Examining motion speed processing in schizophrenia using the flash lag illusion

Mariia Kaliuzhna, Timo Stein, Philipp Sterzer, Kiley J. Seymour

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Research on visual perception in schizophrenia suggests a deficit in motion processing. Specifically, difficulties with discriminating motion speed are commonly reported. However, speed discrimination tasks typically require participants to make judgments about the difference between two stimuli in a two-interval forced choice (2IFC) task. Such tasks not only tap into speed processing mechanisms, but also rely on higher executive functioning including working memory and attention which has been shown to be compromised in schizophrenia. We used the Flash Lag illusion to examine speed processing in patients with schizophrenia. Based on previous research showing a strong dependence between motion speed and the illusion magnitude, we expected a deficit in speed processing to alter this relationship. A motion processing deficit in patients would also predict overall reductions in perceived lag. We found the magnitude and speed dependence of the Flash Lag illusion to be similar in patients and controls. Together, the findings suggest no general abnormality in motion speed processing in schizophrenia.

1. Introduction

Recent studies on visual processing in schizophrenia demonstrate numerous perceptual deficits (Cutting and Dunne, 1986; Phillipson and Harris, 1985; Waters et al., 2014; Bunney Jr et al., 1999; Kantrowitz et al., 2009; Butler et al., 2008; Butler and Javitt, 2005; Butler et al., 2003; Silverstein, 2016; Yoon et al., 2010; Uhlhaas et al., 2005; Uhlhaas and Mishara, 2006; Thoenes and Oberfeld, 2017; O'donnell et al., 2002; Notredame et al., 2014). In particular, evidence suggests a deficit in motion perception that might underlie other disruptions in behaviour associated with the disorder (Chen et al., 1999a; Chen et al., 2003; Chen et al., 2004; Chen, 2011; Tadin et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2013). For instance, it has been reported that patients exhibit difficulties in discriminating biological motion from non-biological motion (Kim et al., 2005; Okruszek et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2013) that might underlie some social cognitive impairments (Couture et al., 2006; Fett et al., 2011; Green et al., 2015). Patients also show impairments in apparent motion perception which have been linked to positive and disorganization symptoms (Tscharcher et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2013). In addition, patients are reported to exhibit higher coherence thresholds for detecting global motion direction (Chen et al., 2003; Carter et al., 2017; Li, 2002; Chen et al., 2005; Slaghuis et al., 2007; Suve et al., 1997), which might generally impede daily functioning in dynamic visual environments.

Research on motion perception in schizophrenia suggests a severe deficit in global motion processing (Carter et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2003; Brittain et al., 2010), while local processing seems to be relatively intact (Carter et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2003). This indicates a functional impairment in higher-order motion areas like V5/MT+ (Britten et al., 1993; Zeki, 1974; Albright, 1984; Pasternak et al., 1985; Van Essen et al., 1981; Dumoulin et al., 2000; Van Kemenade et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2018b; Palmer et al., 2018a; Silverstein, 2016; Yoon et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2010; Seymour et al., 2013; Dakin et al., 2005; Keane et al., 2012; Tadin et al., 2006; Butler et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2017; Uhlhaas et al., 2006; Uhlhaas and Mishara, 2006). Also in support of this is evidence from functional magnetic resonance imaging.
The most consistent finding of a motion processing deficit in schizophrenia is an impairment in speed discrimination (Clementz et al., 2007; Chen, 2011; Chen et al., 2004; Chen et al., 1999b; Chen et al., 1999a; Chen et al., 2003; Bidwell et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Hong et al., 2009; Brenner et al., 2003). Speed processing deficits have been linked to V5/MT+ dysfunction and smooth pursuit deficits, commonly reported with the disorder (Stuve et al., 1997; O’Driscol and Callahan, 2008; Lencer et al., 2005). In a typical motion discrimination task, participants observe two successive motion stimuli and decide whether the first or second stimulus is moving faster. Patients consistently exhibit higher velocity discrimination thresholds than controls, meaning they require larger speed differences to successfully distinguish the two stimuli. This deficit is shown to be present irrespective of the type of moving targets used (Chen et al., 1999b; Kim et al., 2006; Clementz et al., 2007; Hong et al., 2009) and is most prominent at intermediate speeds (e.g., 10°/s) (Chen et al., 1999b; Chen et al., 1999a).

While current evidence suggests speed processing abnormalities exist in schizophrenia, studies employing speed discrimination tasks may be confounded by the presence of a more generalised deficit associated with the disorder. For instance, a working memory deficit (Forbes et al., 2009; Lee and Park, 2005; Conklin et al., 2000; Goldman-Rakic, 1994; Landro et al., 2001; Meda et al., 2009; Park and Gooding, 2014) or attention deficit (Fioravanti et al., 2012; Fioravanti et al., 2005; Chen and Faramee, 2000) could account for findings of poor task performance in schizophrenia, which might otherwise appear to indicate a specific speed processing impairment. In the typical two-interval forced choice (2IFC) speed discrimination task, participants are required to make a comparison between two stimuli (Chen et al., 1999a; Chen et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Clementz et al., 2007; Hong et al., 2009). Such judgments not only require the engagement of speed processing mechanisms, but rely on intact working memory and focused attention to make an accurate comparison. Thus, poor performance by patients in such tasks could be due to a cognitive deficit related to poor working memory or an attention deficit rather than a speed processing deficit per se.

To circumvent the confounding effects of a generalised deficit on task performance, recent research has used visual illusions to examine the integrity of visual processing in schizophrenia (Dakin et al., 2005; Kuluzhna et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2018b; Tibber et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Tadin et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2008; Koethe et al., 2009; Tschacher et al., 2006; Crawford et al., 2010; Norton et al., 2008; Notredame et al., 2014; Dima et al., 2010; Dima et al., 2009; Keane et al., 2013; Keane et al., 2016; Uhlhaas et al., 2006; Kantrowitz et al., 2009; Letourneau and Lavoie, 1973; Letourneau, 1974). Visual illusions are usually well validated and known to probe the functional integrity of a relatively narrow range of mechanisms. Also, because they have typically been tested under multiple stimulus manipulations in healthy participants, they can be used to predict specific hypothesis-consistent patterns of performance from patients that are different from controls and what would be expected from a generalised deficit (Silverstein and Keane, 2011b). However, of the many reports of motion processing deficits in schizophrenia, only few studies have used visual illusions (Tschacher et al., 2006; Crawford et al., 2010; Tschacher et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Tadin et al., 2006) and no study has specifically examined the processing of motion speed.

The Flash Lag illusion (FLI) is a robust visual illusion that is heavily dependent on motion speed (Krekelberg and Lappe, 2001; Eagleman and Sejnowski, 2007; Arnold et al., 2009; Brenner and Smeets, 2000; Sarich et al., 2007; Chappell and Mullen, 2010; Hubbard, 2014; Khan and Timney, 2007; Linares and Lopez-Moliner, 2007; Linares et al., 2009; Watanabe et al., 2001; Nijhawan et al., 2004; Nijhawan, 1994; Nijhawan, 2002; Shiourii et al., 2010; Whitney et al., 2000). It is observed when a flashed bar is presented in physical alignment with a moving target but appears to lag behind the moving target (Nijhawan, 1994). It is consistently shown that the size of the FLI increases linearly with the speed of the moving target (Hubbard and Bharucha, 1988; Hubbard, 1990; Krekelberg and Lappe, 1999, Nijhawan, 1994), making it an excellent tool to assess the integrity of speed processing mechanisms without requiring participants to discriminate between motion speeds directly, as is the case in most speed discrimination experiments.

Examining speed perception in schizophrenia using the FLI eliminates the confounding factors commonly associated with 2IFC speed discrimination tasks, such as high working memory demands. Importantly, it allows for careful testing of specific patterns of performance that would be predicted from a speed processing deficit. Specifically, an impairment in speed processing would predict a weaker relationship between FLI magnitude and motion speed (i.e., slope and goodness of fit) compared to controls. That is, a selective deficit in speed processing would be evidenced by a statistically significant interaction between motion speed and group, being most evident at intermediate speeds as the research suggests (Chen et al., 1999b; Chen et al., 1999a). Also, the use of the FLI allows for predictions about a specific motion deficit or general attention deficit to be pitted against each other. For instance, research in healthy participants shows that disruption to motion area V5/MT+ reduces perceived lag (Maus et al., 2012). We would, thus, predict that a motion deficit in schizophrenia results in reduced FLIs compared to controls. On the other hand, limited attentional resources have been shown to increase FLIs in healthy participants (Sarich et al., 2007; Hayes and Freyd, 2002; Shiourii et al., 2010; Baldo and Namba, 2002; Baldo et al., 2002). Hence, if performance is affected by an attention deficit in patients, we would expect to observe larger FLIs in this group.

Currently, it is also unclear whether speed processing deficits in schizophrenia impact other aspects of functioning in dynamic visual environments. Some evidence suggests patients experience twice as many car accidents compared to other drivers (Edlund et al., 1989; Lipskaya-Velikovsky et al., 2013). The Flash Lag illusion demonstrates that judgments of the relative position between stationary and moving objects are affected by motion speed. By examining how speed processing deficits affect other visual judgments, the current study aids our understanding of how such deficits might contribute to other impairments in daily functioning (Green et al., 2008; Javitt, 2009).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Eighteen outpatients who met the DSM-IV criteria for schizophrenia and 21 healthy controls recruited from the general population performed the experiment. The two groups were matched on mean age (patients 33.3 yo (SD = 5.6), controls 33.7 yo (SD = 6.4), gender (50% female)) and years of education (patients 15.8 y (SD = 4.2), controls 15.4 y (SD = 3.7)). At the time of testing all patients were stable, had a mean illness duration of 9 years (SD = 6.9) and received antipsychotic medication (Chlorpromazine equivalent: 282 mg/day; SD = 256.7). An experienced psychiatrist conducted the clinical interview and administered the Positive and Negative Symptoms Scale (Kay et al., 1987). At the time of testing, the patients were stable and symptom severity was low: the mean positive symptom score was 11.9 (SD = 4.6), the negative score was 13.9 (SD = 5.2), with a general score of 24.8 (SD = 7.9). All participants had normal or corrected-to-normal visual acuity. Participants gave written informed consent to take part in the experiment and the study was approved by the Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin Medical Ethics Review Committee.

2.2. Procedure

Stimuli were presented on a gamma corrected 48-cm Samtron CRT
the main experiment.

The experiment was conducted using a CRT monitor. Subjects practiced with 10 trials before completing the task. They were seated in a darkened experimental booth with a chin rest 57 cm from the monitor. Subjects were instructed to fixate on a target while a set of bars moved horizontally from left to right. The flashed object consists of a vertical bar which is briefly flashed in the gap within the moving target bars when they are aligned. The position of the flashed object appears to lag behind the position of the moving target.

Our procedure closely followed (Whitney et al., 2000). The moving stimulus comprised a pair of vertically aligned white (34.5 cd/m²) target bars translating horizontally 4° below a white fixation point on a grey background. Each target bar subtended 0.50° in width and 2° in height (Fig. 1) and moved concurrently at one of 10 speeds (3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20, 25, 30°/s). The distance between the two bars (2°) was constant.

The moving bars were presented within a 15° horizontal window (within 7.5° of fixation). The bars always moved from left to the right. Each trial began by an initial translation (> 3.5°) of the moving bars, after which another white bar (subtending 0.50° in width and 1° in height) was flashed for one video frame (16.7 ms) between the moving target bars.

We used a set of interleaved adaptive staircase procedures, where participants were asked on each trial to indicate whether they perceived the flashed object to precede or follow the moving target bars. The horizontal position of the flashed object relative to the moving bars was updated after each trial. On the first trial of each speed condition, the flashed object was updated. On every subsequent trial, the position of the flashed bar relative to the moving bars was updated (by an increment of 0.5° for the first 3 trials and 0.25° on subsequent trials, see Cornsweet Tom, 1962). The extent of apparent lag (FLI) was determined as the flash setting that appeared spatially aligned with the moving bars (based on the average of the last two reversals of the staircase over the 15 trials for a given speed condition). For example, when the flash was physically aligned with the moving bars, it would have appeared to lag behind the bars. In order to offset this apparent lag, the flash had to be presented ahead of the moving bars. This offset was calculated for each participant under each speed condition.

3. Data analysis

All analyses were performed using JASP (JASP Team, 2018, Version 0.9) software.

We first used a classical frequentist approach to analyze our results. We then applied Bayesian statistics in order to determine whether our null effects were genuine evidence for the null hypothesis relative to the alternative hypotheses. Bayes Factors (BF₁₀) were calculated using a default Cauchy prior width of 0.707 and were interpreted using established guidelines (Lee and Wagenmakers, 2013; Jeffreys, 1961).

4. Results

An ANOVA was used to determine whether there were any group differences in the size of the FLI in our sample. The analysis returned a very strong significant main effect of speed (Fig. 2) with all participants showing a linear increase in FLI with increasing speed (F(1,37) = 26.77, p < 0.001, η² = 0.420; BF₁₀ > 100). This is consistent with previous research (Hubbard and Bharucha, 1988; Hubbard, 1996; Krekelberg and Luppe, 1999; Nijhawan, 1994; Wojtach et al., 2008). Importantly, our analysis did not reveal a significant main effect of group (F(1,37) = 0.419, p = 0.522, η² = 0.011, BF₁₀ = 0.346), nor evidence for an interaction between speed and group (p = 0.496), which would indicate a deficit in motion speed processing in schizophrenia. Bayesian statistics indicated “strong” evidence against an interaction (BF₁₀ = 0.045). The slope (mean SZ: 0.019, HC: 0.022; p = 0.324) and R² goodness of fit (mean SZ: 0.49, HC: 0.45; p = 0.852) of the linear functions did not differ between patients and controls.

Correlations of line slope with PANNS scores failed to show any relationship between an individual’s illness severity and the influence of motion speed on perceived lag (positive scores: R² = 0.047, p = 0.878; negative scores: R² = −0.032, p = 0.917; general scores: R² = 0.08, p = 0.799; total score: R² = −0.093, p = 0.763).

5. Discussion

Research on visual perception in schizophrenia consistently reports an impairment in motion speed processing (Clementz et al., 2007; Chen, 2011; Chen et al., 2004; Chen et al., 1999b; Chen et al., 1999a; Chen et al., 2003; Bidwell et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Hong et al., 2009; Brenner et al., 2003). However, the typical task used to assess speed processing in schizophrenia is a 2IFC speed discrimination task, which may be susceptible to the effects of a more generalised deficit (e.g., including limited working memory function and attention resources). The aim of this study was to use the Flash Lag illusion to indirectly probe the integrity of speed processing mechanisms in patients with schizophrenia. Previous research on the Flash Lag illusion in healthy adults shows there is a strong linear relationship...
between the speed of the moving target and the magnitude of the perceived lag. We expected that if patients exhibited difficulties in processing motion speed, this relationship would be altered. Based on previous research (Maus et al., 2012), we also predicted that a motion deficit would reduce the overall size of the Flash Lag illusion. The results of this study suggest no such abnormality in motion speed processing in schizophrenia. We found no group differences in overall illusion magnitude or dependence on motion speed.

Despite previous reports of a speed discrimination deficit in schizophrenia (Chen, 2011; Clementz et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2009), the characteristic speed dependence of the Flash Lag illusion observed from our patients indicates intact speed processing in this group. The majority of previous research reporting speed processing deficits has assessed velocity thresholds using a 2IFC task. In the typical speed discrimination task, participants are required to make a comparative judgement of two motion speeds presented in separate temporal intervals. Thus, speed estimations calculated for the first motion stimulus must be maintained in working memory until the second motion stimulus is presented. Given that schizophrenia is heavily associated with working memory deficits (Lee and Park, 2005; Meda et al., 2009; Goldman-Rakic, 1994; Conklin et al., 2000; Forbes et al., 2009), it is possible that poor performance on these 2IFC tasks reflect difficulties in working memory rather than a speed processing deficit per se. In the current study, participants were not required to make judgments of stimuli presented in two separate intervals, reducing any confound associated with a working memory deficit. Instead, they were asked to make much simpler judgments about the relative position of a stationary object and moving target. Thus, our failure to find a weaker relationship between FLI magnitude and motion speed in schizophrenia suggests intact speed processing in this group. These findings are in line with other visual illusion studies showing no visual impairments in schizophrenia (King et al., 2017; Grzeczkowski et al., 2018; Tibber et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2018b; Kaliuzhna et al., 2019) and highlight the importance of examining perception in this group using a range of experimental tasks. Our results are also in accordance with some earlier studies on motion processing in schizophrenia that report no differences between patients and controls (Keane et al., 2018b; Tso et al., 2013; Keane et al., 2018a). Specifically, it has been suggested that previously documented motion processing deficits might be a result of lower IQ in patients with schizophrenia. IQ was not assessed in the present sample. However, both groups were matched on years of education, suggesting comparable IQ levels. Thus, our results might differ from previous research that observed motion processing deficits in schizophrenia due to an IQ level confound.

Another confounding factor that could influence task performance on 2IFC tasks is a general attention deficit (Fioravanti et al., 2012; Fioravanti et al., 2005; Chen and Faraone, 2000). The task employed in this study arguably recruits less attentional resources than the typical 2IFC speed discrimination task, and may thus be more sensitive to detecting a specific deficit in speed processing. Importantly, our study made clear predictions about the pattern of results expected if an attention deficit were to influence task performance. Previous research in healthy adults shows that limited attention results in larger FLIs across a wide range of tasks within the same patient cohort (Grzeczkowski et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2013).

Declaration of competing interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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