Glutamatergic Copy Number Variants and Their Role in Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Glauçia Chiyoko Akutagava-Martins,1 Angelica Salatino-Oliveira,1 Julia P. Genro,1 Verônica Contini,1 Guilherme Polanczyk,1,2 Cristian Zeni,4 Rodrigo Chazan,4 Christian Kieling,4 Luciana Anselmi,5 Ana M. B. Menezes,5 Eugênio H. Grevet,6 Claiton H. D. Bau,1,6 Luis A. Rohde,3,4 and Mara H. Hutz1

1Department of Genetics, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil
2Department of Psychiatry, Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil
3Institute for Developmental Psychiatry for Children and Adolescents
4Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Brazil
5Postgraduate Program in Epidemiology, Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Brazil
6Adult ADHD Outpatient Program, Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common childhood neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairing symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity [American Psychiatric Association, 2013]. The worldwide pooled prevalence is estimated at 5 to 7% in school-aged children [Polanczyk et al., 2007; Willcutt, 2012]. Although symptoms might remit, the ADHD persistence into adulthood is rather common [Faraone et al., 2006; Lara...
et al., 2009], with prevalence rates in adults estimated between 2.5 to 5% [Simon et al., 2009; Willcutt, 2012]. ADHD is a complex and heterogeneous disorder and its etiology is not yet completely understood [Genaro et al., 2010]. Molecular genetic studies have shown that both common and rare variants are implicated in the susceptibility to this disorder [AKUTAGAVA-MARTINS et al., 2013].

An increased overall copy number variant (CNV) rate in ADHD children compared to controls has been reported [Williams et al., 2010] and replicated [Yang et al., 2013]. The higher CNV rate found in ADHD cases is even greater when ADHD cases that also presented mild intellectual disability (ID) were considered [Williams et al., 2010]. Langley et al. [2011] demonstrated an increased risk of large (>500 kb) and rare (<1% frequency) CNVs in ADHD children with comorbid ID. No other difference on symptom severity or type, comorbidity, developmental features, family history or pre- and peri-natal markers was reported, suggesting that CNV presence do not determine an atypical subgroup of ADHD children [Langley et al., 2011].

In Yang et al. [2013], a strategy of combining the investigation of CNVs and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) was used. ADHD was associated with both rare and common variants of genes involved in neurodevelopment and synaptic plasticity, especially those of glutamate synaptic development pathway [Yang et al., 2013]. Moreover, Elia et al. [2010] demonstrated that glutamate metabotropic receptor genes GRM5 and GRM7 were among the genes affected by CNVs [Elia et al., 2010]. In a subsequent study, these investigators again detected an overrepresentation of CNVs affecting glutamate metabotropic receptor genes GRM1, GRM5, GRM7, and GRM8 in ADHD cases. Additional analyses showed that about 10% of ADHD cases where enriched for CNVs in genes interacting with the GRM gene family, forming a network. The most frequent CNVs were GRM5 deletions; GRM1 duplications and GRM8 deletions were also associated with ADHD [Elia et al., 2012].

Glutamate is the major excitatory neurotransmitter in the brain and is involved in a number of processes relevant to ADHD: brain development, modulation of neuronal activity, bidirectional regulation of dopamine signaling, synaptic plasticity, memory formation, and learning [Lesch et al., 2013; Mukherjee and Manahan-Vaughan, 2013]. GRM5 seems to be critical for inhibitory learning mechanisms because impaired receptor function results in inappropriate retention of aversive memories, which may result in anxiety disorders [Xu et al., 2009]. GRM1 knockout mice demonstrated that this receptor is involved in associative learning [Aiba et al., 1994a; Gil-Sanz et al., 2008] and motor learning [Aiba et al., 1994b] due to reduced hippocampal long-term potentiation and deficient cerebellar long-term depression, respectively. Impaired motor coordination was also observed in adult mice without this receptor [Nakao et al., 2007]. The GRM8 null mutant mice showed novelty induced hyperactivity and altered fear responses [Fendt et al., 2010; Gerlai et al., 2002]. Anxiety disorders, motor coordination problems and learning disorders are common features found in ADHD cases [Rommelse et al., 2009].

Considering these evidences and the genome wide screenings results that suggest a role for glutamatergic genes in ADHD, the aim of the present study was to determine the contribution of CNVs in glutamate metabotropic genes GRM1, GRM5, and GRM8 to ADHD susceptibility based on a candidate gene approach.
with two or more positive questions among the six was considered screening positive, and answered questions about the 12 remaining ADHD symptoms, as well as about additional criteria (symptom pervasiveness, age of onset before 12 years old, and clinical impairment). Pervasiveness was assessed by questioning if the subject presented symptoms in at least two of the three main settings: home, social and work/school environments. Clinical impairment specifically related to ADHD was measured through a 0 (no impairment) to 3 (severe impairment) scale answered by the subjects at the end of the ADHD assessment interview. Clinical impairment was defined as ADHD impairment scores of 2 (moderate) or 3 (severe).

For comparison purposes, a total of 1057 individuals were also selected from the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort. It includes all subjects with positive screening (i.e., at least two positive questions in the six question screening) who did not meet full ADHD diagnostic criteria in the subsequent evaluation (n = 187) and individuals with none of the six ADHD screening symptoms (n = 870). This strategy was chosen to maximize the chance of having at the same time a huge control group and individuals endorsing few ADHD symptoms, what is relevant in a dimensional disorder like ADHD.

Methodology of collection and demographic data from this Cohort are described fully in Victora et al. [2006] [Victora et al., 2006]. The general psychiatric assessment was performed with the MINI, a short semi-structured diagnostic interview for DSM-IV and ICD-10 psychiatric disorders, which provided prevalence estimates of common mental disorders. Due to logistic issues with the MINI, a short semi-structured diagnostic interview for the ADHD sample and our controls. No significant findings emerged extending the same analyses contrasting each ADHD sample and the comparison sample of individuals without ADHD. The adult ADHD sample from the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort presented the lowest IQ mean: 72.4 ± 10.3. Disruptive behavior disorders, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders were the most common comorbidities found in the ADHD samples from ProDAH. CNV frequencies were estimated for each gene in each group (Table II). CNVs affecting GRM1 were the most common, except for the adult ADHD sample from ProDAH. These CNVs were primarily deletions, although two duplications were also identified. Inheritance investigation demonstrated that these CNVs were all inherited, most of them from the mother (82.3%). GRM5 CNVs were all de novo deletions. CNVs affecting GRM8 were the rarest. Only two were identified: a deletion and a duplication in the adult ADHD sample from ProDAH; for this CNV it was not possible to determine the inheritance pattern. When all CNVs were considered, deletions were far more common than duplications (97.4%). Only three duplications were identified, all in the adult ADHD sample from ProDAH.

First, the total number of CNVs was compared between the entire ADHD sample and our controls. No significant findings emerged (P = 0.326, OR = 1.112, 95% CI = 0.762–1.624). Second, we performed the same analyses contrasting each ADHD sample and the comparison sample of individuals without ADHD. The adult ADHD sample from the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort presented a significantly higher CNV frequency compared to the population sample, from the same Cohort (P = 0.002, OR = 2.928, 95% CI = 1.562–5.488). However, this was not replicated in the ADHD samples from ProDAH, even though these samples present a 99% power to detect an association of the same magnitude, at P < 0.05.

Given that a higher CNV rate was reported in ADHD cases with ID, we investigated a possible association with IQ scores. The scores were divided into two categories: ≤ 79 (below average) and ≥ 80 (average and above). The presence of CNVs was associated with
### TABLE I. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of Each Sample

|                      | ADHD children and adolescents ProDAH | ADHD adults ProDAH | ADHD adults 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort | Population sample without ADHD 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Age                  | 10.6±3.2                             | 33.9±11.1          | 18                                    | 18                                                       |
| Male                 | 77.2                                 | 50.8               | 38.2                                  | 48.6                                                     |
| IQ                   | 92.4±13.9                            | 101.3±8.4          | 72.4±10.3                             | 75.4±11.5                                               |
| Disruptive behavior disorders | 49.5                                | 48.1               |                                       |                                                          |
| Anxiety disordersb   | 16.9                                 | 32.5               | 49.5                                  | 10.4                                                    |
| Mood disorders       | 15.4                                 | 59.2               | 20.9                                  | 2.5                                                     |
| Data are given as number (percentage) or mean (±standard deviation). |

bAgoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia.

### TABLE II. CNVs of Glutamatergic Genes and Their Frequency in Each Sample

| Gene     | Probe location | Type | ADHD children and adolescents ProDAH | ADHD adults ProDAH | ADHD adults 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort | Population sample without ADHD 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort |
|----------|----------------|------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| GRM1     | Chr6:146666882 | Del  | 21 4.0                               | 4 1.0              | 10 9.1                                | 40 3.9                                                   |
|          |                | Dup  | 0 0                                  | 2 0.5              | 0 0                                   | 0 0                                                      |
| GRM5     | Chr11:88310296 | Del  | 7 1.3                                | 10 2.5             | 4 4.1                                 | 14 1.4                                                   |
|          |                | Dup  | 0 0                                  | 1 0.2              | 0 0                                   | 0 0                                                      |
| GRM8     | Chr7:126473038 | Del  | 0 0                                  | 1 0.2              | 0 0                                   | 0 0                                                      |
|          |                | Dup  | 28 5.3                               | 18 4.6             | 14 14.1                               | 54 5.3                                                   |

Based on National Center for Biotechnology Information build 37.

CNV type: ‘del’ deletion; ‘dup’ duplication.

### TABLE III. IQ Scores in ADHD Casesa and Comparison Sample Without ADHD According to the Presence of CNVsb

| IQ score ≤ 79 | n   | %   | IQ score ≥ 80 | n  | %   | P value | OR   | 95% CI       |
|---------------|-----|-----|---------------|----|-----|---------|------|-------------|
| ADHD cases    |     |     |               |    |     |         |      |             |
| CNV Yes       | 17  | 10.5| 42            | 5  | 5.7 | 0.026   | 1.824| 1.066 - 3.121|
| No            | 145 | 89.5| 688           | 94.3| 94.3|         |      |             |
| Population sample without ADHD CNV |      |     |               |    |     |         |      |             |
| Yes           | 35  | 5.5 | 18            | 4.8|     | 0.385   | 1.136| 0.653 - 1.976|
| No            | 602 | 94.5| 354           | 95.2|    |         |      |             |

aADHD cases from both ProDAH and 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort.
bFisher’s exact test.
lower IQ scores in ADHD cases \( (P = 0.026, \ OR = 1.824, \ 95\% \ CI = 1.066–3.121) \) but not in the individuals without ADHD (Table III).

Since \( \text{GRM5} \) has been linked to anxiety in animal models, we assessed the possible association between \( \text{GRM5} \) and anxiety disorders comorbid with ADHD. The presence of \( \text{GRM5} \) CNVs was associated with comorbid anxiety disorders in ADHD cases \( (P = 0.002, \ OR = 3.915, \ 95\% \ CI = 1.631–9.402) \) but not in subjects without ADHD (Table IV). About 57% of the ADHD patients with a \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV also present at least one anxiety disorder, mainly phobias (75%).

### DISCUSSION

Elia et al. [2012] demonstrated, in a large genome-wide CNV study, an increased rate of CNVs affecting \( \text{GRM1}, \ \text{GRM5}, \) and \( \text{GRM8} \) genes in ADHD children. In the present study, we investigated these rare variants in ADHD based on a candidate gene approach. A higher CNV frequency was detected in the adult ADHD sample from the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort, which, in turn, is the sample with the lowest IQ mean. Despite methodological differences, our results, although not strictly comparable points to the same direction as those presented by Williams et al. [2010] and Langley et al. [2011], which demonstrated that ADHD cases with mild ID have an increased risk of carrying a CNV [Langley et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2010].

The first study to investigate CNVs in ADHD reported no difference in CNV rate between cases and controls corrected for IQ [Elia et al., 2010]. Based on this, the increased CNV rate in ADHD cases and in ADHD cases with ID reported by Williams et al. [2010] was questioned. It was argued that the CNV enrichment seen in ADHD cases was in fact due to the known causal relation between large CNVs and ID [Elia et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2010]. However, a study of both fluid and crystallized intelligence in a large non-clinical sample following the same methodology of Williams et al. [2010] found no evidence of association between these large \( (>500 \ \text{kb}) \) and rare \( (<1\% \text{ frequency}) \) variants and general cognitive ability [MacLeod et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2010]. These results are in agreement with the idea that ADHD and IQ share genetic influences.

In a twin study, Kuntsi et al. [2004] demonstrated that ADHD and lower IQ scores co-vary and the co-occurrence is largely attributed to shared genetic components. In this sense, genes associated with ADHD could influence IQ and vice versa [Kuntsi et al., 2004]. The ataxin 1 gene (\( \text{ATXN1} \)) has been associated with ADHD susceptibility in a meta-analysis [Neale et al., 2010]. In another study, the same gene was associated with IQ in an ADHD sample, but not in population-based samples. These authors concluded that genes associated with IQ in a psychiatric context may not necessarily influence IQ in a non-psychiatric population [Rizzi et al., 2011]. Our results support this hypothesis: the presence of \( \text{GRM} \) CNVs was associated with lower IQ scores in the ADHD sample, but not in the population sample without ADHD. These genes are involved in learning processes, which are impaired in ADHD cases, as a large portion of ADHD patients present comorbid learning disorders [Czamara et al., 2013], which could in turn affect IQ [Kuntsi et al., 2004].

| TABLE IV. Frequency of Anxiety Disorders\(^a\) in ADHD Cases\(^b\) and in the Population Sample According to Presence of \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV\(^c\) |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                 | With anxiety disorders | Without anxiety disorders | \( P \) value | OR | 95% CI |
| ADHD cases \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV | n | % | n | % | | |
| Yes | 12 | 4.5 | 9 | 1.2 | 0.002 | 3.915 | 1.631–9.402 |
| No | 252 | 95.5 | 740 | 98.8 | | | |
| Population sample without ADHD \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV | n | % | n | % | | |
| Yes | 2 | 1.9 | 12 | 1.3 | 0.431 | 1.461 | 0.323–6.619 |
| No | 103 | 98.1 | 903 | 98.7 | | | |

\( ^a \)Agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia.
\( ^b \)ADHD cases from both ProDaH and 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort.
\( ^c \)Fisher’s exact test.

| With anxiety disorders | Without anxiety disorders | \( P \) value | OR | 95% CI |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| ADHD cases \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV | n | % | n | % | | |
| Yes | 12 | 4.5 | 9 | 1.2 | 0.002 | 3.915 | 1.631–9.402 |
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| Anxiety disorders | Without anxiety disorders | \( P \) value | OR | 95% CI |
|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| ADHD cases \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV | n | % | n | % | | |
| Yes | 12 | 4.5 | 9 | 1.2 | 0.002 | 3.915 | 1.631–9.402 |
| No | 252 | 95.5 | 740 | 98.8 | | | |
| Population sample without ADHD \( \text{GRM5} \) CNV | n | % | n | % | | |
| Yes | 2 | 1.9 | 12 | 1.3 | 0.431 | 1.461 | 0.323–6.619 |
| No | 103 | 98.1 | 903 | 98.7 | | | |
Our analyses of anxiety disorders focused on agoraphobia, generalized anxiety, and social phobia since they represent those anxiety disorders with higher prevalence and clinical significance [Gadermann et al., 2012]. For the same reason, only data on these disorders were collected in the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort. In addition, they represent more than 50% of the cases of anxiety disorders in all our clinical samples and present a high comorbid rate with ADHD in the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort. The high comorbid rate between ADHD and anxiety disorders added to rate with ADHD in the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort. The high disorders were collected in the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort. In [Gadermann et al., 2012]. For the same reason, only data on these generalized anxiety, and social phobia since they represent those AKUTAGAVA-MARTINS ET AL.

The observed that these variants were associated with lower IQ scores. CNVs affecting other portions of these genes would pass unnoted. However, the genotyping probes were selected based on CNVs previously described and validated by the same technique [Elia et al., 2012]. The CNV frequencies showed here are higher than those previously reported [Elia et al., 2012], probably reflecting the genotyping methodology employed because qRT-PCR is highly sensitive for CNV genotyping [D’Haene et al., 2010], while the ability to detect CNVs from genome-wide association data, particularly the smaller ones, depends largely on SNP coverage and the algorithm employed for CNV calling [Zhang et al., 2011].

Second, as we have the WISC-III and WAIS-R translated to Portuguese and the validation of the translation assessed but do not have Brazilian norms for WISC-III and WAIS-R validated in representative populations, we use the American norms to derive IQ scores for all samples. Although this strategy does not affect the comparability among groups, our individual IQ estimates might be lower than expected. The possible influence of learning disorders on lower IQ scores was not investigated as information on these disorders is not available. Langley et al. [2011] suggest that CNVs are associated with IQ scores only in individuals with intellectual disability. Given the role of GRMs in learning processes, future studies should further examine the association with IQ scores reported here in ADHD groups with and without learning disorders.

Third, the analysis of GRM5 and anxiety disorders did not consider age and gender, as potential confounders due to sample size limitations. Fourth, children and adult ADHD cases were pooled and different developmental stages may have influenced our results by increasing heterogeneity. Finally, the results were not corrected for multiple testing as we consider this study as preliminary and exploratory. Further investigation of GRMs on IQ and anxiety in both ADHD and non-ADHD samples are clearly warranted to determine the role of GRMs on these characteristics.

In conclusion, our results should be viewed as a preliminary evidence and suggest a role for glutamate in ADHD. Although it was not possible to detect an association between the presence of CNVs affecting GRM1, GRM5, and GRM8 and ADHD susceptibility, we observed that these variants were associated with lower IQ scores. The GRM5 gene, specifically, was associated with the presence of comorbid anxiety disorders. Taken together, our results suggest that CNVs in the glutamatergic genes investigated herein are associated with cognitive and clinical characteristics of ADHD individuals. Such characteristics are clinically important and impact on disease treatment and outcome. Future studies are needed in order to explore and replicate these findings.

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