traits including conduct disorder, dyslexia and lower IQ. The recognition of shared genetic influences is conceptually important, suggesting the existence of multiple overlapping (pleotropic) effects of genes, rather than heterogeneous influences where individual sets of genes map onto individual developmental pathways. Pleiotropy is in fact expected, since most genes that regulate brain function are expressed in multiple brain regions and functional genetic variation will therefore affect more than one neuronal pathway or system. Shared genetic effects may also indicate developmental trajectories whereby genes influence disorder A (e.g. ADHD) which in turn increases risk of disorder B (e.g. antisocial behaviour). Detecting the specific genes involved will help to clarify the causal relationships between ADHD and co-occurring disorders and traits.

MOLecular genetic studies  Molecular genetic studies have developed rapidly since the first reports of association with the dopamine D4 receptor and dopamine transporter gene (DAT1). These findings have stood the test of time with multiple replications (and non-replications) and evidence from meta-analyses confirming small but significant effects on risk for ADHD. Our analysis, and that of others, suggests the involvement of other dopamine pathway genes including the dopamine D5 receptor and a synaptosomal-associated protein (SNAP-25) involved in vesicular release of neurotransmitters. Genes with evidence suggesting association but requiring more extensive analysis include dopamine α-hydroxylase, serotonin 1B receptor, serotonin transporter, β4-nicotinic...
As in other areas of psychiatry, the nature of ADHD has been vociferous over the years. Environmental risks for ADHD were known before genetic influences were established. Still (1902) first reported a hyperactive behaviour pattern occurring when brain damage was expected but could not be demonstrated, and this was postulated to include factors such as birth injury or mild anoxia. This laid the foundation for the concept of minimal brain damage/dysfunction, a childhood syndrome that included developmental impairments in control of attention, impulse and motor function as well as perception, conceptualisation, language and memory linked to deviations in the function of the central nervous system. The subsequent finding that genetic factors explain familial aggregation of ADHD suggested a likely role for gene-environment interaction (Rutter & Silberg, 2002).

Three main groups of environmental risk factors have been identified. The first group comprises prenatal and perinatal events, such as prematurity, low birth weight, pregnancy and/or birth complications and mother’s use of alcohol or tobacco during pregnancy. The second consists of parental and family factors such as early and severe neglect, and later influences upon the course such as critical expressed emotion. These are not yet confirmed by identification of specific genes, but seem to identify larger influences than the candidate gene associations and have the potential to identify novel genes and developmental processes. Chromosomal regions highlighted by replication across studies or accumulating evidence with increasing sample size include chromosomes 5p13, 6q12, 16p13 and 17p11. A further sib-pair linkage study, the International Multicentre ADHD Genetics (IMAGE) Project, will provide additional linkage data in the coming year (Asherson & the Image Consortium, 2004). Several of these loci overlap with those highlighted in studies of other developmental disorders, in particular autism (5p13, 16p13 and 17p11). Whether the same genes are involved will become clear when specific genes are identified.

ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS

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NEUROCOGNITIVE PROCESSES

A major challenge arising from the success of genetic research is to identify the neurocognitive processes that mediate genetic influences on ADHD. Although much progress has been made in cognitive-experimental research on ADHD a consensus is yet to emerge on the key underlying processes. Interpretation of neurocognitive data is complex, with alternative explanations for poor performance on experimental tasks including impaired ability to withhold a response, deficient extinction processes, attentional problems, insufficient ability to regulate the state of activation, altered motivational processes and working memory impairments (Castellanos & Tannock, 2002; Kuntsi & Asherson, 2004). Part of the difficulty in specifying the cognitive processes relates to the inconsistency that often characterises performance of children with ADHD. Within-task manipulations with variables such as incentives or presentation rate often influence whether or not a cognitive ‘deficit’ is observed. Thus, although many authors have attempted to formulate a single neurocognitive theory of ADHD, it is often not clear what neurocognitive processes underlie performance on a particular cognitive experimental task.

Quantitative genetic analyses have the potential to narrow the focus to one or more causal pathways. We can investigate the extent to which cognitive experimental measures that tag ‘distinct’ neurocognitive processes correlate with each other and with ADHD behaviours and the extent to which shared genetic influences account for such correlations. We might, for example, expect to see multiple overlapping effects of genes on neurocognitive processes implicated in ADHD. It currently remains a matter of conjecture whether the various psychological constructs put forward to explain ADHD have the same or different underlying cause or causes. Kuntsi & Stevenson (2001) were the first to apply a genetic design to identify cognitive processes that mediate genetic influences on ADHD, and we are currently engaged in further family and twin studies to provide empirical answers to these questions. Molecular genetic studies investigating attention and response inhibition have also been completed, but no firm conclusion can yet be drawn owing to small sample sizes and inconsistency across data-sets. Another...
strand of our research is the use of family and twin designs to investigate genetic and environmental influences on brain structure and function. Neuroimaging studies have identified structural and functional changes in the prefrontal cortex, striatum and cerebellum as well as evidence for increased dopamine transporter density in the striatum, but as yet little is known about their relationship to individual differences in the risk for ADHD (Castellanos & Tannock, 2002; Kuntsi & Asherson, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The new genetics was heralded by the near completion of the human genome sequence and has been followed by a rapid rise in the number of identified genetic variants. It has shifted the goal of behavioural genetic research from gene discovery towards gene functionality (McGuffin & Plomin, 2004). Quantitative genetic findings have shifted perception of ADHD towards that of a quantitative trait sharing aetiological influences with other developmental, behavioural and cognitive traits. Molecular genetics has confirmed a priori hypotheses of dopamine system dysregulation and promises to identify additional genes in the coming decade. Combining genetic, environmental and neurobiological research has the potential to delineate causal links between ADHD and the developmental course of the disorder, including persistence of ADHD symptoms into adulthood and comorbidity with associated psychiatric disorders and traits. At a time when the role of developmental disorders is increasingly recognised within adult as well as child psychiatry, the accruing knowledge holds promise for the development of new clinical approaches to previously intractable problems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Medical Research Council (MRC), the Wellcome Trust and the US National Institute of Mental Health currently fund the MRC Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre for genetic studies of ADHD Professor Jan Buitelaar contributed to the section on environmental risks.

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Access the most recent version at DOI: 10.1192/bjp.187.2.103

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