Fast myocardial $T_{1p}$ mapping in mice using k-space weighted image contrast and a Bloch simulation-optimized radial sampling pattern

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Received: 31 March 2021 / Revised: 26 July 2021 / Accepted: 27 July 2021 / Published online: 7 September 2021
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Abstract

**Purpose** $T_{1p}$ dispersion quantification can potentially be used as a cardiac magnetic resonance index for sensitive detection of myocardial fibrosis without the need of contrast agents. However, dispersion quantification is still a major challenge, because $T_{1p}$ mapping for different spin lock amplitudes is a very time consuming process. This study aims to develop a fast and accurate $T_{1p}$ mapping sequence, which paves the way to cardiac $T_{1p}$ dispersion quantification within the limited measurement time of an in vivo study in small animals.

**Methods** A radial spin lock sequence was developed using a Bloch simulation-optimized sampling pattern and a view-sharing method for image reconstruction. For validation, phantom measurements with a conventional sampling pattern and a gold standard sequence were compared to examine $T_{1p}$ quantification accuracy. The in vivo validation of $T_{1p}$ mapping was performed in $N = 10$ mice and in a reproduction study in a single animal, in which ten maps were acquired in direct succession. Finally, the feasibility of myocardial dispersion quantification was tested in one animal.

**Results** The Bloch simulation-based sampling shows considerably higher image quality as well as improved $T_{1p}$ quantification accuracy ($+56\%$) and precision ($+49\%$) compared to conventional sampling. Compared to the gold standard sequence, a mean deviation of $-0.46 \pm 1.84\%$ was observed. The in vivo measurements proved high reproducibility of myocardial $T_{1p}$ mapping. The mean $T_{1p}$ in the left ventricle was $39.5 \pm 1.2$ ms for different animals and the maximum deviation was $2.1\%$ in the successive measurements. The myocardial $T_{1p}$ dispersion slope, which was measured for the first time in one animal, could be determined to be $4.76 \pm 0.23$ ms/kHz.

**Conclusion** This new and fast $T_{1p}$ quantification technique enables high-resolution myocardial $T_{1p}$ mapping and even dispersion quantification within the limited time of an in vivo study and could, therefore, be a reliable tool for improved tissue characterization.

**Keywords** $T_{1rho}$ · $T_{1p}$ mapping · $T_{1p}$ dispersion · Spin lock · Radial · KWIC · Cardiac · Small animal · Mice

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**Introduction**

Cardiac magnetic resonance imaging (cMRI) has become an increasingly important imaging technique, which enables various non-invasive diagnostic options in clinical cardiology and basic cardiologic research. In addition to informative morphological and functional investigations, cMRI offers the possibility of enhanced tissue characterization to investigate tissue defects like edema, inflammation or fibrosis [1–3]. There are several methods facilitating magnetic resonance imaging to enable tissue characterization, such as late gadolinium enhancement (LGE), $T_1$- and $T_2$ mapping, and the quantification of the extracellular volume [4–8]. However, some of these methods require the administration...
Native $T_1\rho$ quantification has been emerging to be a promising alternative. The $T_1\rho$ relaxation mechanism, also called spin lattice relaxation in the rotating frame, uses an on-resonant radiofrequency pulse that locks the magnetization and prohibits free relaxation of the spin ensemble [9–11]. This applied spin lock (SL) pulse causes a high sensitivity to low frequency processes at the molecular and cellular level (e.g. of biologic macromolecules) [12–14]. In the field of cMRI, the SL method, using a moderate locking amplitude, has been shown to suppress low frequency relaxation mechanisms that obscure endogenous contrast [15]. In chronic infarcts in the swine model, $T_1\rho$ revealed a significant increase compared to healthy remote myocardium even without the use of contrast agents [15]. Compared to other native quantification techniques, $T_1\rho$ improves the contrast ratio between diseased and healthy myocardial tissue [16–18]. In experimental models as well as in vivo, $T_1\rho$ has already been shown to be a sensitive marker for the detection of several tissue damages like edema, ischemia, fibrosis and myocardial infarction [19–22]. Moreover, $T_1\rho$ gives the possibility for dispersion measurements by manipulation of the effective SL pulse amplitude, enabling additional contrast mechanisms and further improved tissue characterization [11]. This dispersion behavior is of great interest and might be highly beneficial not only in basic research in various animal models, but also in various scenarios in clinical practice [23–25]. However, fast and accurate $T_1\rho$ dispersion quantification in cMRI is still a major imaging challenge, since the preparation of $T_1\rho$ must be carried out immediately before each acquisition [26, 27] and the acquisition time is strongly limited by physiological parameters such as the breathing cycle and heart rate. For the calculation of a single $T_1\rho$ map, several images with different $T_1\rho$ weightings must be acquired. To quantify the dispersion, several maps must be measured using different SL amplitudes. This procedure can lead to excessive measurement times, especially in small animal studies.

Despite the many promising possibilities of cardiac $T_1\rho$ dispersion quantification, only minor attention has been paid to the technique itself so far. To date, there are only a few publications that deal with myocardial $T_1\rho$ dispersion analysis. In the work presented by Witschey et al. [15] myocardial $T_1\rho$ mapping was performed in vivo using an infarction model in pigs. Here, the infarction area could be clearly visualized using cardiac $T_1\rho$ mapping. However, $T_1\rho$ dispersion measurements were only performed ex vivo, revealing a significant difference in the dispersion behavior between infarcted, border zone and remote myocardium. Musthafa et al. [20] presented a study in a mouse infarction model at which $T_1\rho$ mapping was performed at several time points after infarction, accounting a significant increase of $T_1\rho$ at day 7 after infarction. The sequence used for high-resolution $T_1\rho$ mapping was based on respiratory and heartbeat triggered spin locking followed by a single Cartesian spin echo readout. This acquisition procedure ensured a high signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) but was relatively slow, requiring a total scan time of approximately 20 min for a single-slice $T_1\rho$ map, although only four different $T_1\rho$ weighted images were acquired for mapping. This work also introduced an accelerated proof of concept $T_1\rho$ dispersion measurement with reduced spatial resolution. However, these measurements only seem to roughly estimate the dispersion behavior and do not allow an exact pixel-by-pixel quantification. In the work published by Yin et al. [19] $T_1\rho$ dispersion analysis has been performed in a fibrosis model in several dogs in vivo. The authors introduced a dispersion dependent myocardial biomarker that enables the distinction between different grades of fibrosis. A drawback of the study is that only two relaxation maps were used for dispersion quantification and one of these maps did not represent a true $T_1\rho$ map but rather a $T_2$ map. Over all, the main reason why there is no suitable myocardial $T_1\rho$ dispersion quantification method so far is the fact that an accurate measurement can take several hours.

The aim of our work is to introduce a very fast and accurate $T_1\rho$ quantification technique that enables high-resolution myocardial $T_1\rho$ mapping and $T_1\rho$ dispersion quantification even within the limited time window of a small animal in vivo study. For this, a Bloch simulation-optimized imaging sequence using high flip angles and a radial view-sharing method has been developed ensuring high SNR and efficient data sampling. In our study, the new radial sampling technique was compared in phantom measurements with a conventional radial acquisition scheme and a reference gold standard technique. In addition, measurements were carried out in $N = 10$ healthy mice to test the in vivo applicability and to carry out, for the first time, quantitative dispersion imaging in the myocardium.

**Methods**

**Sequence design**

The optimized $T_1\rho$ mapping sequence has been designed to acquire a series of $T_1\rho$ weighted images with different SL times $t_{SL}$ within a single measurement. Therefore, a signal intensity dependent radial sampling pattern and a k-space view-sharing method has been used. $T_1\rho$ preparation was performed by a balanced spin locking module, which includes two adiabatic half-passage (AHP) excitation pulses,
three continuous wave SL pulses using alternating phases and two opposite 180° refocusing pulses for improved $B_0$ and $B_1$ insensitivity [28, 29]. For data acquisition, a golden angle radial gradient echo readout was used [30], acquiring four radial spokes after each SL preparation (Fig. 1). The acquisition window was positioned in end diastole using a dynamic trigger delay (depending on $t_{SL}$) after the R-wave of the ECG signal. Each preparation experiment was separated by a waiting time $t_{rec}$ for magnetization recovery, which is dependent on the respiratory cycle rate. Data sampling was segmented into 13 preparation experiments with identical preparation characteristics (identical SL time $t_{SL}$ and SL amplitude $f_{SL}$). These 13 identical preparation experiments were carried out with eight different SL times, enabling the reconstruction of eight images with different $T_1\rho$ weightings using a k-space weighted image contrast (KWIC) filtered view-sharing method [31]. This leads to $13 \times 8 = 104$ consecutive preparation experiments and consequently $104 \times 4 = 416$ radial acquisitions in total for the generation of a single $T_1\rho$ map. The acquisition time at a respiratory rate of 1 Hz is $\approx 1.7$ min.

**Concept of Bloch sorting**

The fundamental idea of our fast $T_1\rho$ mapping technique is based on three key points. First, the increase of SNR using high flip angles in the gradient echo readouts. Second, the algorithmic search for an optimal radial sampling pattern based on Bloch simulations. Third, the image reconstruction of undersampled data using a KWIC-filtered view-sharing method.

Due to the very high heart rate in mice ($\approx 450$ bpm), only a few readouts after the spin lock preparation are possible in the acquisition window of the diastole ($\approx 20$ ms). Hence, short repetition times TR ($\approx 5$ ms) and only four readouts per preparation were used. The waiting time for magnetization recovery is set by the respiratory cycle (breath gating, $t_{rec} \approx 1500$ ms) and is therefore relatively long. Since this means that only a small number of acquisitions are carried out over time, the signal level must be maximized. In this specific case, the maximum of the averaged signal intensity $\bar{S}$ is achieved if appropriately high flip angles are used in the RF pulse train. Without taking relaxation effects into account, the optimal flip angle can be calculated as follows:

$$\alpha_{opt} = \arg \max_a \left[ \bar{S}(a) \right] = \arg \max_a \left[ \sum_{k=1}^4 \sin(a) \cos(a)^{k-1} \right] = 43.51^\circ$$  

(1)

By considering typical relaxation times of myocardial tissue ($T_{1\rho} = 40$ ms [20], $T_1 = 1400$ ms [32]) and the sequence timings (TR = 5 ms, $t_{rec} = 1500$ ms) described above, the signal maximum is reached at a slightly different value. In Fig. 2a the signal of the NR = 4 readouts was simulated for different SL times ($t_{SL} = 4, 12, 20, 28, 36, 44, 52, 60$ ms) by solving the Bloch equations [33]. In Fig. 2b, the simulation was carried out for different flip angles and plotted averaged over all SL times and readouts. The signal maximum is reached at $\alpha_{opt} = 39.35^\circ$. Based on this estimate, we consistently used $\alpha = 40^\circ$ for all measurements and simulations in this study. Since the $T_1$ recovery is not complete between sequence repetitions, we carried out two dummy cycles prior to the first preparation experiment to prevent increased signals in the first acquisitions. The high flip angles are advantageous here because the steady-state is reached quickly.

The signal maximization generated using high flip angles for the readout ($\alpha = 40^\circ$) has the disadvantage of strong signal variations after each $T_1\rho$ preparation (Fig. 3a). This would ultimately lead to incorrect $T_1\rho$ weighting if all projections were used equally for the sampling of k-space. A fundamental idea of our method is therefore to generate a
smooth variation of signal intensities across k-space using an optimized sorting of golden angles. For this a Bloch simulation-optimized sampling scheme was developed. The signal intensity for every acquisition window was roughly predicted prior to the measurement using the known sequence parameters (TR, t_{rec} and α) and estimated T₁ and T₁ρ values of the probe under investigation by solving the Bloch equations [33]. The results were used to create a sorting (Bloch sorting) of the predicted signal levels for the corresponding acquisition windows (Fig. 3b). The projection angle φ was calculated for each radial readout by linking neighboring golden angles (111.25°, 222.50°, 333.75°, …) with the corresponding Bloch sorting position N_{BS} (Fig. 3c).

\[
φ = N_{BS} \cdot \frac{360°}{1 + \sqrt{5}} \approx N_{BS} \cdot 111.25°
\]

The image reconstruction was performed using an adapted KWIC-filtered technique [31] (Fig. 3d). Here, the k-space center for a desired T₁ρ weighting (with desired t_{SL}) is exclusively selected from the first readout after preparation. This ensures that the main image contrast of the specific T₁ρ weighted image is provided by the correct SL time. Since we have 13 (Fibonacci number) radial projections available for each preparation experiment, the sampling density in the azimuthal direction is homogeneous and only two different azimuthal gaps exist (Fig. 3d) [30]. Due to the Bloch sorting technique, the change in contrast between neighboring golden angles used for the k-space filling (based on the KWIC filter) is minimized for the k-space center. The k-space peripherals were also chosen from other acquisition windows as well as other T₁ρ weightings. Here, the k-space was filled in segments according to the Bloch sorting principle. In each segment, the total number of projections nₙ is maximized for α_{opt} = 39.35°. This value strongly depends on the number of readouts after preparation (NR = 4).

Phantom measurements

All measurements were performed on a 7.0 T small animal imaging system (Bruker BioSpec 70/30, Bruker BioSpin MRI GmbH, Ettlingen, Germany) with a maximum gradient field strength of 470 mT/m. A 35 mm homebuilt quadrature transmit-receive birdcage was used for signal detection. The phantom used consisted of four cylindrical sample tubes with a diameter of 17 mm and a length of 120 mm. The tubes were filled with different concentrations (10, 15, 20, and 25%) of BSA (Bovine Serum Albumin, Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) resulting in different T₁ρ values in the typical range of biological tissue. The sample tubes were arranged in a quadratic array, which was placed in the isocenter of the magnet. In the phantom measurements, ECG triggering of the sequence was deactivated and the recovery time was fixed to a constant value t_{rec} = 5000 ms.
To demonstrate the advantages of the Bloch simulation-based sampling scheme, the image quality and the $T_1\rho$ quantification accuracy were compared with a conventional sampling scheme using a serial sorting of golden angles for subsequent readouts (Fig. 3c). In this setup, the projection angles were not optimized for the expected signal intensity. The remaining sequence parameters for the acquired $T_1\rho$ weighted images were adjusted identical for both sampling schemes: field of view (FOV) = 38.4 × 38.4 mm$^2$, slice thickness = 1.5 mm, acquired/reconstructed resolution = 128 × 128 pixels, repetition time (TR) = 5.0 ms, echo time (TE) = 2.0 ms, bandwidth = 75 kHz, flip angle $\alpha = 40^\circ$, acquired spokes after SL preparation = 4, $t_{SL} = 4...102$ ms (8 different, linear spacing), $f_{SL} = 1500$ Hz. The calculation of a single $T_1\rho$ map required 104 (13 × 8) SL preparation experiments.

An artifact/SNR analysis was performed to determine the sampling scheme that achieves the best image quality with least artifacts, due to the undersampling of the k-space and the KWIC filter based image reconstruction.
Therefore, the SNR for every $T_{1\rho}$ weighted image has been calculated and averaged over all reconstructed images. The individual SNR values were calculated from the magnitude images using four signal masks and a noise mask (Fig. 5) avoiding the edges of the phantoms. The ratio was built from the mean value within the signal masks and the standard deviation within the noise mask. In addition, the coefficient of determination $R^2$, which represents a measure of the agreement with the monoequivalently model function, has been calculated pixel-wise for each fitting process of the $T_{1\rho}$ exponential decay and was finally averaged to obtain a global $R^2$ indicator for both sampling schemes.

For validation of the $T_{1\rho}$ quantification accuracy pixel-wise comparisons with a Cartesian SL prepared turbo spin echo (TSE) sequence were performed, which serves as the gold standard reference. The TSE sequence parameters were chosen similar to the radial sequence and the identical balanced spin lock preparation was used: FOV = 38.4 × 38.4 mm$^2$, slice thickness = 1.5 mm, resolution = 128 × 128 pixels, TR = 5031.4 ms (including $t_{\text{rec}}$), TE = 7.0 ms, bandwidth = 50 kHz, turbo factor = 4, $t_{\text{rec}} = 5000$ ms, $f_{\text{SL}} = 4...102$ ms (eight different, linear spacing), $f_{\text{SL}} = 1500$ Hz. $T_{1\rho}$ mapping using the reference TSE sequence required 256 (32 × 8) SL preparation experiments. Hence, our new radial $T_{1\rho}$ mapping sequence is about 2.5 times (32:13) faster than the TSE reference measurement.

Furthermore, the accuracy of the $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion quantification was examined by comparing the novel radial Bloch sorting technique and the TSE reference. Here, $T_{1\rho}$ mapping was performed for eight different SL amplitudes ($f_{\text{SL}} = 750...2500$ Hz, linear spacing). Thus $8 \times 8 \times 13 = 832$ preparation experiments were required for the radial acquisitions and $8 \times 8 \times 32 = 2048$ preparations for the TSE sequence. For data analysis, circular regions of interest (ROIs) were drawn at the positions of the four $T_{1\rho}$ sample probes. In these ROIs, the $T_{1\rho}$ mapping results were compared pixel-wise with the corresponding values obtained from the TSE reference sequence. The mean quantification accuracy and its variance were determined based on the eight mapping experiments. In addition, the $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion was analyzed using a linear dispersion model to the eight acquired $T_{1\rho}$ maps with various SL amplitudes $f_{\text{SL}}$.

$$T_{1\rho}(f_{\text{SL}}) = T_{1\rho}^0 + m_{1\rho} \cdot f_{\text{SL}}$$

(3)

The quantification accuracy of the dispersion offset $T_{1\rho}(f_{\text{SL}} = 0) = T_{1\rho}^0$ and the dispersion slope $m_{1\rho}$ was also investigated by a pixel-wise examination for each sample tube, identifying its deviation from the corresponding pixel in the TSE reference.

**In vivo measurements**

To check the applicability of our new method in vivo, measurements were carried out in healthy mice. Here the Bloch sorting scheme was used to quantify the $T_{1\rho}$ relaxation time and $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion, since—with respect of the results of the phantom measurements—the Serial sorting scheme did not allow a reasonable application in vivo.

The mice (Naval Medical Research Institute, Charles River Laboratories MA) were imaged in prone position. The animals were anesthetized with isoflurane inhalation (1.5–2 Vol. % in oxygen) and were kept at a constant body temperature of 37 °C. For signal detection the same 35 mm quadrature transmit-receive birdcage as for the phantom measurements was used. Two ECG electrodes attached to the forepaws of the mice were used for ECG triggering and a pressure sensitive balloon placed on the abdominal wall for breath gating. All experimental procedures were in accordance with institutional guidelines and were approved by local authorities.

Myocardial $T_{1\rho}$ mapping was performed in $N = 10$ mice in a single slice for $f_{\text{SL}} = 1500$ Hz. After a standard planning procedure using high-resolution cine images, a midventricular short-axis imaging slice has been selected for the $T_{1\rho}$ measurements. The acquisition window was positioned in end diastole using a variable trigger delay dependent on $f_{\text{SL}}$. The recovery time $t_{\text{rec}}$ was chosen dependent on the respiratory cycle, which was ≈ 1500 ms. The further sequence parameters were adjusted similar to the phantom measurements: FOV = 32 × 32 mm$^2$, slice thickness = 1.5 mm, TR = 4.7 ms, TE = 1.9 ms, bandwidth = 75 kHz, $\alpha = 40^\circ$, acquired spokes after SL preparation = 4, acquired/reconstructed resolution = 128 × 128 pixels, $f_{\text{SL}} = 4...60$ ms (eight different, linear spacing). The in vivo measurement time for each $T_{1\rho}$ map was approximately 2.5 min.

For analysis of the best case reproducibility of the radial $T_{1\rho}$ mapping sequence, a series of ten $T_{1\rho}$ maps with identical SL amplitudes was acquired in one animal in direct succession. A global left ventricular ROI has been selected and was then copied to every repeated $T_{1\rho}$ map. Subsequently, the mean $T_{1\rho}$ values as well as the standard deviations have been calculated at the position of the ROIs. In addition, a comparative measurement using an equivalent Cartesian gradient echo readout was carried out in one animal. Here, fully sampled data sets were acquired for all $T_{1\rho}$ weighted images, leading to a total measurement time of ≈ 6.2 min for the matrix size of 128 × 128. All $T_{1\rho}$ maps obtained were analyzed in a left ventricular segmentation model according to the American Heart Association (AHA).

Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion was carried out in one animal. Therefore, eight $T_{1\rho}$ maps with different SL amplitudes $f_{\text{SL}} = 750...2500$ Hz (eight different, linear spacing, $8 \times 8 \times 13 = 832$ preparation experiments)
were acquired. With the acquired data, eight myocardial \( T_{1\rho} \) maps and a quantitative \( T_{1\rho} \) dispersion slope map were calculated (Eq. 3). Finally, the dispersion behavior of myocardial tissue and the left ventricular blood pool was quantitatively analyzed. Here the measurement time for the acquisition of the complete \( T_{1\rho} \) dispersion map was approximately 20 min.

**Results**

**Phantom measurements**

The results in Fig. 4 show the measured signal intensities over the projection angle of the respective readouts. Here, a good agreement with the predictions of the Bloch simulation (Fig. 3) can be observed. In the case of Bloch sorting, the intensities were sorted almost perfectly in a descending manner (98%). Only a few readouts were acquired in incorrect order. In the case of Serial sorting fast signal changes were observed due to the high flip angles used.

Figure 5a shows the results of the artifact/SNR analysis. The images reveal clearly less artifacts using the optimized Bloch sampling scheme compared to the standard Serial sorting method, which is a result of the reduced contrast differences between acquired subsequent golden angles. The SNR values averaged over all reconstructed \( T_{1\rho} \) weighted images were \( \text{SNR}_{\text{Serial}} = 17.9 \) and \( \text{SNR}_{\text{Bloch}} = 39.3 \). This represents a SNR increase of 120% using the Bloch sorting scheme. The \( R^2 \) map (coefficient of determination, Fig. 5b) also shows a better agreement with the fitted exponential \( T_{1\rho} \) decay, since the \( R^2 \) values almost perfectly fit the value 1 using Bloch sorting. In the \( R^2 \) map of the Serial sorting scheme, certain structural shapes are visible, which might be caused by the artifacts within the reconstructed \( T_{1\rho} \) weighted images. Hence, the \( R^2 \) maps also represents a measure of potential artifacts. The mean \( R^2 \) values were determined to be \( R^2_{\text{Serial}} = 0.973 \) and \( R^2_{\text{Bloch}} = 0.999 \).

The resulting \( T_{1\rho} \) maps for both sampling schemes are shown in Fig. 6a. An improved image quality for Bloch sorting is also visible here, since fewer streaking artifacts can be seen in the phantoms. The results of the \( T_{1\rho} \) quantification accuracy and precision measurements are illustrated in Fig. 6b. The quantification errors compared to the TSE reference have been determined for the individual BSA tubes using a pixel-wise evaluation (Table 1). The relative error averaged over all phantoms was \(-4.01 \pm 5.57\%\) (mean value ± standard deviation) for Serial sorting and \(-0.17 \pm 2.79\%\) for Bloch sorting. The optimized Bloch sorting scheme achieves a considerable improvement in accuracy (+56%) and precision (+49%). However, for the individual tubes, Bloch sorting showed a tendency to slightly underestimate long \( T_{1\rho} \) times and overestimate short times (Table 1).

The results of the \( T_{1\rho} \) dispersion investigations are shown in Fig. 7a. The mean \( T_{1\rho} \) values of the four sample probes are plotted versus the SL amplitude for our radial Bloch sorting scheme and the reference values obtained from the TSE measurement (Fig. 7b). The quantification error was averaged for all SL amplitudes and determined to be \(-0.46 \pm 1.84\%\). In Fig. 7c the calculated dispersion slope maps and dispersion offset maps using the linear dispersion model (Eq. 3) are shown. The obtained dispersion slopes \( m_{1\rho} \)
Fig. 5 Artifact and SNR analysis of the novel Bloch simulation-based sampling scheme and the standard Serial sorting scheme. 

(a) Comparison of exemplary $T_{1\rho}$-weighted images of the four BSA phantoms. Left column: the images are “normally” scaled (all images were acquired with an identical $t_{SL}$ and $f_{SL}$ combination). Right column: the scaling of the images is adapted to highlight artifacts. It is apparent, that Bloch sorting produces much less artifacts than the Serial sorting technique. The SNR values have been determined to $\text{SNR}_{\text{Serial}} = 16.7$ and $\text{SNR}_{\text{Bloch}} = 44.6$ for the images shown. 

(b) Comparison of $R^2$ maps. The $R^2$ values of the Bloch sorting method almost perfectly fit the value 1, while the other method only reaches lower values ($R^2_{\text{Serial}} = 0.973$ and $R^2_{\text{Bloch}} = 0.999$). Structural shapes within the $R^2$ maps are an indication of artifacts within the reconstructed $T_{1\rho}$ weighted images and a measure of reduced image quality.

Fig. 6 $T_{1\rho}$ quantification of Serial Sorting and Bloch Sorting. 

(a) Calculated $T_{1\rho}$ maps of the four BSA phantoms. Streaking artifacts were clearly reduced with Bloch Sorting. 

(b) Comparison of quantification errors using the TSE reference method. For the individual BSA tubes, the relative error in relation to the TSE reference was pixel-wise evaluated. The accuracy and precision has been improved by Bloch sorting for all phantoms. However, a slight underestimation (low BSA concentrations) and overestimation (high BSA concentrations) was obtained.
The dispersion behavior of the four samples can be clearly differentiated using our new radial sequence. For the dispersion slope, a mean deviation of −1.3% and a maximum deviation of −2.8% has been observed. Mean deviation of the dispersion offset was −0.2% and the maximum deviation was −3.4%. For the dispersion analysis, good agreement with a linear model could be determined in the range of the SL amplitudes used. The coefficient of determination of the linear regression averaged at least 0.993.

Comparison of Serial sorting and Bloch sorting in the phantom experiments. The $R^2$ values and the relative quantification errors $\Delta Q$ for the individual BSA phantoms were examined. The results of the TSE sequence were used as a reference. The improvement in accuracy and precision achieved by Bloch sorting (vs Serial sorting) was determined by the respective quantification errors.

### Table 1 $T_{1p}$ quantification of Serial sorting and Bloch sorting

| BSA concentration | $R^2$ Serial [0…1] | $R^2$ Bloch [0…1] | $\Delta Q$ Serial [%] | $\Delta Q$ Bloch [%] | Improvement [%] |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| 10%               | 0.974 ± 0.013      | 0.999 ± 0.001     | −3.33 ± 6.22          | −2.58 ± 2.14         | +23            |
| 15%               | 0.962 ± 0.018      | 0.999 ± 0.001     | −1.81 ± 4.99          | −0.86 ± 2.18         | +52            |
| 20%               | 0.986 ± 0.008      | 0.999 ± 0.001     | −4.71 ± 5.32          | 1.07 ± 3.01          | +77            |
| 25%               | 0.969 ± 0.015      | 0.999 ± 0.001     | −6.17 ± 5.76          | 1.68 ± 3.84          | +73            |
| Mean              | 0.973 ± 0.016      | 0.999 ± 0.001     | −4.01 ± 5.57          | −0.17 ± 2.79         | +56            |

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**Fig. 7** Comparison of the radial Bloch sorting method with the Cartesian TSE reference gold standard.

- **a** Results of $T_{1p}$ mapping using different SL amplitudes ($f_{SL} = 750…2500 \text{ Hz}$). Both methods clearly show $T_{1p}$ dispersion for all BSA probes.
- **b** Mean $T_{1p}$ values and standard deviation of the different sample probes plotted versus the SL amplitude. The calculated $T_{1p}$ values of our new method are in good agreement with the reference TSE values (shaded area, mean ± std).
- **c** Heat maps of the dispersion offset $T_{1p}^0$ and the dispersion slope $m_{1p}$ calculated using a linear dispersion model (Eq. 3). The results of the radial Bloch sorting scheme and the TSE reference measurements are in good agreement and show a comparable image quality. Only at the edges of the sample tubes, some deviations are visible using the Bloch sorting scheme. This might be caused by data undersampling and the KWIC-filtered view-sharing technique.
In vivo measurements

The calculated $T_{1\rho}$ maps of the $N=10$ mice are shown in Fig. 8. A segmentation of the left ventricle according to the AHA model was carried out for each map. The results are listed in Table 3 for all animals (physiological parameters in the supplementary material, Online Table 2). Here, the breathing cycle was $1460 \pm 154$ ms and the cardiac cycle length was $137.3 \pm 5.9$ ms averaged over all animals. The global left ventricular $T_{1\rho}$ was $39.5 \pm 1.2$ ms for $f_{SL} = 1500$ Hz. Slightly increased $T_{1\rho}$ values could be found in the segments 3 (41.7 ± 2.5 ms) and 4 (41.1 ± 2.1 ms).

Table 2 Dispersion analysis of the phantom experiments

| BSA concentration | TSE reference | Radial Bloch sorting |
|-------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Dispersion slope $m_{1\rho}$ [ms/kHz] | | |
| 10% | 12.81 ± 0.35 | 12.67 ± 0.84 (− 1.1%) |
| 15% | 8.42 ± 0.26 | 8.20 ± 0.50 (− 2.7%) |
| 20% | 5.73 ± 0.13 | 5.80 ± 0.33 (+ 1.3%) |
| 25% | 4.59 ± 0.16 | 4.46 ± 0.37 (− 2.8%) |
| Dispersion offset $T_{1\rho}^0$ [ms] | | |
| 10% | 82.60 ± 0.63 | 79.81 ± 1.61 (− 3.4%) |
| 15% | 51.51 ± 0.39 | 51.03 ± 1.41 (− 0.9%) |
| 20% | 36.11 ± 0.20 | 36.50 ± 1.38 (+ 1.1%) |
| 25% | 27.00 ± 0.20 | 27.63 ± 1.26 (+ 2.3%) |
| Coefficient of determination $R^2$ [0…1] | | |
| 10% | 0.989 ± 0.004 | 0.994 ± 0.003 |
| 15% | 0.993 ± 0.003 | 0.996 ± 0.002 |
| 20% | 0.991 ± 0.004 | 0.996 ± 0.002 |
| 25% | 0.991 ± 0.004 | 0.996 ± 0.002 |

Calculated dispersion slopes $m_{1\rho}$ and dispersion offsets $T_{1\rho}^0$ of the four sample probes for the TSE reference measurement and the radial sequence using Bloch sorting. For both methods, the dispersion values decrease with increasing BSA concentration. The values in brackets represent the percentage deviation from the TSE reference with a maximum deviation of − 2.8% for the dispersion slope and − 3.4% for the dispersion offset. The high $R^2$ values of consistently > 0.98 indicate a very good agreement of the acquired data with the linear dispersion model.
Table 3 Results of in vivo T$_{1p}$ mapping in mice

| Animal | LV   | AHA 1 | AHA 2 | AHA 3 | AHA 4 | AHA 5 | AHA 6 |
|--------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1      | 38.5 ± 0.5 | 36.4 ± 0.7 | 38.6 ± 0.4 | 39.9 ± 1.7 | 39.6 ± 1.3 | 38.7 ± 0.6 | 38.4 ± 0.6 |
| 2      | 38.3 ± 3.3 | 36.3 ± 1.6 | 35.1 ± 1.5 | 38.8 ± 2.8 | 38.5 ± 2.0 | 40.5 ± 2.5 | 41.9 ± 3.5 |
| 3      | 37.9 ± 3.7 | 36.0 ± 2.0 | 35.7 ± 1.8 | 43.3 ± 2.3 | 41.6 ± 3.4 | 36.4 ± 2.9 | 37.1 ± 2.3 |
| 4      | 40.5 ± 2.6 | 38.5 ± 1.8 | 39.9 ± 1.9 | 40.2 ± 2.7 | 42.4 ± 2.1 | 41.8 ± 2.4 | 40.6 ± 2.6 |
| 5      | 41.8 ± 4.0 | 41.0 ± 2.2 | 37.9 ± 1.9 | 43.4 ± 3.2 | 45.3 ± 5.2 | 40.1 ± 2.1 | 45.3 ± 1.8 |
| 6      | 39.4 ± 3.2 | 38.1 ± 1.9 | 39.2 ± 1.7 | 43.9 ± 2.2 | 39.1 ± 2.9 | 36.6 ± 2.2 | 40.6 ± 2.6 |
| 7      | 39.2 ± 2.5 | 37.6 ± 2.4 | 39.6 ± 1.9 | 42.0 ± 1.5 | 38.9 ± 2.4 | 38.0 ± 1.1 | 39.1 ± 2.4 |
| 8      | 40.4 ± 3.3 | 38.0 ± 2.5 | 40.6 ± 3.4 | 42.0 ± 3.6 | 42.4 ± 2.6 | 41.4 ± 1.7 | 38.4 ± 2.7 |
| 9      | 40.0 ± 3.6 | 36.6 ± 3.0 | 39.7 ± 2.4 | 46.0 ± 2.7 | 42.5 ± 2.5 | 40.2 ± 2.6 | 39.8 ± 1.7 |
| 10     | 39.1 ± 2.5 | 38.3 ± 1.4 | 39.6 ± 1.7 | 37.8 ± 2.5 | 41.0 ± 2.5 | 41.1 ± 2.4 | 37.2 ± 2.4 |
| Mean   | 39.5 ± 1.2 | 37.7 ± 1.5 | 38.6 ± 1.8 | 41.7 ± 2.5 | 41.1 ± 2.1 | 39.4 ± 1.9 | 39.7 ± 2.4 |

T$_{1p}$ quantification results in $N = 10$ different animals for $f_{SL} = 1500$ Hz. The table shows the results in the individual AHA segments for T$_{1p}$, as well as the mean values in the global left ventricular ROI (LV). In the supplementary material (Online Table 2) the results of the reproduction study, the comparison with the fully sampled Cartesian reference measurement and the monitored physiological parameters (cardiac cycle and breath cycle length) are listed.

Fig. 9 Results of the in vivo reproducibility measurements. a Images of the ten repeatedly acquired T$_{1p}$ maps (short-axis view, isotropic resolution 250 μm) with identical SL amplitudes of 1500 Hz. All T$_{1p}$ maps show the same image quality without any motion, flow or reconstruction artifacts. The dashed lines represent the chosen ROI for data analysis. b Mean (blue dots) and standard deviation (black lines) of the myocardial T$_{1p}$ values of the ten repetitive measurements. Mean T$_{1p}$ has been determined to 38.52 ± 0.54 ms (dotted red line and light red area).
(37.8 ± 3.7 ms) with the accelerated radial method (38.3 ± 3.3 ms) revealed a small deviation of +1.3%.

In Fig. 9 the results of the in vivo reproducibility study are depicted. Figure 9a shows the ten repetitive $T_{1p}$ maps, indicating a very good image quality. There are hardly any visual differences in the images. All structures are at the same position and the quantified $T_{1p}$ values appear to be almost identical. A ROI-based analysis of the left ventricular myocardium shows a mean $T_{1p}$ of 38.52 ms and only a small variation in the individual $T_{1p}$ values with a standard deviation of ±0.54 ms (Fig. 9b). The maximum deviation observed in the separate experiments was 2.1%.

Figure 10 shows the results of the in vivo $T_{1p}$ dispersion quantification measurements. The $T_{1p}$ maps show a very good image quality with minimal motion, flow or reconstruction artifacts. The $T_{1p}$ dispersion map reveals a diagnostic image quality with little blurring at the myocardial borders. This might be caused by slightly different heart phases within the underlying $T_{1p}$ maps. The $T_{1p}$ dispersion slope has been determined to 4.76 ± 0.23 ms/kHz for left ventricular myocardium and 21.57 ± 2.56 ms/kHz for the left ventricular blood pool. The dispersion offset could be determined to be 32.73 ± 0.36 and 48.72 ± 3.41 ms, respectively.

**Discussion**

In the current study, we introduced a fast cardiac $T_{1p}$ quantification technique that enables high-resolution in vivo $T_{1p}$ mapping and even $T_{1p}$ dispersion mapping in small animals. The method consisted of three concepts; Signal maximization using high flip angles, a specially adapted radial data sampling (which was optimized using Bloch simulations) and a KWIC-filtered view-sharing technique for efficient image reconstruction. With these concepts, an appropriate data undersampling (factor 32:13 ≈ 2.5, 13 preparations for radial sampling, 32 = 128/4 preparations for Cartesian sampling) is possible requiring only a fraction of the commonly needed data for the acquisition of $T_{1p}$ weighted images.

The optimized radial sequence ensures a high signal-to-noise-ratio and is combined with a very efficient sampling strategy that accelerates data acquisition while reducing the occurrence of artifacts and preventing incorrect $T_{1p}$ weighting. The main reason for this is that the precalculation of the expected signal intensity using Bloch simulations avoids strong changes in the signal levels of...
consecutive spokes. This results in an improved image quality with minor artifacts and an SNR increase of 120% in contrast to a conventional Serial sorting scheme of golden angles. Besides, the optimized Bloch sampling strategy reveals a higher accuracy and precision of the calculated $T_{1\rho}$ values compared to Serial sorting. The $T_{1\rho}$ quantification accuracy of Bloch sorting has proven in phantom measurements to be very high with a mean deviation of $-0.46 \pm 1.84\%$ compared to a TSE reference measurement. We observed the largest quantification errors in the phantom with 10% BSA concentration. Compared to the other phantoms, this has a much longer $T_{1\rho}$ relaxation time. Here the influence of the KWIC filter could possibly affect the contrasts. As a result, systematically shorter relaxation times were measured ($\sim -3\%$). However, this shift did not affect the quantification of the dispersion slope and offset and the $T_{1\rho}$ range of this phantom is hardly relevant for the characterization of myocardial tissue.

As described by Song et al. [31], the variation of signal intensities between the radial profiles possibly results in different relative proportions of high and low spatial frequencies for different weighted images. This effect depends on the design of the KWIC filter and was examined in the supplementary material. If the Nyquist criterion is not met in all regions of k-space (Nyquist factor $f_{\text{nyq}} < 1$), undersampling artifacts and reduced SNR occur (Online Fig. 2). Opposed, excessive sharing of different contrasts ($f_{\text{nyq}} > 2$) results in edge blurring and edge sharpening (Online Fig. 3). As the results in the supplementary material show, the $T_{1\rho}$ quantification accuracy is also affected by the choice of the KWIC filter design (Online Figs. 4 and 5). However, in the range chosen in this work ($f_{\text{nyq}} = 1.1$) the accuracy is stable and only shows systematic errors for the phantom with the highest relaxation time. Using moderate Nyquist factors $f_{\text{nyq}} = 1.0\ldots1.5$, the influence of the KWIC filter design on the quantification is small ($\pm 0.3\%$) and can be neglected in the context of in vivo experiments.

In this work constant high flip angles (40°) were used for the gradient echo readout. For small flip angles, Bloch sorting can be avoided. However, in a previous work we could show that the resulting image quality is significantly reduced using an echo number based sorting and 10° flip angles, for example [36]. Yet, it is also possible to use ramped flip angles after the preparation. This could prevent the formation of signal plateaus and, if the RF pulse accuracy is well calibrated, the Bloch sorting could be omitted. However, different $T_{1\rho}$ weightings require different ramps, whereby the first readout must always be carried out using the same flip angle in order not to impair $T_{1\rho}$ quantification.

In the in vivo experiments, a good comparability of the $T_{1\rho}$ values in the left ventricle could be achieved for different animals. The $T_{1\rho}$ values determined at $f_{\text{SL}} = 1500$ Hz varied between 37.9 and 41.8 ms. Musthafa et al. obtained values in the range 32...38 ms for $f_{\text{SL}} = 1250$ Hz and $B_0 = 9.4$ T [20]. The deviation could be explained by the $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion, since, according to basic relaxation theory, smaller values are expected for decreasing $f_{\text{SL}}$. In addition, a high goodness of the mono-exponential $T_{1\rho}$ fit could be observed in most of the measurements. The values in the left ventricle were $R^2 = 0.993$ on average. The slightly increased $T_{1\rho}$ values in the segments 3 (+ 5.6%) and 4 (+ 4.1%) may have been caused by partial volume effects, since the wall thickness was also reduced here. However, streaking and blurring artifacts could also have an impact. The fully sampled Cartesian measurement shows a slightly improved image quality compared to the accelerated radial technique. However, the quantification in the respective segments is in good agreement (+ 1.9 ± 3.3%) and the deviation in the global left ventricular ROI was only + 1.3%. It also needs to be considered that the cardiac phases were not exactly identical. The cycle length for the radial acquisition was 131.5 ± 1.2 ms and for the Cartesian measurement 153.2 ± 0.7 ms. This can also be seen in the contrast of the blood pool.

The in vivo reproducibility study showed, that our method enables a high degree of comparability for successive measurements, which is also crucial for dispersion imaging. This is a consequence of the radial readout that is more robust against moving tissues and blood flow. However, the main reason might be the very short measurement time of around 2.5 min. Alternative methods that require longer measurement times can lead to problems in the stability of the animal under investigation due to variations in the cardiac and respiratory cycle. This would require additional compensation and/or correction mechanisms, which is quite complex and hampers the practicality of cardiac $T_{1\rho}$ and/or $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion mapping.

Furthermore, a new approach for quantifying the dispersion behavior was introduced in this work. Due to the high acceleration of the radial data acquisition, the measurement could be accomplished in 20 min. In this total measurement time, only relatively small variations in the physiological parameters were observed. The mean cardiac cycle length was 141.5 ± 3.9 ms while the breathing cycle was 1430 ± 63 ms. In comparison, a fully sampled Cartesian method would have taken 50 min, potentially leading to higher variations. The determination of the dispersion slope $m_{1\rho}$ and the offset $T_{1\rho}^0$ was based on the approach of Yin et al. [19], in which the difference $T_{1\rho}^0 - T_{1\rho}(f_{\text{SL}})$ is presented as a potential myocardial fibrosis index. The calculation of a slope has an advantage over a differential measurement because the value is thus normalized. In addition, the determination of the dispersion slope based on eight independent $T_{1\rho}$ maps increases the accuracy compared to the previously described method of Yin et al. [19]. Nevertheless, it is necessary to ensure that the linear range of $T_{1\rho}$ dispersion is not
exceeded, since it is known from relaxation theory that $T_{1ρ}$ dispersion is formally more complex than a linear model [10, 11]. In [19] the range $f_{SL} = 0...510$ Hz was used for dispersion quantification, although it was not explained why this range is particularly suitable. Future studies must therefore primarily investigate which ranges of SL amplitudes are most suitable for calculating a fibrosis index.

For the translation of the method to human studies, the SAR (specific absorption rate) is a limiting factor. In this study, relatively high SL amplitudes were used, which show a low susceptibility to $B_0$ inhomogeneities [27, 28]. These amplitudes are hardly feasible using radiofrequency amplifiers available on clinical scanners, which ultimately limits routine clinical applications [29]. The concept of Bloch sorting can, however, be transferred, whereby far more readouts would be possible after the preparation due to the lower heart rate in humans. Here the optimal flip angle arises with significantly lower values, which could possibly be utilized for SAR reduction.

A drawback of our study is that we are not yet able to present results in fibrotic myocardial tissue. The quantification of the $T_{1ρ}$ dispersion is of particular interest for future studies. Measurements in the infarct model, in which the dispersion is to be examined in detail, are planned. Besides, work is in progress to develop an extension of the sequence design presented in this study. Here, not only one $T_{1ρ}$ map should be acquired in a single scan, but the whole data set required for dispersion mapping, since separate maps can ultimately lead to quantification errors due to misregistration and cardiac motion. For this purpose, an optimization of the radial sampling pattern is also considered based on the Bloch sorting principle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our new $T_{1ρ}$ quantification technique represents a reasonable tool for cardiac $T_{1ρ}$ mapping and $T_{1ρ}$ dispersion imaging. The method is feasible for improved cardiac tissue characterization and possibly enables enhanced diagnostics for several diseases as it might identify diffuse fibrosis. Due to its very short measurement time, stability and robustness, this method might be included in a common in vivo measurement protocol for small animals without major difficulty.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10334-021-00951-y.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research of the Federal Republic of Germany. The authors would like to thank Sabine Voll and Anna-Karina Lamprecht for animal handling and for the help in organizing the study.

Author contribution MG and DG contributed equally to this work. Guarantors of integrity of entire study: PN, PMJ; study concepts: all authors; data acquisition and ethic approval: MG, DG, PAAL, PMJ, PN; animal studies: MG, DG, PAAL; experimental studies: MG, DG, PW, MS; data analysis, MG, DG, PW, MS; manuscript drafting and manuscript editing: all authors.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. Federal Ministry for Education and Research of the Federal Republic of Germany. Grant Numbers: BMBF 01EO1504, MO.6

Availability of data and materials The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval All experimental procedures were in accordance with institutional guidelines and were approved by local authorities.

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