The DOPA decarboxylase (DDC) gene is associated with alerting attention

Bi Zhu a, Chuansheng Chen b,⁎, Robert K. Moyzis c, Qi Dong a,⁎⁎, Chunhui Chen a, Qinghua He a, Jin Li a, Jun Li a, Xuemei Lei a, Chongde Lin a

a State Key Laboratory of Cognitive Neuroscience and Learning, Beijing Normal University, China
b Department of Psychology and Social Behavior, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA
c Department of Biological Chemistry and Institute of Genomics and Bioinformatics, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

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A B S T R A C T

DOPA decarboxylase (DDC) is involved in the synthesis of dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin. It has been suggested that genes involved in the dopamine, norepinephrine, and cholinergic systems play an essential role in the efficiency of human attention networks. Attention refers to the cognitive process of obtaining and maintaining the alert state, orienting to sensory events, and regulating the conflicts of thoughts and behavior. The present study tested seven single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) within the DDC gene for association with attention, which was assessed by the Attention Network Test to detect three networks of attention, including alerting, orienting, and executive attention, in a healthy Han Chinese sample (N = 451). Association analysis for individual SNPs indicated that four of the seven SNPs (rs3887825, rs7786398, rs10499695, and rs6969081) were significantly associated with alerting attention. Haplotype-based association analysis revealed that alerting was associated with the haplotype G–A–T for SNPs rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081. These associations remained significant after correcting for multiple testing by max(T) permutation. No association was found for orienting and executive attention. This study provides the first evidence for the involvement of the DDC gene in alerting attention. A better understanding of the genetic basis of distinct attention networks would allow us to develop more effective diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of deficit or underdeveloped alerting attention as well as its related prevalent neuropsychiatric disorders.

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1. Introduction

Attention is a central cognitive process involved in selectively concentrating on a certain aspect of the environment. Research on attention has potential applications in many areas, including education, human factors engineering, and treatment and rehabilitation of pathological conditions (Raz and Buhle, 2006). According to Posner and colleagues, there are three attention networks including alerting, orienting, and executive attention that can be measured by the attention network test (ANT) (Fan et al., 2002; Posner and Petersen, 1990). Alerting refers to the ability to achieve and maintain response readiness in preparation for incoming stimuli. Orienting is the ability to select specific information from sensory stimuli. Executive attention involves the mechanism for monitoring and resolving conflicts among thoughts, feelings and responses.

The ANT is a suitable task for detecting the neural and genetic correlates of three attention networks (Fossella et al., 2002). Previous twin studies suggested that the heritability of the three attention networks ranged from 0 to .72 (i.e., low for orienting, moderate for alerting, and high for executive function) (Fan et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2012). The three attention networks showed distinct neural networks, and are differentially related to specific neurotransmitters. Alerting is associated with activation of brain areas in the locus coeruleus, right frontal lobe and right parietal lobe; and it is influenced by the level of norepinephrine, also known as noradrenaline (Oberlin et al., 2005; Witte and Marrocco, 1997). Orienting is associated with activation of brain areas in the superior colliculus, superior parietal lobe, temporal parietal junction, and frontal eye fields; and it is influenced by acetylcholine (Thiel et al., 2005). Finally, executive attention is related to activation of brain areas in the prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate, and basal ganglia; and it is modulated by dopamine (Posner, 2008; Raz and Buhle, 2006).

Abbreviations: DDC, DOPA decarboxylase; ANT, attention network test; DRD4, dopamine D4 receptor; MAOA, monoamine oxidase a; TPH 2, tryptophan hydroxylase 2; COMT, catechol-o-methyltransferase; DAT 1, dopamine transporter; ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; AADC, aromatic L-amino acid decarboxylase; L-DOPA, L-dihydroxyphenylalanine; IMAGE, International Multicenter ADHD Genetics; LD, linkage disequilibrium; MAF, Minor allele frequency; HWE, Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium; LSD, least significant difference; CHB, Han Chinese in Beijing, China; CHD, Chinese in Metropolitan Denver, Colorado; JPT, Japanese in Tokyo, Japan; CEU, Utah residents with Northern and Western European ancestry from the Centre d’Etude du Polymorphisme Humain (CEPH) collection; ASW, African ancestry in Southwest USA.

⁎ Correspondence to: C. Chen, Psychology and Social Behavior; 4201 Social & Behavioral Sciences Gateway, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-7085, USA. Tel.: +1 949 824 4184; fax: +1 949 824 3002.
⁎⁎ Correspondence to: Q. Dong, State Key Laboratory of Cognitive Neuroscience and Learning, Beijing Normal University, 100875, Beijing, China.
E-mail addresses: cschen@uci.edu (C. Chen), psydongqi@126.com (Q. Dong).

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Several previous studies detected associations between various genes with relevance for neurotransmission and specific attention networks using the ANT. For example, in a study of 200 normal adults, Fossella et al. (2002) found that polymorphisms in the dopamine D4 receptor (DRD4) gene and the monoamine oxidase a (MAOA) gene were related to efficiency of executive attention. Other researchers found associations between the executive attention network and the tryptophan hydroxylase 2 (TPH 2) gene in normal subjects (Reuter et al., 2007), and between executive attention and the catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) Val108/158Met polymorphism in schizophrenic males (Ogen-Rhein et al., 2008). In addition, the dopamine transporter (DAT) 1 gene showed a tendency for association with both alerting and executive attention in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but these results did not survive the multiple testing corrections (Konrad et al., 2010).

The DOPA decarboxylase gene (DDC), which encodes the enzyme aromatic l-amino acid decarboxylase (AADC), is a very interesting candidate gene for mental activities and mental disorders, since it is involved in several neurotransmitter pathways (Borglum et al., 1999). The encoded protein catalyzes the conversion of l-dihydroxyphenylalanine (l-DOPA) to dopamine and of l-5 hydroxytryptophan to serotonin and l-tryptophan to tryptamine. Moreover, further downstream in the catecholamine pathway, dopamine transported into vesicles then converted to norepinephrine by dopamine β-hydroxylase. Although DDC is not a rate-limiting enzyme in the synthesis of dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin, it is regulated both at pre- and post-translational levels (Ma et al., 2005). The DDC gene is located on the short arm of chromosome 7 and contains 15 exons and 14 introns. Many previous studies showed that genetic variations in the DDC gene were significantly associated with ADHD, especially its inattentive symptoms. ADHD is a highly heritable and prevalent psychiatric disorder characterized by severe impairment in attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity (Banaschewski et al., 2010). Researchers reported that the DDC gene was strongly associated with ADHD in both childhood and adulthood (Ribases et al., 2009). A genome-wide association study also supported the association between the DDC gene and inattentive ADHD using over 900 ADHD Caucasian proband-parent trios (i.e., International Multicenter ADHD Genetics [IMAGE] project dataset) (Lasky-Su et al., 2008). Moreover, this association was also confirmed in a Chinese Han sample (Guan et al., 2009). There were also a few non-significant or only trend results reported such as an earlier analysis using a subsample of patients from the IMAGE sample (Brookes et al., 2006) or a study with a relatively small sample size (Hawi et al., 2001).

Thus, the DDC gene may act as a susceptibility gene for attention inefficiency. As addressed earlier, the DDC gene is involved with three important neurotransmitter systems (i.e., dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin), and these neurotransmitters are related to the attention networks. However, to date no study has examined possible associations between DDC variants and the attention networks. In this study, we analyzed seven SNPs selected to cover the whole DDC gene to explore whether there exists an association of the DDC gene with specific attention network inefficiency.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

451 healthy Han Chinese undergraduates were recruited (mean age = 19.95 years, SD = 89, range 18–22 years old; 57% female). The present sample included all subjects who completed the ANT from the Gene–Brain–Behavior Project at Beijing Normal University in China. All subjects were Han Chinese with normal or corrected-to-normal vision and had no neurological or psychiatric history based on their self-report. They all signed written informed consent. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Beijing Normal University, China.

2.2. Genotyping

A 4 ml venous blood sample was collected from each subject. Genomic DNA was extracted according to standard methods within two weeks after the blood sample was collected. All samples were genotyped using the standard Illumina GoldenGate Genotyping protocol (see www.southgene.com.cn for details).

As depicted in Fig. 1 and Table 1, seven SNPs in the DDC gene on chromosome 7 were selected based on the HapMap data (www.hapmap.org), including rs11238131, rs11238133, rs3887825, rs3807566, rs7786398, rs10499695, and rs6969081. All seven SNPs met the criteria of a call rate of ≥95%, Minor Allele Frequency (MAF) of ≥0.05, and Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium (HWE) of p > 0.05. The allele frequencies in our sample were very similar to those of the Chinese in the HapMap dataset (see Table 1 and supplemental materials Figs. S2–S6). In order to sample the genetic diversity of the DDC gene, we selected the tag SNPs (tSNPs) defined by the HapMap project (www.hapmap.org [phase 3]), which are the minimum set of SNPs needed to sample most genetic diversity through linkage disequilibrium (LD). The tSNPs were defined by HapMap in 2007 using the four populations investigated at that time (European, African-Yoruban, Chinese, and Japanese ancestry), and a general r² value of 0.8 was used for identification. These seven SNPs were chosen to cover 84% of LD blocks in the DDC gene, as defined for the Chinese sample included in the HapMap Project (www.hapmap.org) and in the 1000 Genomes Project (http://browser.1000genomes.org). For SNPs rs11238131 and rs11238133, there was one subject with missing genotype data in the current study.

2.3. Behavioral assessment

The attention network test (ANT) assesses the abilities of alerting, orienting, and executive function (see Fan et al., 2002, and Figure S1 for details). Subjects were seated 65 cm in front of the 17-in. computer screen, and responses were collected via two response buttons on the keyboard. They saw several arrows on the computer screen and had to decide the direction of the arrow in the middle. RT (ms) and performance accuracy (almost 100% accuracy in our study [mean = 98%, SD = .02]) were recorded. The four factors were cue (no-cue, center-cue [i.e., a cue appeared in the middle], double-cue [i.e., two cues appeared up and down], spatial-cue [i.e., a cue appeared up or down]); the position of the target arrow (up or down); the direction of the arrows around the target arrow (congruent, incongruent, neutral); and the direction of the target arrow (right or left). The ANT consisted of a 24-trial practice block and two 96-trial experimental blocks. The alerting effect was calculated by subtracting the mean RT of the double-cue conditions from that of the no-cue conditions. The orienting effect was calculated by subtracting the mean RT of the spatial cue conditions (i.e., cues appeared up or down) from that of the center.
Dopa Decarboxylase (DDC)

Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the DDC gene and linkage disequilibrium map of the seven SNPs used in the current sample. The DDC gene has 15 exons and 14 introns. Regions of high LD are shown in dark grey. Markers with lower LD are shown in light grey with the intensity decreasing with decreased r² value. Regions of low LD are shown in white. The numbers indicate the r² statistic value between the corresponding two SNPs.

Quantitative trait genetic association analysis was carried out by using Plink v1.07 (Purcell et al., 2007), including allelic associations tests between individual SNPs and attention measures, and associations between haplotypes and attention measures. In order to test the group differences between different genotypes, ANOVA and the Fisher’s least significant difference (LSD) post hoc tests (r-tests) were performed in SPSS 17.0. Pair-wise LD between all SNP markers was assessed using the Haplovie 4.2 program (Barrett et al., 2005).

In a preliminary analysis, several separate two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test the effects of gender, each SNP, and their interaction on each attention measure. Results showed that the main effects of gender were non-significant: the p values were .33 for alerting, .50 for orienting, and .37 for executive scores. Perhaps due to the restricted age range, age was also not correlated with attention. Therefore, we did not include gender and age in subsequent analysis. The three attention measures (alerting, orienting, and executive scores) were analyzed individually. All significant associations were corrected for multiple testing by the max(T) permutations permutation approach in Plink (10000 permutation) for individual SNP analysis and haplotype-based association analysis considering all tests done for all three traits.

3. Results

In the current study, the mean scores for alerting, orienting, and executive attention were 6.67±25.61, 33.52±29.49, and 81.09±36.02, respectively. Pair-wise correlations were not significant (i.e., p>.05), suggesting three independent attention networks as found in a previous study (Fossella et al., 2002). The mean reaction times for each condition in the ANT are shown in the supplementary materials Table S1.

Individual SNP analysis using Plink revealed significant associations for rs3887825, rs3807566, rs7786398, rs10499695, and rs6969081 with alerting (see Table 2 for details). Except for rs3807566, the other four associations remained significant after correcting for multiple testing by max(T) permutation (corrected empirical p-value [max(T)/familywise]).

As shown in Fig. 1, the mean pair-wise r² values of seven SNPs within DDC were 0.57. According to the criteria of confidence intervals (Gabriel et al., 2002), two haplotype blocks across the DDC gene were revealed from the linkage disequilibrium (LD) data for these seven SNPs. The first block contained three SNPs rs11238133, rs3887825, and rs3807566, which covered 21 kb. The second block contained three other SNPs rs7786398, rs10499695, and rs6969081, which covered 11 kb.

Haplotype-based association analysis was performed for different combinations of SNPs within DDC in the current sample. As shown in Table 3, we found a major haplotype G-A-T (with a frequency of 52%) for rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081 that showed a significant

| SNP          | Base-pair position | Location | Reference/other allele/ | Reference Allele frequencies |
|--------------|--------------------|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
|              |                    |          |                         | Han Chinese                 |
| rs11238131   | 50550983            | Intron 11| G/A                     | Chinese                     |
|              |                    |          |                         | JPT                         |
| rs11238133   | 50550406            | Intron 11| C/A                     | Chinese                     |
|              |                    |          |                         | JPT                         |
| rs3887825    | 50512587            | Intron 10| G/A                     | Chinese                     |
|              |                    |          |                         | JPT                         |
| rs3807566    | 50531698            | Intron 8 | A/C                     | Japanese                    |
| rs7786398    | 50580400            | Intron 1 | A/G                     | European                    |
| rs10499695   | 50586098            | Intron 1 | C/A                     | African                      |
| rs6969081    | 50591999            | Intron 1 | A/T                     | African                      |

Note: On the HapMap Website (HapMap genome browser released 2 [phase 3]), these specific alleles of SNPs have different labels, due to different coding based on either the forward primer or the reverse primer. For example, the alleles of rs10499695 are A and G in the present study (the standard Illumina GoldenGate Genotyping protocol), but they are T and C on the HapMap Website; the alleles of rs11238131 are A and G in the present study (the standard Illumina GoldenGate Genotyping protocol), but they are T and C on the HapMap Website. In this table, we used the coding of all alleles based on the coding system of the Illumina system.

Population descriptors: CHB: Han Chinese in Beijing, China; CHD: Chinese in Metropolitan Denver, Colorado; JPT: Japanese in Tokyo, Japan; CEU: Utah residents with Northern and Western European ancestry from the CEPH collection; ASW: African ancestry in Southwest USA.
attention after max (T) permutation for multiple testing correction. Further, we identified a major haplotype G–A–T (with a frequency of 52%) for rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081, which showed a significant negative association with alerting, even after max (T) permutation for multiple testing correction. Moreover, two additional haplotypes were found to be positively related to alerting (i.e., A–G–A [with a frequency of 42%] for rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081 and C–G–A [with a frequency of 33%] for rs11238133–rs3887825–rs3807566), which did not survive the correction. There was no association for the seven SNPs in the DDC gene with orienting and executive attention. These effects were independent of subjects’ overall mean reaction time, age, and gender. These results further confirmed the critical role of the DDC gene in the alerting attention network.

These findings can be integrated with multiple lines of human and animal research (including biochemical, pharmacological, genetic, and brain imaging studies) on the DDC gene, the related neurotransmitters, and specific attention networks. The enzyme of the DDC gene is required in the synthesis of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin (Christenson et al., 1972). It is regulated at both pre- and post-translational levels (see Berry et al., 1996 for details). Three attention networks were related to three neurotransmitters respectively, alerting with norepinephrine, orienting with acetylcholine, and executive attention with dopamine. Pharmacological studies with human and monkeys showed that norepinephrine influences alerting but not orienting, while acetylcholine-related drugs influence orienting but not alerting (Posner, 2008). These findings may explain the association between the DDC gene and alerting but not orienting found in the current study.

Moreover, the DDC gene was found to be related to ADHD inattention symptoms (Guan et al., 2009; Lasky-Su et al., 2008; Ribases et al., 2009). There was direct evidence of altered DOPA decarboxylase activity in children and adults with ADHD using the positron emission tomography (Ernst et al., 1998, 1999). Using the ANT, several researchers reported alerting and executive attention deficits in children with ADHD (Johnson et al., 2008; Mullane et al., 2011). However, some other researchers suggested that the alerting network can best detect inattentive ADHD (Booth et al., 2007). For example, Booth et al. (2007) found that children with inattentive type ADHD showed a stronger alerting effect than those with the combined type ADHD, but no group differences were found in orienting and executive attention. A neuroimaging study also suggested that children with ADHD had a deficit in alerting, and this deficit was related to abnormal activities in the frontal and parietal brain regions (Cao et al., 2008). In line with the evidence presented above, the DDC gene was associated with alerting but not with orienting and executive attention in the current sample.

In the current study, we identified four SNPs (located in introns 1 and 10) and a three-marker haplotype (located in intron 1) in the DDC gene that were significantly related to alerting. These significant markers have not been used in previous studies. There were studies, however, linking markers in the same intron or adjacent location

### Table 2

| SNP      | Effective allele | Allelic test | maj | M  | SD  | N  | het | M  | SD  | N  | min | M  | SD  | N  | LSD (p<.05) |
|----------|------------------|--------------|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-------------|
| rs11238113 | G 1.39 .167 AA   | 4.20 (25.55) | 123 | AG | 7.01 (25.27) | 231 | GG | 8.96 (26.47) | 98 |

Note: Significant p-values after correction for multiple comparisons by max(T) permutation are shown as underlined.

\[ \text{max(T)} \]

Additional haplotype analysis based on a different SNP combination (rs7786398–rs10499695, rs6969081) remained significant after correcting for multiple testing by max(T) permutation (corrected empirical p-value [max(T)/ familywise] = 0.020 – 0.031) maj = majority, het = heterozygote, min = minority. LSD = Fisher’s least significant difference post hoc test.

### Table 3

| Association between major haplotype of the DDC gene and alerting attention. |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| rs11238113–rs3887825–rs3807566 | C–G–A .33 5.08 .0248 | C–A–T 52 –7.39 .0068 |
| rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081 | A–A–C .51 –3.74 .0537 | A–G–A .22 6.06 .0742 |
|                       | C–A–C .09 –2.09 .1486 | A–A–T .04 –0.73 .7848 |
|                       | C–G–C .07 .84 .3587  |

Note: On the HapMap website, these specific SNPs alleles have different labels due to different coding based on either the forward primer or the reverse primer (see note to Table 1 for more details).

Significant p-value after max (T) permutation for multiple testing correction for the major haplotype is shown as underlined.

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### 4. Discussion

In the present study, we chose seven SNPs in the DDC gene to investigate their genetic effects on three components of the attention network in normal Chinese adults. Results showed that four SNPs (rs3887825, rs7786398, rs10499695 and rs6969081) were significantly associated with individual differences in the alerting efficiency of the DDC gene and the orienting and executive attention measures with or without the covariate.

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**Note:**

- The image contains a table with columns for SNP, Effective allele, Allelic test, maj, M, SD, N, het, M, SD, N, min, M, SD, N, and LSD (p<.05).
- The text discusses the association between seven SNPs of the DDC gene and alerting attention, with a focus on significant p-values after correction for multiple comparisons by max(T) permutation.
- Additional haplotype analysis is mentioned, with significant associations for seven SNPs in the DDC gene after multiple comparison correction.
- The discussion includes references to previous studies, highlighting the critical role of the DDC gene in different attention networks.
- The text concludes with a discussion on the association between the DDC gene and alerting but not orienting found in the current study.
- The implications of these findings are also discussed in relation to ADHD and its subtypes.

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**Table 2**

Association between seven SNPs of the DDC gene and alerting attention.

| SNP                  | Effective allele | Allelic test | maj | M  | SD  | N  | het | M  | SD  | N  | min | M  | SD  | N  | LSD (p<.05) |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-------------|
| rs11238113           | G 1.39 .167 AA   | 4.20 (25.55) | 123 | AG | 7.01 (25.27) | 231 | GG | 8.96 (26.47) | 98 |

Note: Significant p-values after correction for multiple comparisons by max(T) permutation are shown as underlined.

**Table 3**

Association between major haplotype of the DDC gene and alerting attention.

| Haplotype Frequency | rs3887825–rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081 | Haplotype Frequency | rs3807566 |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| C–G–A .33 5.08 .0248 | C–A–T 52 –7.39 .0068 | A–A–C .51 –3.74 .0537 | A–G–A .22 6.06 .0742 |
| C–A–C .09 –2.09 .1486 | A–A–T .04 –0.73 .7848 | C–G–C .07 .84 .3587  |

Note: On the HapMap website, these specific SNPs alleles have different labels due to different coding based on either the forward primer or the reverse primer (see note to Table 1 for more details).

Significant p-value after max (T) permutation for multiple testing correction for the major haplotype is shown as underlined.
with certain LD to ADHD and other disorders. For example, researchers reported that ADHD was associated with several genetic variations in the DDC gene such as polymorphisms on exon 1 (4 bp insertion), intron 3 (rs1466163), intron 8 (rs11575544) and intron 9 (rs6592952), and a haplotype block (rs11238131–rs6592961–rs1982406–rs2044859) on introns 1, 4, 6, 11 (Brookes et al., 2006; Guan et al., 2009; Hawi et al., 2001; Kirley et al., 2002; Ribases et al., 2009). Based on the LD data from the Asian samples in the HapMap Project and the 1000 Genomes Project, the four significant SNPs and the haplotype on introns 1 and 10 found in the current study are located in the LD blocks, which encompassed the associated SNPs reported in the previous studies about the DDC gene and attention-related phenotypes. Genetic variations located in intron 1 of the DDC gene were also found to be related to nicotine dependence (Ma et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2006), and interestingly nicotine could potentiate alerting attention in humans (Hahn et al., 2007; Thielen et al., 2009). In addition, the DDC gene has a high level of expression in the basal ganglia, which have been shown to modulate frontal-posterior connectivity involved in attention (van Schouwenburg et al., 2010.).

Our analysis suggested that the particular haplotype (G–A–T) of rs7786398–rs10499695–rs6969081 located on intron 1 decreased alerting in the attention network test. Although these three SNPs are intrinsic and hence their biochemical functions are not straightforward, several previous studies have shed light on this genetic variant. One previous study found that a DNA sequence upstream of DDC possesses enhancer-link properties and is essential for normal neuron-specific expression in Drosophila (Johnson et al., 1989). Mutations that abolish the activity of the DDC gene have been described in a recessively inherited disease, called aromatic l-amino acid decarboxylase deficiency (Lee et al., 2009). As the second enzyme in the catecholamine biosynthetic pathway, the deficiency of the enzyme DOPA decarboxylase leads to a reduced level of downstream biogenic amines, including dopamine, norepinephrine, epinephrine and serotonin. Previous studies also described chromosomal aberrations in the region encompassing the DDC gene, e.g., a duplication (dup(7)p11.2–p12) associated with mild cognitive deficit (Leach et al., 2007). Taken together, these studies provided evidence that common variants in the DDC gene may be involved in the genetics of alerting.

Finally, given that DDC is involved in the synthesis of dopamine and subsequently norepinephrine and that dopamine is believed to modulate executive function while norepinephrine is believed to modulate alerting, it is somewhat counterintuitive that the DDC gene is linked only to alerting, not to executive function. There may be several explanations of this apparent paradox. First, the dopamine system is a complex system involving several subsystems and many genes. It is possible that different genes play different roles in modulating dopamine levels in different brain regions, which in turn affect different components of the attention network. For example, previous studies showed that DRD4 VNTR was related to executive attention (e.g., Fossella et al., 2002). Second, we studied healthy young college students, who were likely to have normal executive function. Indeed, as Fig S7 shows, we had a restricted distribution of scores on executive function (but not for alerting and orienting), which might have contributed to our not finding an association between the DDC gene and executive function. It is plausible that when clinical samples such as children with ADHD who have a special deficit in executive attention are included (e.g., Johnson et al., 2008; Mullane et al., 2011), one may find an association between the DDC gene and executive function. Finally, because the relationship between the dopamine level and cognitive performance follows an “inverted-U-shaped” function (Cools and D’Esposito, 2011), complex patterns of associations between dopamine-related genes and cognitive performance occur depending on environmental factors as well as gene–gene and gene–environment interactions. Future research is needed to untangle these complex relationships.

Although the current findings add to the growing body of evidence for genetic bases of individual differences in attention (Fossella et al., 2002; Greenwood et al., 2005; Parasuraman et al., 2005), several limitations of this study need to be noted. First, the biochemical and physiological functions of the haplotype polymorphisms were not directly explored in the present study. Additional molecular functional studies are needed to investigate the details of mechanism of this association. Second, it should be noted that the current study is based on a healthy Han Chinese sample. Previous studies have inconsistent results about the racial specificity (e.g., African Americans versus European Americans) of the association between the DDC gene and certain behavioral phenotypes (Ma et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2006). The SNPs in the DDC gene have different minor allele frequency (MAF) and constructed different LD blocks in different ethnic populations based on the HapMap Data (www.hapmap.org, see Table 1 and Figs S2 to S6). In order to obtain confirmatory evidence, this association should be replicated in future studies using different ethnic samples. Third, although alerting is a particularly important component of attention, it is not well studied as compared to other components of attention, such as executive attention (Raz and Buhle, 2006). Finally, future studies should also map the DDC genetic variation of alerting attention onto brain activity.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provided the first evidence of the association between the DDC gene and alerting attention in healthy Chinese individuals and excluded several confounding factors including overall mean reaction time, age, and gender.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pnpbp.2012.12.020.

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