Oxytocin receptors in the dorsolateral bed nucleus of the stria terminalis (BNST) bias fear learning toward temporally predictable cued fear

Daisy Martinon1, Paulina Lis1, Alexandra N. Roman1, Patricio Tornesi1, Sarah V. Applebey1, Garrett Buechner1, Valentina Olivera1,2,3 and Joanna Dabrowska1,2,3

Abstract
The inability to discriminate between threat and safety is a hallmark of stress-induced psychiatric disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Dorsolateral bed nucleus of the stria terminalis (BNSTdl) is critically involved in the modulation of fear and anxiety, and has been proposed to regulate discrimination between signaled (cued, predictable) and unsignaled (unpredictable) threats. We recently showed that oxytocin receptors (OTRs) in the BNSTdl facilitate acquisition of cued fear measured in a fear-potentiated startle (FPS). In the current study, using in vivo microdialysis in awake male Sprague–Dawley rats, a double immunofluorescence approach with confocal microscopy, as well as retrograde tracing of hypothalamic BNST-projecting OT neurons, we investigated whether fear conditioning activates OT system and modulates OT release. To determine the role of OTR in fear memory formation, we also infused OTR antagonist or OT into the BNSTdl before fear conditioning and measured rats’ ability to discriminate between cued (signaled) and non-cued (unsignaled) fear using FPS. In contrast to acute stress (exposure to forced swim stress or foot shocks alone), cued fear conditioning increases OT content in BNSTdl microdialysates. In addition, fear conditioning induces moderate activation of OT neurons in the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus and robust activation in the supraoptic and accessory nuclei of the hypothalamus. Application of OT into the BNSTdl facilitates fear learning toward signaled, predictable threats, whereas blocking OTR attenuates this effect. We conclude that OTR neurotransmission in the BNSTdl plays a pivotal role in strengthening fear learning of temporally predictable, signaled threats.

Introduction
Oxytocin (OT) is a hypothalamic peptide, hormone, and a neuromodulator, first isolated and then synthesized by Vincent du Vigneaud1, who later received Nobel Price for his work. OT receptor (OTR) in a G-protein-coupled receptor, which can propagate signal transduction via either Gαi or Gαq proteins, activate a variety of signaling cascades2. In addition to regulating reproductive function and water/electrolyte homeostasis, OT modulates a wide range of fear and anxiety-like behaviors; for review, see refs.2,3. Although substantial evidence suggests that OT has anxiolytic properties4–6, the role of OT neurotransmission in the regulation of conditioned fear appears more complex and is brain region specific7–9. Some conflicting data on the role of OT in the regulation of fear responses might stem from the fact that the great majority of behavioral studies utilize exogenous OT application to

Correspondence: Joanna Dabrowska (joanna.dabrowska@rosalindfranklin.edu)
1Department of Cellular and Molecular Pharmacology, Chicago Medical School, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, North Chicago, IL 60064, USA
2Center for the Neurobiology of Stress Resilience and Psychiatric Disorders, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, North Chicago, IL 60064, USA
Full list of author information is available at the end of the article.
define its biological function, whereas the role of endogenous OT in anxiety and fear formation is largely unknown. In a fear-potentiated startle (FPS), systemic OT reduces background anxiety without affecting cued or contextual fear. In the FPS, cued fear is measured as a potentiation of the startle amplitude to startle-eliciting noise during presentations of conditioned stimuli (CS$^+$), which have been previously paired with foot shocks. Background anxiety (non-cued fear) reflects potentiation of the startle measured between the CS$^+$ presentations. Importantly, non-cued fear recall depends on the initial CS$^+$ presentation, as it is not observed until after the CS$^+$ presentations and is mainly independent of contextual fear. Therefore, cued and non-cued fear responses can be used to determine rats’ ability to discriminate between signaled (cued) and unsignaled (diffuse) stimuli, as described before.

The dorsolateral bed nucleus of the stria terminalis (BNST$\text{dl}$) is a key brain area for translocating stress into sustained anxiety. Imaging studies in humans have shown potentiation of the BNST activity in conditions of uncertainty, during hypervigilant threat monitoring, and in anticipatory anxiety in participants suffering from arachnophobia. The activity of the BNST is further exaggerated in patients suffering from anxiety disorders. In animal models, BNST lesions disrupt expression of contextual fear, as well as conditioned fear responses to long-lasting cues, but not to short, discrete cues. However, growing evidence suggests that the BNST is also involved in the modulation of conditioned fear responses to discrete cues. BNST lesion improves ability to discriminate between cues paired with unconditioned stimuli (US) vs. unpaired cues. Recent studies confirm the involvement of the BNST in learning to discriminate between CS representing safety and CS representing threat, phasic vs. sustained fear, and signaled vs. unsignaled threats.

The BNST has one of the highest expression levels of OTR and receives OT inputs, at least partly, from the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus (PVN). We recently demonstrated that OTR neurotransmission in the BNST$\text{dl}$ facilitates the acquisition of conditioned fear to a discrete cue. Here we show that OT is selectively released in the BNST$\text{dl}$ during cued fear conditioning, highlighting the involvement of endogenous OT in cued fear learning. Moreover, we demonstrate that fear conditioning induces robust activation of OT neurons in the accessory (AN) and supraoptic nuclei of the hypothalamus (SON), and that both of the nuclei project to the BNST$\text{dl}$. Finally, using in vivo pharmacology and FPS, we calculate discrimination indices of individual rats by comparing a proportion of cued with non-cued fear as before. We show that OTR transmission in the BNST$\text{dl}$ facilitates discrimination learning between cued (signaled, predictable) and non-cued (unsignaled, unpredictable) fear, whereas blocking OTR attenuates this discrimination. Our results show that OTR in the BNST$\text{dl}$ biases fear learning toward the formation of adaptive fear responses of cued, signaled, predictable threats.

**Methods and materials**

**Animals**

Male Sprague–Dawley rats (Envigo, Chicago, IL; 240–300 g) were housed in groups of three on a 12 h light/dark cycle with free access to water and food. Protocols for animal experiments in this study were performed in accordance with the guidelines of the National Institute of Health and approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science.

**The effect of fear conditioning, acute stress, or social interactions on OT content in BNST$\text{dl}$ microdialysates**

**Fear conditioning**

A total of 31 rats were used in the experiment (Supplementary Table 1), 6 rats were eliminated due to missing microdialysate samples, and 2 rats were eliminated due to misplacement of the probe. Microdialysis in freely moving rats was performed as before (Supplementary Methods 1.1–1.2).

All experiments were conducted in SR-LAB startle chambers (San Diego Instruments, San Diego, CA). Male Sprague–Dawley rats (Envigo, Chicago, IL; 240–300 g) were housed in groups of three on a 12 h light/dark cycle with free access to water and food. Protocols for animal experiments in this study were performed in accordance with the guidelines of the National Institute of Health and approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science.

**Forced swimming**

There were 41 rats used in the forced swimming (FS) and social interaction (SI) experiments, and 9 rats were excluded from the analysis (misplacement or inability to confirm probe placement). After baseline samples collection, rats were placed in Plexiglas tanks filled with...
They were then returned to microdialysis cages and five more microdialysis samples were collected (Supplementary Methods 1.3.2).

**Social interactions**

After three baseline sample collections, a novel rat was placed in the microdialysis cage with the experimental rat for 10 min (Supplementary Methods 1.3.3).

**Probe placement and radioimmunoassay for OT**

Radioimmunoassay was performed as before (see inclusion criteria in Fig. 2 legend and Supplementary Methods 1.4-1.5).

**The effect of fear conditioning on activation of hypothalamic OT neurons**

**Fear conditioning and timely perfusions**

Ninety minutes following exposure to unpaired foot shocks, foot shocks signaled by a cue, or control conditions \((n = 5 \text{ per condition})\), rats were deeply anesthetized with Somnasol (Henry Schein Animal Care, Dublin, OH) and transcardially perfused with 10% buffered formalin. In another cohort, rats were exposed to cue light alone or control conditions \((n = 3 \text{ per condition})\) and were perfused as above. Brains were then sliced \((50 \mu m)\) on a SM2000R sliding microtome (Leica Biosystems, Nussloch, Germany) and processed for double immunofluorescence for OT and marker of immediate early gene expression, cFos30 (Fig. 1b, Supplementary Methods 2.1).

**Confocal microscopy and cells counting**

An FV10i confocal laser-scanning microscope (Olympus, Waltham, MA) was used to acquire high-resolution Z-stack images \((\times 60 \text{ magnification at } 1 \mu m \text{ interval})\), which were taken bilaterally from the PVN, SON, and AN (both medial and lateral AN when applicable) of every third hypothalamic brain section from the entire brain \((150 \mu m \text{ interval between sections, five to six sections from each rat; Supplementary Table 2})\). Quantitative analysis of double-labeled OT/cFos neurons was performed offline from all Z-stacks from the three-hypothalamic nuclei using FLUOVIEW software (Version 3.0, Olympus) by experimenters, who were blind to the treatments during image acquisition as well as during cell counting. For each Z-stack image, the cells colocalizing cFos and OT were counted and compared with the
total number of neurons expressing OT alone (Supplementary Methods 2.2).

**Retrograde tracing of BNST-projecting hypothalamic OT neurons**

Six rats were bilaterally injected into the BNSTd with 200 nl (25 nl/min) of retrograde tracer, cholera toxin B Alexa Fluor 488 conjugate (CTB, Life Technologies, C34775, Eugene, OR). Rats were transcardially perfused 4 weeks later and hypothalamic sections were immunolabeled for OT as above. Imaging was completed using Nikon A1R and Olympus FV10i confocal microscopes.

**The effects of OT or OTA administration into the BNSTd on the FPS**

Guide cannulas were implanted bilaterally into the BNSTd of 75 rats as before26. Twenty-three artificial cerebrospinal fluid (ACSF)-treated, 14-OT, and 16-OTR antagonist (OTA)-treated rats were included in the main analysis. Ten OT- and 12 OTA-treated rats were excluded from the analysis due to cannula misplacement and inability to confirm the location of the cannula (see inclusion criteria in Supplementary Materials 1.4) and were analyzed as negative controls (Fig. 5A-A”).

**Drugs**

OT acetate salt (H-2510, Bachem, Inc., CA) and a selective OTA (V-905, NIMH Chemical Synthesis and Drug Supply Program) (d(CH2)5-1, D-Tyr2, Thr4, Orn8, des-Gly-NH29)-vasotocin trifluoroacetate salt36 were stored in −80 °C freezer and diluted in sterile ACSF (pH = 7.4) before each experiment (Supplementary Methods 3.2).

**Fear conditioning and fear recall testing using FPS**

FPS procedures were performed as before10–12,37 (Supplementary Methods 3.3). On days 1 (startle habituation) and 2 (pre-test), rats underwent two acoustic startle response (ASR) sessions, they were fear conditioned in context A on day 3, and 24 h later rats were tested for cued and non-cued fear expression (recall test, day 4) in context B. On day 5, the same rats were tested for contextual fear recall in context A (Fig. 1c).
**Data analysis**

FPS analysis, including percentage change of cued and non-cued fear, was performed as before \(^{12}\) (Supplementary Methods 3.4). The following formulas were used: Cued fear = [(light-noise trials – noise-alone trials)/noise-alone trials] × 100% in context B. Non-cued fear = [(noise-alone trials – pre-test trials)/pre-test trials] × 100% in context B. Contextual fear = [(noise-alone trials – pre-test trials)/pre-test trials] × 100% in context A. In addition, to determine the ability to discriminate between cued and non-cued fear, we calculated the discrimination index (DI) of individual rats by dividing their percent change score of non-cued fear responses according to the formula: DI = [(light-noise trials/noise-alone trials)/(noise-alone trials/cued fear responses according to the formula: DI = [(light-noise trials/noise-alone trials)/noise-alone trials] × 100% in context B. In addition, to determine the ability to discriminate between cued and non-cued fear, we calculated the discrimination index (DI) of individual rats by dividing their percent change score of non-cued fear by their percent change score of non-cued fear responses according to the formula: DI = [(light-noise trials/noise-alone trials)/(noise-alone trials/pre-test trials)] × 100% in context B.

**Statistical analysis**

Data are presented as mean ± SEM. In the microdialysis experiments, results (pg/100 μl) were analyzed by a within-group, one-way repeated-measures (RM) analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Supplementary Table 1). For analysis between treatment groups, data are presented as percentage change (±SEM) from the subjects’ own baseline values and analyzed by a two-way RM ANOVA with the factors TIME and TREATMENT. ANOVA was used to compare percentages of OT neurons colocalizing cFos in each of the hypothalamic nuclei between three conditions (TREATMENT; Supplementary Table 2). FPS data were analyzed by a two-way RM ANOVA with the factors TRIAL TYPE (pre-test, noise-alone, light-noise) and TREATMENT. The percent change scores (cued, non-cued, and contextual fear), shock reactivity, and DI were analyzed using ANOVA. To determine the effect of treatment on DI scores as a function of time, results were analyzed with a two-way RM ANOVA with the factors TIME (recall session divided into four blocks, each consisting of five noise-alone and five light-noise trials) and TREATMENT. Where the F-ratio was significant, all pairwise post-hoc comparisons were made using Bonferroni’s test. All statistical analyses were completed using GraphPad Prism version 6 (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA). P < 0.05 was considered significant.

**Results**

**The effects of behavioral manipulations on OT content in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates**

OT content (pg/100 μl) in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates is shown in Supplementary Table 1.

**Cued fear conditioning increases OT content in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates**

To determine whether OT levels were stable before introducing fear conditioning, we performed RM ANOVA of OT content in three baseline samples and have found stable OT levels in rats exposed to foot shocks alone (F(1,150.5,751) = 1.977, P = 0.2148), foot shocks signaled by a cue (F(1,502,10.51) = 1.740, P = 0.2216), and control (CTRL) conditions (F(1,106,6.636) = 1.331, P = 0.2948).

To determine whether fear conditioning affected OT content in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates within each treatment group, we performed RM ANOVA. This revealed a significant TREATMENT effect on OT content in rats exposed to foot shocks signaled by a cue (F(3.010,21.07) = 3.621, P = 0.0297), but not rats exposed to foot shocks alone (F(2,597,12.98) = 0.1707, P = 0.8921), or CTRL rats (F(2,502,15.01) = 0.08814, P = 0.9468).

A two-way RM ANOVA of percentage change from baseline OT content allowed us to perform comparisons between treatment groups. This analysis showed no significant main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,20) = 1.937, P = 0.1702) or TIME (F(5,100) = 1.153, P = 0.3378). However, there was a significant interaction between TIME and TREATMENT (F(1,100) = 2.002, P = 0.0408). Bonferroni’s multiple comparison test revealed a significantly greater percentage change of OT content in rats exposed to foot shocks signaled by a cue (134.66% ± 12.95) at 30 min in comparison with CTRL rats (98.86% ± 6.56, P < 0.01), or in comparison with rats exposed to foot shocks alone (98.29% ± 8.04, P < 0.01). No significant effects were observed at 60, 90, 120, and 150 min after the fear conditioning (Fig. 2b).

**FS does not affect OT content in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates**

OT content did not differ between baseline microdialysates in rats exposed to FS (F(1,235,8.644) = 1.405, P = 0.2780) or CTRL rats (F(1,542,3.88) = 1.014, P = 0.3680).

No significant effect of TREATMENT was observed in rats exposed to FS (F(2,275,15.92) = 0.7365, P = 0.5109) or CTRL rats (F(2,510,22.59) = 1.220, P = 0.3209, RM ANOVA).

Comparing percentage change from baseline OT content revealed no significant main effect of TREATMENT (F(1,16) = 1.010, P = 0.3298) or TIME (F(5,80) = 1.414, P = 0.2282), and no significant interaction between TIME and TREATMENT (F(5,80) = 0.4828, P = 0.7881, two-way RM ANOVA; Fig. 2b’).

**SIs do not affect OT content in BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates**

OT content did not differ between baseline BNST\textsubscript{dl} microdialysates in SI rats (F(1,115,5.573) = 2.160, P = 0.1977) or CTRL rats (F(1,564,9.383) = 1.651, P = 0.2403).

No significant effect of treatment on OT content was observed in rats exposed to SI (F(2,237,11.85) = 1.379, P = 0.2932) or CTRL rats (F(2,260,15.82) = 1.332, P = 0.2949).
Comparing percentage changes from baseline OT content revealed no significant main effect of TREATMENT (F(1,12) = 1.432, P = 0.2546), no significant effect of TIME (F(5,60) = 1.394, P = 0.2396), and no significant interaction between TIME and TREATMENT (F(5,60) = 0.8411, P = 0.5259; Fig. 2b)

The effect of fear conditioning on OT neurons’ activation in the hypothalamus

Results are shown in Fig. 3. Additional analysis is included in the Supplementary Table 2. The average number of counted OT neurons, including anterior to posterior hypothalamic sections scored bilaterally, was 44.18 ± 3.17 for each hemisphere PVN, 59.62 ± 2.48 for each SON, and 13.62 ± 0.80 for each AN, for all treatment groups combined.

Fear conditioning activates OT neurons in the PVN

When comparing percentages of cFos-positive OT neurons in the PVN, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of TREATMENT in response to fear conditioning (F(2,129) = 3.142, P = 0.0465). Post-hoc analysis showed a significantly greater percentage of activated OT neurons in rats exposed to foot shocks alone in comparison with CTRL rats (P = 0.0406). However, percentage of activated OT neurons did not differ between rats exposed to foot shocks signaled by a cue compared with CTRL rats (P = 0.6495), or compared with rats exposed to foot shocks alone (P = 0.7511) (Fig. 3A-A’).

Fear conditioning causes robust activation of OT neurons in the AN

Similarly, in the SON, there was a significant effect of TREATMENT on percentage of activated OT neurons in response to fear conditioning (F(2,82) = 31.40, P < 0.0001). Post-hoc analysis revealed a significantly greater percentage of activated OT neurons in rats exposed to foot shocks signaled by a cue (P = 0.0030) and foot shocks alone (P < 0.0001) in comparison with CTRL rats. A significant difference was also observed in rats exposed to signaled vs. unsignaled footshocks (P = 0.0003) (Fig. 3B-B’).

Fear conditioning causes robust activation of OT neurons in the AN

A significant TREATMENT effect (F(2,150) = 12.62, P < 0.0001) followed by a post-hoc analysis revealed a significantly greater percentage of activated OT neurons in rats exposed to foot shocks signaled by a cue (P = 0.0168) as well as group exposed to foot shocks alone (P < 0.0001), as compared with CTRL. Percentages of activated OT neurons did not differ between the two groups (P = 0.2564) (Fig. 3C-C’). Interestingly, the most intense OT-cFOS co-expression was observed in posterior AN sections in both groups, reaching 25% of all OT neurons co-expressing cFos (Bregma = −1.80 to −2.28 based on Rat Brain Atlas38; Supplementary Table 2.

Exposure to cue alone does not activate OT neurons in the hypothalamus

To determine whether exposure to CS alone can cause an activation of OT neurons, percentage of activated OT neurons was compared between rats exposed to cue (light) alone and control rats. In the PVN, the percentage of OT neurons co-expressing cFos did not differ between rats exposed to cue alone and control rats (t = 0.5609, df = 45, P = 0.5776, unpaired t-test). Similarly, in the SON, no treatment effect was detected (t = 0.7189, df = 27, P = 0.4784). Finally, no cue effect was also observed in the AN (t = 1.063, df = 32, P = 0.2959).

OT neurons from the hypothalamus project to the BNSTdl

To determine which hypothalamic OT neurons project to the BNSTdl, we injected a retrograde tracer, CTB, into the BNSTdl, and several weeks later we stained serial hypothalamic brain sections with OT. Double-labeled neurons for CTB-Alexa 488 and OT were found in the PVN (Fig. 4A-A”), anterior SON (Fig. 4B-B”, Bregma −1.20 to Bregma −1.32 mm), and posterior AN (Fig. 4C-C”), indicative of BNST-projecting OT neurons.

Effects of OT or OTA administration into the BNSTdl on fear acquisition

Acquisition of cued fear conditioning

All animals exhibited a significantly potentiated startle in light-noise trials compared with noise-alone trials. Two-way RM ANOVA showed a significant main effect of TRIAL TYPE (F(1,50) = 32.01, P < 0.0001) but no main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,50) = 0.1656, P = 0.8478) and no interaction between TRIAL TYPE and TREATMENT (F(2,50) = 0.7115, P = 0.4958; Fig. 5b). Comparison of percentage changes revealed a trend in the TREATMENT effect on cued fear (F(2,50) = 2.433, P = 0.0981, ANOVA; Fig. 5c). As high variability was observed in OT-treated rats, we also compared ACSF and OTA-treated groups using unpaired t-test, which revealed a trend in the OTA effect on cued fear (P = 0.0763).

Acquisition of non-cued fear conditioning

Quantitative analysis showed a significant enhancement of ASR in noise-alone trials compared with pre-test trials across all groups. There was a main effect of TRIAL TYPE (pre-test vs. noise-alone, F(1,50) = 22.73, P < 0.0001) but no main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,50) = 0.8546, P = 0.4316) and no significant interaction (F(2,50) = 0.6216, P = 0.5412). When comparing percentage change of non-cued fear with ANOVA, no significant differences were
Fig. 3 (See legend on next page.)
observed between treatment groups (F(2,50) = 0.1063, P = 0.8993; Fig. 5d).

**Acquisition of contextual fear conditioning**

Quantitative analysis showed a significant enhancement of ASR in the training context compared with pre-test trials. There was a main effect of TRIAL TYPE (F(1,46) = 12.45, P = 0.001) but no main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,6) = 1.35, P = 0.2693) and no significant interaction (F(2,46) = 1.977, P = 0.1492). SIMILARLY, the mean percent change analysis showed that contextual fear did not differ between treatment groups (F(2,46) = 0.6275, P = 0.5384; Fig. 5e).

**Shock reactivity**

The mean shock reactivity during the fear-conditioning session was not different between treatment groups (F(2,50) = 0.1415, P = 0.8684; Fig. 5f).

**Discrimination index**

The calculated overall DI was not significantly different between treatment groups (F(2,50) = 1.977, P = 0.1492, ANOVA; Fig. 5g). When the DI was calculated over four time blocks, there was no significant main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,50) = 1.92, P = 0.1573) or TIME (F(3,150) = 1.47, P = 0.2249), but there was a significant interaction between TREATMENT and TIME (F(6,150) = 2.261, P = 0.0406, two-way RM ANOVA). Post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences in the DI in the fourth time block of fear memory recall between ACSF- and OT-treated groups (t(200) = 2.91, P = 0.0121), as well as between OT and OTA-treated groups (t(200) = 3.739, P = 0.0007, Bonferroni's test; Fig. 5h). In the negative controls, the DI over four time blocks revealed no significant main effect of TREATMENT (F(2,42) = 0.5469, P = 0.5828) or TIME (F(3,126) = 0.6473, P = 0.5861) and there was no significant interaction (F(6,126) = 0.2376, P = 0.9634; Fig. 5h').

**Discussion**

In the current study, using in vivo microdialysis in freely moving male rats as well as brain-site-specific in vivo pharmacology, we demonstrate that OTR transmission in the BNST enables fear learning of cued (signaled, predictable) fear. Using double immunofluorescence labeling of OT and immediate early gene expression cFosS, we show that in the hypothalamus, exposure to fear conditioning causes robust activation of OT neurons in the SON and posterior AN. We previously demonstrated that intra-BNST infusion of an OTR antagonist before fear conditioning significantly reduces cued fear recall. In the current study we show that presentation of foot shocks signaled by a discrete cue leads to a significant increase in OT content in BNST microdialysates, whereas the presentation of unsignaled foot shocks has no effect. In contrast to previous studies in the PVN, central amygdala, and lateral septum, we demonstrate that OT release in the BNST is not sensitive to acute stress of FS or foot shocks alone. However, caution needs to be applied when interpreting forced swim results, as high variability of OT content in the BNST microdialysates was observed in this experimental group. Previous studies have shown that OT content in the posterior BNST correlate with social discrimination in rats. Although we did not specifically employ a social recognition paradigm, we demonstrate that OT release in the BNST is not modulated by SIs with a novel rat. Our results suggest that OT in the BNST is released during the acquisition of cued fear, and that OT neurons in the hypothalamus are activated in response to fear conditioning. Accordingly, we show a significant increase in the percentage of activated OT neurons in the SON and AN in response to signaled and unsignaled foot shocks. Interestingly, the AN has been identified as the main source of OT innervation in the CeA, a critical brain region for acquisition and consolidation of fear memory. We also show activation of OT neurons in the PVN in rats exposed to foot shocks alone, but not cue-signaled foot...
shocks. Similarly, acute stressors were shown to activate OT neurons in the PVN\textsuperscript{45,46}. However, although the PVN sends OT projections to the BNST\textsubscript{dl}\textsuperscript{7,30}, we show that OT release in the BNST\textsubscript{dl} is not evoked by unsignaled foot shocks. Although seemingly contradictory, another population of BNST-projecting hypothalamic OT neurons might modulate acquisition of cued fear, as it has been shown that discrete clusters of OT neurons are highly specialized in their projections and functions\textsuperscript{47}. Using retrograde neuronal tracing, we demonstrate that OT neurons from anterior SON and posterior AN also send projections to the BNST\textsubscript{dl}, suggesting they might be specifically involved in facilitating cued fear. Our future studies will identify specific populations of OT neurons in the SON and AN activated by cue-signalized foot shocks. Previously, recall of cued fear conditioning or recall of foot shock alone has been shown to activate OT neurons in the SON and PVN\textsuperscript{48}. Notably, in our study, exposure to foot shocks alone generally activated more OT neurons in the hypothalamic nuclei, suggesting that cue presentation...
may have suppressed the activation of OT neurons. However, our control experiment shows that cue alone does not affect OT neurons’ activation in any of the hypothalamic nuclei. It is therefore possible that OT projection to the BNST_{dl} is selectively involved in strengthening formation of cued fear. Once activated by OT, BNST neurons might have inhibited hypothalamic OT neurons, leading to the observed reduction of their
activation. In fact, projection from GABA-ergic neurons in the BNST

Although we demonstrated that exposure to cue alone does not induce an activation of OT neurons, we could not perform a microdialysis experiment during an exposure to cue alone. Here, microdialysates’ sampling was further complicated by the fact that, once placed in SR-LAB cylindrical enclosures, and not distracted by foot shocks exposure, freely moving rats quickly engage in the consumption and damage of the microdialysis tubing. Nonetheless, as cue alone does not induce any activation of OT neurons, it is unlikely to be that it would induce OT release in the BNSTdl.

We next investigated the role of OTR transmission in the BNSTdl in the acquisition of cued, non-cued, and contextual fear. Structural modification in the OTR antagonist (D-Tyr² instead of Tyr(Me)²) renders this compound more selective toward OTR vs. vasopressin receptors in comparison with the antagonist we used before also see ref. However, in contrast to our previous findings, we show that blocking OTR in the BNSTdl before fear conditioning does not significantly reduce cued fear but only induces a trend in cued fear reduction measured in the FPS. However, by calculating DI, we show that infusion of OT potentiates fear discrimination and strengthens fear responses toward cued fear, especially during the later phase of fear recall. Nonetheless, OT-treated group shows high variability of fear responses. Considering that endogenous OT is released during fear acquisition, infusing more exogenous OT might have led to high variability of fear responses. Using selective OTR agonist, (Thr⁴Gly⁷)-OT, might be a better alternative in the future studies. In previous FPS studies, systemic, but not ICV, administration of OT reduced non-cued fear (background anxiety), without affecting cued or contextual fear. Therefore, it is possible that OT dynamically modulates both cued and non-cued fear responses in an opposite manner; it facilitates cued fear in the BNST and reduces non-cued fear responses, overall promoting discrimination between the two. In the BNSTdl, OT might activate neurons mediating cued fear, which in turn might inhibit neurons responsible for non-cued, sustained fear responses in, or outside the BNSTdl (see ref. 13). Such dualism was reported in the BNST after auditory fear conditioning, where anterolateral neurons were inhibited, whereas anteromedial BNST neurons were excited in response to CS+ presentation. Notably, a similar role of OTR in facilitating fear discrimination has been recently shown in the basolateral amygdala.

Our findings have translational validity for psychiatric disorders in humans. Although healthy controls have greater startle responses to stimuli predicting danger vs. stimuli predicting safety, humans suffering from PTSD demonstrate lack of discrimination between these stimuli. However, startle responses to aversive stimuli administered in a predictable manner do not differ between PTSD patients and healthy controls. This highlights the adaptive role of cued/predictable fear, which is necessary to accurately detect and avoid danger. The notion of OT strengthening the adaptive fear and improving the ability to accurately discriminate between danger and safety becomes apparent in animal and human research.

Notably, a growing number of studies emphasize the role of the BNST in the discrimination between cued (signaled, predictable, phasic) vs. non-cued (unsignaled, unpredictable, sustained) fear. OTR transmission in the BNSTdl might play a pivotal role in learning to accurately recognize threats signaled by a discrete cue.
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Author details
1Department of Cellular and Molecular Pharmacology, Chicago Medical School, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, North Chicago, IL 60064, USA. 2Center for the Neurobiology of Stress Resistance and Psychiatric Disorders, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, North Chicago, IL 60064, USA. 3School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, North Chicago, IL 60064, USA.

Author contributions
J.D designed the study. D.M., P.L., A.N.R., P.T., S.V.A., V.O., and V.O. acquired data. D.M., P.L., A.N.R., P.T., S.V.A., V.O., and J.D. analyzed and interpreted data. J.D. wrote the manuscript. P.L., A.N.R., P.T., and S.V.A. edited the manuscript.

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

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