Potential effect of skull thickening on the associations between cognition and brain atrophy in ageing

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Abstract

Background: intracranial volume (ICV) is commonly used as a marker of premorbid brain size in neuroimaging studies as it is thought to remain fixed throughout adulthood. However, inner skull table thickening would encroach on ICV and could mask actual brain atrophy.

Objective: we investigated the effect that thickening might have on the associations between brain atrophy and cognition.

Methods: the sample comprised 57 non-demented older adults who underwent structural brain MRI at mean age 72.7 ± 0.7 years and were assessed on cognitive ability at mean age 11 and 73 years. Principal component analysis was used to derive factors of general cognitive ability (g), information processing speed and memory from the recorded cognitive ability data. The total brain tissue volume and ICV with (estimated original ICV) and without (current ICV) adjusting for the effects of inner table skull thickening were measured. General linear modelling was used to test for associations.

Results: all cognitive ability variables were significantly (P < 0.01) associated with percentage total brain volume in ICV measured without adjusting for skull thickening (g: η² = 0.177, speed: η² = 0.264 and memory: η² = 0.132). After accounting for skull thickening, only speed was significantly associated with percentage total brain volume in ICV (η² = 0.085, P = 0.034), not g or memory.

Conclusions: not accounting for skull thickening when computing ICV can distort the association between brain atrophy and cognitive ability in old age. Larger samples are required to determine the true effect.

Keywords: skull thickening, brain atrophy, cognition, ageing, magnetic resonance imaging, older people

Introduction

Brain atrophy helps in understanding brain volume changes and their association with ageing, neuropsychological conditions and cognition [1, 2]. Estimation of brain atrophy in neuroimaging studies normally requires the use of a marker of premorbid brain size. Intracranial volume (ICV) is commonly used for this because it is generally believed not to be affected by disease or age-related changes [3]. However, in other areas of imaging practice, it has long been recognised
that thickening of the inner skull table occurs in variable amounts as part of normal ageing, more so in women than men [4, 5].

Previous studies have reported that the association between cognitive ability and brain atrophy is stronger for women than men and for adults than children [1, 2]. However, the brain shrinks with advancing age, and the atrophy rate is faster in men than women [1, 2]. Hence, it is possible that inner table skull thickening could distort the association between cognition and brain size/atrophy with advancing age.

In a previous study [6], we found that not accounting for inner table skull thickening in the computation of ICV could underestimate brain atrophy by ∼5.3%, potentially obscuring gender differences. In the present exploratory study, we investigated whether the inclusion of inner table skull thickening during measurement of ICV could affect the association between estimated brain atrophy and cognitive ability.

Two estimates of ICV were recorded (full description provided elsewhere [6] and in Supplementary data in *Age and Ageing* online, Appendix 2). Briefly, the first measured ICV did not adjust for the effect of inner table skull thickening, termed ‘current ICV’ (Figure 1; top right panel). The second estimated the original ICV prior to development of inner table skull thickening by estimating where the original inner skull was, termed ‘estimated original ICV’ (Figure 1, bottom right panel). Both current and estimated original ICV include veins and meninges in the ICV, as veins and meninges increase in size with increasing brain atrophy [10].

**Methods**

**Subjects**

Study participants were members of the Lothian Birth Cohort 1936 (LBC1936; [7] who underwent brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI; [8]), and detailed cognitive and medical assessments [7] at mean age 73 years. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants under protocols approved by the Lothian (REC-07/MRE00/58) and Scottish Multicentre (MREC/01/0/56) Research Ethics Committee. For the present study, a representative sub-sample of 60 out of 672 participants were selected by visual inspection of MRI data to include subjects with a range of representative skull thickening, from obvious thickening of the inner skull table to little or no thickening, blind to the cognitive ability scores. Three of the originally selected 60 subjects were excluded because of incomplete data leaving 57 subjects (30 men), aged 71.1–74.3 years (mean 72.7, SD 0.7 years).

**Brain MRI acquisition**

Subjects were imaged with a GE Signa Horizon HDxt 1.5T clinical scanner (General Electric, Milwaukee, WI, USA) using a self-shielding gradient set with maximum gradient strength of 33 mT/m and an 8-channel phased-array head coil. The imaging data included: T1-weighted and T2-weighted whole brain tissue volume measurements as part of normal ageing, more so in women than men [4, 5].

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**Cognitive parameters**

The cognitive ability assessments have been described elsewhere [7]. Briefly, subjects were assessed on a battery of cognitive tests at mean age 11 and 73 years. These were used to derive cognitive ability variables at age 73, that is: the general factors of cognitive ability (g; Supplementary data are available in *Age and Ageing* online, Appendix 3), processing speed (speed) and memory (memory).

**Statistical analysis**

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 19 (IBM Inc., NY, USA), with all statistical tests being two-tailed, and *P*-values < 0.05 being considered statistically significant. For each subject, total brain volume was normalised to the subject’s ICV (current and estimated original ICV) and expressed as percentages of ICV. The normalised brain volumes were used as measures of atrophy.

General linear modelling (GLM) was used to investigate associations between cognitive parameters (dependent variables) and atrophy measures (independent variables, Figure 1). Covariates were gender, age in days at age 73 years and age 11 IQ. Separate GLM were used to investigate the association between age 11 IQ (independent variable) and atrophy measures (dependent variables).

**Results**

Supplementary data in *Age and Ageing* online, Appendix 4 presents descriptive statistics for all brain and cognitive variables. We have previously reported the difference between current ICV and estimated original ICV in the same sample [6]. Estimated original ICV was significantly greater than current ICV. The percentage of brain tissue in current ICV was significantly larger than the percentage of brain in estimated original ICV. The total brain tissue volume occupied a larger proportion of current ICV in women than in men. There was no sex difference in the proportion of estimated original ICV occupied by total brain volume.

GLM (Table 1; Supplementary data are available in *Age and Ageing* online, Appendix 6) showed that, after adjusting for age in days, gender and age 11 IQ, cognitive ability in old age was significantly associated with the percentage of brain.
tissue in current ICV (g: $F = 11.2, P = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.177$; speed: $F = 18.31, P < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.264$ and memory: $F = 7.88, P = 0.007, \eta^2 = 0.132$). However, only speed ($F = 4.73, P = 0.034, \eta^2 = 0.085$) was significantly associated with the percentage of brain tissue in estimated original ICV, although with a substantially attenuated effect size, but not g ($F = 2.64, P = 0.11, \eta^2 = 0.048$) or memory ($F = 2.40, P = 0.127, \eta^2 = 0.044$; see Supplementary data are available in Age and Ageing online, Appendix 5, for associations between age 11 IQ and atrophy. Supplementary data in Age and Ageing online, Appendix 7 presents the statistical comparison of associations between atrophy and cognitive ability.
Discussion

In this exploratory sample, we show that inner table skull thickening can distort associations between lifetime cognitive change and brain atrophy measured as percentage of brain tissue in ICV in older subjects. When ICV was computed without accounting for inner table skull thickening, the percentage of total brain tissue volume occupied a larger proportion of ICV in women than in men in preceding work [1]; accounting for skull thickening removed this gender difference. Furthermore, the use of current ICV showed that the percentage of brain tissue in ICV is associated with all cognitive parameters, whereas the use of estimated original ICV revealed that the percentage of brain tissue in ICV is only associated with speed, not g or memory. The difference in the brain size-lifetime cognitive change association when skull thickening is or is not accounted for might explain why the association between brain size and cognitive ability was found to be stronger in older adults than in children, and in women than in men in previous studies [1, 2], i.e. it could in part be an artefact of change in ICV over the life course. These results show that ICV computed without accounting for skull thickening may falsely inflate the relationship between lifetime cognitive change and brain atrophy.

We used validated image processing tools, accounted for the entire intracranial contents, carefully estimated the effect of inner table skull thickening, and used a sample of older subjects manifesting a range of skull thickening. We corrected atrophy-cognitive ability associations for childhood IQ, assessed over 60 years earlier. These associations therefore reflect lifetime cognitive change.

A possible limitation of this study is the assumption that ICV reflects maximal brain size in youth. Ideally, serial MRI of a large sample should be used to assess whether ICV does in fact remain stable from late childhood to old age; however, this is currently impossible. The study sample size is small, chosen as a sub-sample of a large cohort in order to determine if inner table skull thickening was worthy of further evaluation. It is clear that a larger sample is required to confirm the findings and test gender-related differences, also in other populations. The method used for determining original ICV in this study is time-consuming which was why we selected a sample for this study; automation becomes necessary if future studies are to account for skull thickening routinely. Clearly, as inner table skull thickening may be an important methodological point in studies of the ageing brain, further research is now warranted to determine the best method to account for inner table skull thickening in ICV and brain measurement.

Future studies of brain atrophy, and its association with cognitive ageing, should evaluate the necessity of adjusting for inner table skull thickening when measuring ICV. These findings call for attention to a typically overlooked aspect of cognitive ageing research. Further research in larger samples is required to investigate the true effect of inner table skull thickening on the associations between brain atrophy and cognition, and to derive the true relationship between ICV and inner table skull thickening in older adults.

Key points

- ICV measured accounting for skull thickening (estimate ICV) was larger than ICV measured without (current ICV).
- All cognitive ability variables (intelligence, speed and memory) were associated with percentage of total brain volume in current ICV.
- Only speed was significantly associated with percentage of total brain volume in estimate ICV.
- Not accounting for skull thickening when computing ICV can distort the association between brain atrophy and cognitive ability.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data mentioned in the text are available to subscribers in Age and Ageing online.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

References

Self-reported quality of care for older adults from 2004 to 2011: a cohort study

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Abstract

Background: little is known about changes in the quality of medical care for older adults over time. 
Objective: to assess changes in technical quality of care over 6 years, and associations with participants’ characteristics. 
Design: a national cohort survey covering RAND Corporation-derived quality indicators (QIs) in face-to-face structured interviews in participants’ households. 
Participants: a total of 5,114 people aged 50 or more in four waves of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. 
Methods: the percentage achievement of 24 QIs in 10 general medical and geriatric clinical conditions was calculated for each time point, and associations with participants’ characteristics were estimated using logistic regression. 
Results: participants were eligible for 21,220 QIs. QI achievement for geriatric conditions (cataract, falls, osteoarthritis and osteoporosis) was 41% [95% confidence interval (CI): 38–44] in 2004–05 and 38% (36–39) in 2010–11. Achievement for general medical conditions (depression, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, ischaemic heart disease, pain and cerebrovascular disease) improved from 75% (73–77) in 2004–05 to 80% (79–82) in 2010–11. Achievement ranged from 89% for cerebrovascular disease to 34% for osteoarthritis. Overall achievement was lower for participants who were men, wealthier, infrequent alcohol drinkers, not obese and living alone. 
Conclusion: substantial system-level shortfalls in quality of care for geriatric conditions persisted over 6 years, with relatively small and inconsistent variations in quality by participants’ characteristics. The relative lack of variation by participants’ characteristics suggests that quality improvement interventions may be more effective when directed at healthcare delivery systems rather than individuals. 

Keywords: quality of care, geriatrics, epidemiology, older people