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Research Article

Keywords: premammillary nucleus (PMD), behaviour, water, food, territory

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-788121/v1

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Dynamics in brain activation and behaviour in acute and repeated social defensive motivated behaviour

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ABSTRACT

In nature, confrontations between conspecifics are recurrent and related, in general, to the lack of resources such as food and territory. In this sense, adequate defence against a conspecific aggressor is essential for the individual’s survival and the group integrity. However, repeated social defeat is a significant stressor, promoting several behavioural changes, including on social defence per se. But what would be the neural basis of these behavioural changes? To explore some hypotheses about this, we investigated the effects of repeated social stress on neural circuits underlying the motivated behaviour social defence in male mice. The hypothalamus is an essential centre of these circuits. Different hypothalamic structures receive information about the conspecific from the medial amygdala and the bed nucleus of the terminal stria. Furthermore, the hypothalamus can receive environmental information via the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit. Both information is processed by the dorsal premamillary nucleus (PMD) and the ventrolateral portion of the ventromedial nucleus of the hypothalamus, which communicate with the periaqueductal grey, an important downstream site for behavioural emission. During our analysis, we observed that animals re-exposed three times to the aggressor spent more time in passive defence during their last exposure than in their first one. These animals also present a smaller mobilization of areas related to the processing of conspecific cues. In contrast, we did not observe changes in the PMD mobilization. Therefore, our data indicate that the balance between the activity of circuits related to conspecific processing and the PMD determines the pattern of social defence behaviour. Changes in this balance may be the basis of the adaptations in social defence after repeated social defeat.

Introduction

Conflicts between animals of the same species are frequent during the life of social animals1–3. In general, these conflicts occur due to a lack of resources (water, food, territory) or sexual partners, and their occurrence divides animals between dominants - those who were often the winners - and subordinates1–3. Submission is a relevant stressor in groups of social animals. Subordinate animals have a shorter life expectancy, a lower success rate in mating and greater weight loss than their dominant ones1,2. Furthermore, these animals show a series of neuroendocrine and autonomic responses associated with stress, such as changes in blood corticosterone levels and in heart rate1,2,4. In the laboratory, the exposure - acute or chronic - of an animal to a conspecific aggressor is one of the most used protocols for the study of coping and psychopathology-like behaviours4–7.

Chronic exposure to social stress promotes a series of changes in the subordinate animal behaviour6. In short, animals begin to express what is known as anxious- and depressive-like behaviours, which is related to changes in the pattern of locomotion and exploration in paradigms such as the open field and the elevated plus-maze4–6,8. Coping strategies are also changed. Butler et al. (2018)7 have shown that cichlid fishes re-exposed to social stress initially perform a proactive coping strategy, which changes for a reactive strategy after the third exposure. Although these coping strategies are related to social defence, we have little information about the effect of chronic social stress on social defence itself. This behaviour is divided between active defence, which occurs during the attack of dominant animals, and passive defence, which includes freezing or on-the-back posture9. Social defence is essential for individual survival and the maintenance of group integrity since it enables the division of winners and losers without deaths10,11. Therefore, social defence is a goal-oriented behaviour essential to the survival of social animal species9.

Goal-oriented behaviours involve a range of behaviours essential to the survival of the individual and the species, such as ingestive (eating and drinking), defensive (fight or flight), and reproductive (sexual and parental) behaviours12,13. The execution of these behaviours depends on different neural circuits, whose neuronal populations and connections are genetically determined, which makes it possible for animals to be born knowing how to perform them9. An essential brain structure for
goal-oriented behaviours is the hypothalamus\textsuperscript{12,13}. This structure receives information both from the internal environment (e.g. energy status, extracellular fluid volume, temperature) and from the external environment (e.g. presence of a predator, characteristics of a co-specific, distance to threats)\textsuperscript{12,13}. Furthermore, the hypothalamus projects to regions associated with the organization of behaviour, in addition to controlling endocrine and autonomic systems\textsuperscript{12,13}. Therefore, the hypothalamus acts as an integrator centre that regulates goal-oriented behaviours, including social defence. Concerning repeated exposure to social stress (in the laboratory or nature), even though changes in social defence have been described, the neural bases of these changes are still unclear\textsuperscript{1,2,7,14}. Given the importance of the hypothalamus for the execution of these behaviours, behavioural changes are expected to be associated with changes in the activity of hypothalamic nuclei and associated areas. But, how does repeated social stress impact the activity of these structures?

During acute exposure to social stress, social defence mobilizes regions related to the processing of social and environmental information\textsuperscript{9,15}. Social cues are relevant for defeated animals since they could give them information about health, sex and the hierarchy ranking of the aggressor\textsuperscript{16–18}. In rodents, this information is mainly related to olfactory cues\textsuperscript{3,18}. The social information is processed by the medial amygdala (MeA) and bed nucleus of stria terminalis (BST)\textsuperscript{16–20}, which project for regions of the hypothalamus that regulate social behaviours - the hypothalamic conspecific responsive circuit\textsuperscript{21–23}. The environmental context related to social conflict is another significant variable to social defence\textsuperscript{22}. Works with rats suggest that a septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic pathway participates in the processing of environmental cues related to physical or psychological limits\textsuperscript{15,23}. An important area in this system is the juxtadorsomedial part of the lateral hypothalamic area (LHAjd), which may receive spatial information from the septo-hippocampal system and transmit this information to brain regions that organize defensive behaviours, as the dorsal premammillary nucleus of the hypothalamus (PMD)\textsuperscript{9,15,23}.

Interestingly, in rats, the exposure to restraint stress also promotes mobilization of the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit and PMD\textsuperscript{15}. Restraint stress is a typical protocol used to study the effect of stress on behavioural and physiological variables\textsuperscript{24}. The protocol is characterized by the limitation of animal movement and an absence of escape possibility\textsuperscript{25}. Since the aversive context of restraint stress is the limit imposed by the walls of the apparatus, it is believed that the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit works in processing this environmental information\textsuperscript{15}. This circuit is mobilized in other aversive contexts, as predatory and social stress, which would be expected since the environmental context is relevant to coping with general threats\textsuperscript{15,23,25,26}.

To study how reexposure to social stress impacts social defence as a goal-oriented behaviour, and to evaluate the possible neural bases of these changes, we have submitted C57Bl/6 male mice to one or three sessions of social stress. We also have investigated if, like rats, a septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit is responsive to two different stressful contexts: social and restraint stress. Our analysis suggests that animals submitted to three social defeat sessions spent more time in passive defence during the last exposure. This is followed by a decrease in the mobilization of brain areas that process social cues. Also, there is no evidence of a difference in the mobilization of areas related to the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit during the first and last exposure. Our study suggests a broad mobilization of this circuit in aversive contexts since it is also mobilized during restraint stress. Our work provides insightful data for future studies about the neural bases of social defence and changes in defensive behaviour under repeated defeated male mice.

Results

Behavioural effects of reexposure to the resident-intruder paradigm in social defence

\textbf{Intruders and residents behavioural pattern during the resident-intruder paradigm}

Two groups of C57Bl/6 mice were submitted to the resident-intruder paradigm, one group to only one exposure (n = 7; 1 Exp. group) and another group to three exposures (n = 11; 3 Exp. group), for three days, once a day, and with different residents. During the sessions, the resident’s attacks began almost immediately after the intruder was placed and, after the first attack, intruders were left for 5 min with the dominant male. Most of the time, the intruder animals expressed defensive behaviours, which were classified as active defence – when the animal is under attack by the resident - or passive defence – when the resident leaves the intruder alone (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Table S1). In this case, the most common posture performed, classified as passive defence, was freezing, followed by checking (turning to maintain intruder’s orientation toward the resident) (Supplementary Information Table S1). As regards the active defence, intruders generally performed a defensive upright position (standing under the hind limbs and towards the resident) (Supplementary Information Table S1). Flight and jumping were also very common during the paradigm (Supplementary Information Table S1). In general, intruders spent almost 20% of the time in active defence, which in all cases, was lower than the time spent in passive defence (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Table S1). During the first exposures to the paradigm, mice intruders spent nearly 25% of the time in exploring the resident’s home cage (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Table S1). As to resident’s behaviours, lateral threat (moving laterally to the intruders, via an arc-like path) was the most common performed behaviour (Supplementary Information Table S3). Move towards (moving in a straight line toward the intruder) and clinch attack (direct attacks against the intruder) was also very frequent (Supplementary Information Table S3).
Intruder animals spend more time in passive defence and less time in exploration during last exposure

The behavioural pattern of the intruder animal changes dramatically between the first and third exposure. On average, intruders spent 64.65 s less on exploratory behaviour during the last exposure in relation to the first exposure (although residents are different; $M_{\text{diff}} - 95\% \text{ CI} [32.65, 96.66]$, $d_{\text{unb}} = 2.01 [1.01, 3.46]$; Supplementary Information Table S2). Also, for the same intruders, the time spent on passive defence has increased in 82.70 s during the last exposure ($M_{\text{diff}} - 95\% \text{ CI} [-113.64, -51.75]$, $d_{\text{unb}} = -2.24 [-3.60, -1.38]$; Supplementary Information Table S2). The short confidence intervals (CIs), and mostly restricted to high standardized effect size values, suggest that there is a large and robust effect of reexposure under the behavioural pattern of the intruder (Supplementary Information Table S2). During the first exposure, the intruder starts the session with a pattern of exploratory behaviour interspersed with confrontational events between intruder and resident, whose frequency decreases throughout the session, while in the last exposure intruder behaviour already starts predominantly defensive (Fig. 2).

On the other hand, the behavioural pattern of residents has not substantially changed between the first and third sessions of the paradigm, which has also occurred with the intruder’s time spent on active defence (Fig. 1, Supplementary Information Fig. S1; Table S2, S4). This is consistent with the CIs of the standardized effect sizes, which are long and include zero. During all the sessions, resident and intruder spent a minimal portion of time in social and other behaviours (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Fig. S1 and Tables S1, S3).

Overall, despite variations in the behaviour pattern of intruders, exploratory analyses do not provide clear evidence of a variation in the spatio-temporal measurements between the first and third exposure to the paradigm, which also occurred with residents (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Table S2, S4). The CIs are long and, for the most part, are consistent with anywhere from large reduction, no change up to a large increase in times or distances evaluated. The only exception is when comparing the distance covered by the intruders submitted to 3 exposures of the paradigm during the first and last exposures of them (Fig. 1; Supplementary Information Table S2). On average, these mice covered 275.96 cm less on total distance during the last exposure ($M_{\text{diff}} - 95\% \text{ CI} [-1.45.52, 566.45]$, $d_{\text{unb}} = 0.72 [0.05, 1.55]$; Supplementary Information Table S2). In this case, the standardized effect sizes suggest a moderate difference between these groups, although the CIs are consistent with no difference up to a large reduction of the covered distance in the third day of exposure. In short, intruder and resident animals spent most of the time at the border of the resident’s home cage and, in general, the resident had a greater distance travelled than the intruder during the sessions (Fig. 1, Supplementary Information Fig. S1 and Tables S1, S3).

Effects of reexposure to the resident-intruder paradigm in brain activation pattern

We analysed the activation of some areas of the brain in control animals ($n = 12$), animals exposed once to the resident-intruder paradigm ($n = 7$) and animals exposed to this paradigm three times ($n = 11$). It was quantified the density of Fos-labelled cells in 31 brain regions, which includes septal, amygdalar, hypothalamic and periaqueductal grey sites. Only the caudodorsal part of the lateral septum (LSc) and the dorsomedial portion of the ventromedial hypothalamic nucleus (rVMHdm) did not show differences in the Fos-labelled cell density between the three groups (Fig. 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6). In general, these CIs are large and include moderate positive and negative values of the standardized effect size and does not provide clear evidence of differences between these groups. In all other analysed sites, exploratory analyses provide clear evidence that animals exposed one or three times to social stress showed considerably greater activation compared to the control group (Fig. 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6).

Circuits that process social information are less mobilized during last exposure

When comparing animals that have gone through 1 or 3 exposures of the resident-intruder paradigm, the more robust and clear differences in the brain activation pattern between these groups are in regions related to the processing of conspecific information (Fig. 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6). For example, it is possible to observe a moderate reduction in activity in most of the analysed mediolateral amygdaloid nuclei (MeA), especially the anterodorsal (MeAad), posterodorsal (MeApd) areas and posteroventral (MeApv) portions throughout the exposures (Fig. 3, 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6). In these cases, the CIs are mostly restricted to moderate up to high positive standardized effect size values, which supports the conclusion that these regions are less mobilized during the last exposure. Other important structures in the processing of conspecific information are the nuclei of the sexually dimorphic circuit (medial preoptic nucleus - MPN, ventrolateral preoptic nucleus - PMV, tuberoinfundibular nucleus - TU, and rostral and caudal portion of ventromedial part of the ventromedial nucleus - rVMHvl and cVMHvl), which in general are also less mobilized during the last exposure (Fig. 3, 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6). About the rVMHvl, cVMHvl and PMV, the CIs are large but restricted to moderate up to high standardized effect size values, indicating that the effect of reexposure on activation of these areas is probably no less than moderate in size. The standardized effect size of the difference in TU is moderate, but the CI is long and consistent with a small negative effect size value up to a large positive effect size value, suggesting that the effect is, most likely, no more than moderate in size. Regarding the MPN, the standardized effect size is small and the CI is consistent with anywhere from a decrease, no change, up to an increase in the activation of this area through the reexposure, which does not provide clear evidence of a difference between intruder submitted to 1 or 3 exposures of social stress (Fig. 3, 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6).
The mobilization of septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit between first and third exposure is not different

Correlations between brain activation and behaviour

Regarding the portions of the MeA, when we analysed data from animals submitted to only one exposure to the resident-intruder paradigm, we were not able to observe a clear correlation with any behavioural variable or other brain areas mobilization (Supplementary Data 1). This absence of clear correlations changes when we analyse data from animals that have submitted to the resident-intruder paradigm.

Periaqueductal grey matter mobilization during first and third exposure

About the analysed periaqueductal grey matter (PAG) columns, in general, exploratory analyses do not provide evidence of a difference in the activation pattern between animals submitted to a one or three exposures to the resident-intruder paradigm (Fig. 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6). The standardized effect size values are small and the CIs are large, but in moderate sizes and varying between negative and positive values, which is consistent with an absence of difference between the groups. The only exception is the caudal portion of the ventrolateral part (cPAGvl), whose standardized effect size is high and suggests that this area was more active during the last day of exposure to the paradigm. However, although the high standardized effect size, the confidence interval is wide and consistent with anywhere from an absence of difference up to a large difference between intruders submitted to 1 or 3 exposures of resident-intruder paradigm (Fig. 5; Supplementary Information Table S5, S6).

Correlations

To explore the relationship between different evaluated regions and analysed behaviours, we calculated Pearson’s r and its 95% CI among these variables (Supplementary Data 1 and 2). We performed these analyses with the data from animals submitted to one or three exposures of the resident-intruder paradigm, separately. Interestingly, the correlation pattern changes between the two groups.

Correlations between intruders and residents behaviours

During first exposure, flight behaviour is both related to attack and threat behaviours of the resident (flight vs. attack: r = 0.72, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.96]; flight vs. lateral threat: r = 0.87, 95% CI [0.35, 0.98]). Concerning flight vs. attack comparison, there is a moderate positive correlation, but the 95% CI is large and consistent with anywhere from an absence of correlation to a very strong positive correlation. About flight vs. lateral threat, the correlation is strong and the 95% CI is restricted to moderate and strong positive correlation values. Interestingly, during the last exposure, the correlation between flight and threat disappears, while flight vs. attack correlation was maintained (flight vs. attack: r = 0.80, 95% CI [0.38, 0.95]; flight vs. lateral threat: r = 0.08, 95% CI [-0.55, 0.65]). The 95% CI of the coefficient related to flight vs. attack comparison suggests, at least, a moderate correlation between these behaviours. Another interesting difference between first and third exposure is the correlation between intruder bites and flight behaviours. Regarding first exposure, the positive correlation is strong and the 95% CI is large, but restricted to moderate and very positive strong correlation (r = 0.82, 95% CI [0.17, 0.97]). The correlation intensity decreases in the third exposure when the coefficient is moderate and the 95% CI is consistent with anywhere between an absence of correlation to a strong positive correlation (r = 0.62, 95% CI [0.03, 0.89]).

In both exposures, there is a very strong negative correlation between exploratory and defensive behaviours (1 Exp.: r = -0.98, 95% CI [-0.99, -0.89]; 3 Exp.: r = -0.98, 95% CI [-0.99, -0.91]). Their 95% CI are short and restricted to a very strong correlation. Also, the correlation between passive and active defence is very strong and their 95% CI was a little larger, but restricted to moderate and very strong negative coefficients (1 Exp.: r = -0.88, 95% CI [-0.98, -0.40]; 3 Exp.: r = -0.87, 95% CI [-0.97, -0.56]). Another similarity between the two groups is the correlation between flight behaviour and intruder travelled distance (1 Exp.: r = 0.92, 95% CI [0.57, 0.99]; 3 Exp.: r = 0.90, 95% CI [0.64, 0.97]). The coefficients suggest a very strong correlation and both 95% CI are consistent with, at least, a moderate positive correlation between flight behaviour and travelled distance.
3 exposures. In this case, the correlations suggest a positive relationship between MeAav, MeApd and MeApv with behaviours involved with active defence (Supplementary Data 2). However, the calculated coefficients are generally moderate, and the 95% CI is large and consistent with an absence of correlation to a strong positive correlation. The exception is the correlation between MeApd and MeApv with boxing, which has a strong correlation and a small confidence interval restricted to moderate to strong Pearson’s coefficient values (MeApd vs. boxing: $r = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.95]; MeApv vs. boxing: $r = 0.90$, 95% CI [0.65, 0.97]).

On the sexually dimorphic circuit, the correlation pattern is also different between the two groups. In 1 Exp. group, as the MeA, there is not a clear correlation between sexually dimorphic circuit mobilization and other areas or behaviours (Supplementary Data 1). Some exceptions are the correlation between PMV and rVMHvl mobilization, as well as the correlation between these areas and defensive upright behaviour (Supplementary Data 1). Remarkably, PMV and rVMHvl are strongly negatively correlated ($r = -0.93$, 95% CI [-0.99, -0.57]). The 95% CI is short and restricted to moderate up to very strong negatively coefficient values. The rVMHvl is also moderately negatively correlated with LHAjd. However, the 95% CI is large and corroborates with an absence of correlation up to a very strong negative correlation ($r = -0.73$, 95% CI [-0.96, 0.05]). The defensive upright behaviour is negatively correlated with rVMHvl, while is positively correlated with PMV. About the defensive upright behaviour vs. rVMHvl, the Pearson correlation coefficient is moderate and its 95% CI are large and consistent with an absence of correlation up to a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.73$, 95% CI [-0.96, 0.05]). Regarding defensive upright behaviour vs. PMV, the coefficient is moderate and its 95% CI are large and consistent with moderate up to a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.86$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.98]). Interestingly, these correlations disappear to intruders submitted three times to the resident-intruder paradigm (Supplementary Data 2).

Concerning PMD, in animals subjected to 1 exposure to the resident-intruder paradigm, we observed a strong positive correlation between their expression of Fos and time spent in checking ($r = 0.86$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.98]). In this case, the 95% CI is short and restricted to moderate to strong positive Pearson’s coefficient values. In animals submitted to three exposures, we no longer observe this correlation. However, there is a moderate correlation between PMD Fos expression with turning to face, whose Pearson’s coefficient is moderate and has a 95% CI restricted to weak up to strong positive correlation values ($r = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.91]). Also, the PMD is negatively correlated with rVMHvl mobilization. The Pearson correlation coefficient is moderate and the 95% CI is consistent with anywhere from a very strong negative correlation up to a weak positive correlation ($r = -0.67$, 95% CI [-0.95, 0.17]).

About the PAG, in animals submitted to only one exposure to the resident-intruder paradigm, there is not a clear correlation between the PAG columns and others areas or different analysed behaviours. Overall, the correlations are weak, and the 95% CI is broad and consistent with moderate negative correlation to moderate positive correlation (Supplementary Data 1). Regarding the group of animals submitted to three exposures, there is a moderate correlation between the pattern of activity of the dorsomedial (rPAGdm and cPAGdm) and lateral (rPAGl and cPAGl) columns with active defence behaviours, namely flight and boxing (Supplementary Data 2). In this case, the 95% CI are broad and restricted to positive values of Pearson’s coefficients. Furthermore, there is a strong negative correlation between time spent in passive defence and cPAGdm activity, which has a 95% short CI and restricted to moderate to strong Pearson’s coefficient values ($r = -0.84$, 95% CI [-0.96, -0.48]). We also observed a negative correlation between passive defence and cPAGvl activity, however with a moderate coefficient and a large 95% CI consistent with a lack of correlation with a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.62$, 95% CI [-0.89, -0.03]). About the cPAGl, there is a moderate positive correlation between this column and the rVMHvl and LHAjd mobilization. In both cases, the 95% CI are large and consistent with a weak positive correlation up to a strong correlation (cPAGl vs. LHAjd: $r = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.91]; cPAGl vs. rVMHvl: $r = 0.79$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.94]).

Social defeat and restraint stress

To investigate if the neural circuits mobilized during social defeat are also mobilized by other aversive situations, we compared the activation pattern between a group of animals submitted to one exposure of the resident-intruder paradigm ($n = 7$) and one group of animals submitted to restraint stress ($n = 7$). As the restraint stress is characterized by the limitation of the animal movement, the comparison between these types of stress can suggest the circuits that would be behind the signal of entrapment imposed by the aggressor during the social defeat. As before, most of the time, intruder animals expressed defensive behaviours and a small portion of the time was also spent in exploring the resident’s home cage. During the restraint stress, animals presented clear signs of stress and, sometimes, vocalization.

**Differently from social defeat, circuits that process social information are not mobilized during restraint stress**

Regarding the regions associated with the processing of social information, most of them presented high standardized effect sizes and large CIs restricted to moderate up to high effect size values, which suggests a greater activation in animals submitted to the social stress than restraint stress (Fig 4, 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8). The only exception is the MPN, which presents a moderate negative standardized effect size with a CI consistent with negative up to positive effect sizes, which does not provide clear evidence of a difference between the groups.
The septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit is also mobilized during restraint stress

About the nuclei of the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit, exploratory analyses do not suggest a clear difference in the mobilization of LHAjp and LHAjd between animals submitted to social stress or restraint stress (Fig 4, 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8). In these cases, the standardized effect sizes are small and the CIs are consistent with anywhere from negative difference, no difference up to positive difference between the groups. The same was observed with the PMD, the rVMHdm and hypothalamic nuclei that participate in neuroendocrine and autonomic responses to stress (Fig 4, 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8). The only exception is the anterior part of the dorsomedial nucleus of the hypothalamus (DMHa), whose standardized effect size is high and the CI is restricted to high up to small negative effect size values, which suggest that the neural activation of this area is greater in restrained animals than social subjugated animals (Fig 4, 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8).

Periaqueductal grey matter mobilization during social defeat and restraint stress

In the periaqueductal grey matter, except the rostral and caudal portion of the dorsolateral part (rPAGdl and cPAGdl), social defeat mice showed, at least moderately, a higher neural activity than restrained animals in all others analysed columns (Fig 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8). In general, the standardized effect sizes are moderate and the CIs are large and consistent with no difference up to a high difference between these groups. The exception is the cPAGi that has a high standardized effect size and a CI covering only high effect size values. About rPAGdl and cPAGdl, exploratory analyses do not provide clear evidence of difference between animals submitted to restraint and social stress (Fig 6; Supplementary Information Table S7, S8). The effect size related to rPAGdl is small and the CI is consistent with anywhere from negative difference, no difference up to positive difference between these groups. Concerning cPAGdl, the effect size is moderate and suggests that this area is slightly more mobilized in social stress than restraint stress. However, the CI is large and consistent with small negative effect size values up to high positive effect size values.

Discussion

Many works have studied the effects of repeated social stress with different aims, such as in the neuroendocrine and autonomic response, memory, psychopathology-like behaviour and coping strategy. In the present work, our goal was to investigate the effects of repeated social stress on neural circuits underlying the motivated behaviour social defence and to explore some hypotheses about the mechanisms that lead to adaptations in this behaviour after reexposures. We observed that, during last exposure to social stress, there is a lower mobilization of circuits associated with the processing of conspecific information, while the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit and the PMD present an activity pattern similar to the first day of social stress. The septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit is also mobilized during the restraint stress, which suggests broader participation in defensive responses. With all this in view, our data suggest that the balance between the activity of circuits related to conspecific processing and the PMD may determine the pattern of expressed defensive behaviour. The reexposure to the conspecific impacts the mobilization of these structures, which may be the basis of the adaptations in social defence.

During acute social stress, the mobilized structures in mice are similar to those observed in rats, although the behavioural pattern is different between these animals3,15,23. While rats rarely perform exploratory behaviours, mice, during their first exposure, spend a substantial part of their time exploring the environment8,15. After reexposure to the paradigm, the intruder’s time spent in exploration decreases and the relation between exploratory and defensive behaviour becomes more similar to the rat’s relation9,15. Interestingly, during acute social stress, the PMD is relatively more mobilized than the VMHvl in rats9,15, while in mice it is the opposite. Since the PMD is essential in passive defence and the VMHvl is associated with active defence and social exploration9,28,29; this brought us to the idea that, in mice, the behavioural variation after reexposure to social stress (balance between exploration and passive and active defence) would be related to the balance in the mobilization of these neural structures. Our data corroborate this idea since, during the last exposure to social stress, the intensity of mobilization of the circuits underlying the social defence becomes closer to what is observed in rats.

As expected, the nuclei of the sexually dimorphic circuit are mobilized during a social confrontation. Different works with rats and mice suggest the participation of this circuit in many types of social behaviour as fighting, parenting and mating behaviour8,20,21,30–36. These nuclei are also very important for social memory and social recognition17,38. In the present work, VMHvl and PMV were the most mobilized regions during social stress. Concerning VMHvl, some works indicate its role in defensive behaviour, especially active defence28. This region is also related to social fear and the VMHvl inhibition impairs fear response to a social aversive stimulus39,40. The PMV is activated by male and female olfactory cues and their inhibition impairs both maternal and inter-male attacks20,21,41. Their activity during the social confrontation can be due mainly to the social representation of the resident and the execution of active defence behaviours20,28,38,42. Our data suggest a reduction in the mobilization of these areas after the reexposure to the resident-intruder paradigm. This reduction in the sexually dimorphic circuit mobilization was not associated with a reduction in time spent on active defence. Also, there was not a clear correlation between the Fos expression of these regions and some behaviour associated with active defence. Different phenomena can
be behind this. First, there is a large diversity of neurons in nuclei of the sexually dimorphic circuit, especially the VMHvl. While some neurons are related to social exploration, other neurons participate mainly in active defence behaviour. Therefore, the mobilization of VMHvl may depend not only on active defence. Another possibility – which may be occurring concurrently – is that the active defence can be defined not only on the number of neurons mobilized in the sexually dimorphic circuit but also on the variation in the frequency or intensity of neural activation of these areas.

One relevant region upstream of the sexually dimorphic circuit is the MeA. Its nuclei receive many direct and indirect projections from main and accessory olfactory systems and process the social information from olfactory cues. The MeA participates in the neural representation of social conspecific and its activity is related to sexual, defensive and aggressive behaviours both in mice and rats. The activation of gabaergic MeA neurons promotes aggressive and sexual behaviours, depending on the intensity of activation. As the activity of the sexually dimorphic circuit is also necessary for these behaviours, it has been proposed that the role of MeA occurs by a disinhibitory circuit. This idea agrees with our data since we observed an increase in Fos-labelled neuron density in MeA and sexually dimorphic circuit during social stress. After reexposure to social stress, there was a reduction of mobilization of MeA nuclei, which may be a factor that leads to a reduction of activity of the sexually dimorphic circuit. However, there is not a clear correlation between the mobilization of this circuit and MeA mobilization. These data suggest a more complex relationship between these regions, which also may be related to direct and indirect pathways between MeA and sexually dimorphic circuit.

Another region that can participate in the processing of social information is the BST. Its activity is related to different social behaviours such as social defence, inter-male aggression, maternal aggression and parental behaviour. Neuroanatomic evidence suggests that the BST participates in the disinhibitory circuit between MeA and sexually dimorphic circuit. If the BST activity was just dependent on this disinhibitory circuit, it would be expected to increase in BST mobilization in animals of the reexposure group, since in these animals there was a decrease in MeA activation. However, our data do not suggest a clear difference in BST mobilization between animals submitted to one or three sessions of the resident-intruder paradigm. As the MeA, BST neurons also receive direct and indirect projections from main and accessory olfactory systems, which also can influence the BST activity during social defeat. The BST activity is important to the expression of conditioned defeat, which is related to defensive behaviours. So, the BST may be relevant to the increase in time spent in passive defence during the last exposure.

In addition to social information, spatial information is essential to the organization of defensive strategy not only for social confrontation but also in many aversive situations. The distance of the threat and the existence of an escape route or safe place can impact the behaviour to be developed. In this sense, we believe that the LHAjd is important for the processing of environmental cues. The LHAjd is mobilized during the first and the last exposure to social stress and is also mobilized during restraint stress, both in mice, as we observed in the present work, and rats. Since the restraint stress is characterized only by the presence of a physical limit that prevents animal movement and, in social stress, the conspecific represents a physical and psychological limit, the LHAjd may be processing the entrapment component associated with both contexts. Some functional studies also highlight the role of the LHAjd in defensive behaviour. Rats with lesioned LHAjd perform less risk assessment during post-encounter context associated to a conspecific. Also, the inhibition of LHA promotes a deficit in escape behaviour in response to predatory and physical threats. Thus, a septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit, that comprises the LHAjd, is expected to participate in the processing of spatial information during many aversive contexts. This circuit also comprises the two major sources of afferent to LHAjd: the subiculum and the lateral septum. The subiculum detains many border-vector cells, which participate in the processing of environmental limits. Neuroanatomic evidence also suggests that this structure participates as an intermediate of information present in the hippocampal system to cortical and subcortical structures. The lateral septum is the structure that most receives projections from CA1 and CA3 hippocampal regions. Recent works show the role of the lateral septum as a decoder of the cognitive map from the hippocampus to downstream regions. These data suggest a broader role for LHAjd in defence by participating in the spatial information process.

The integration of spatial and social information is relevant to social defence. The PMD seems to be an important region for the integration of threat cues (social, predatory and physical) and spatial information. As LHAjd, the PMD is mobilized during social and restraint stress. This nucleus receives strong projections from LHAjd and, therefore, may be receiving environmental-related information from the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit during aversive situations. Furthermore, the PMD activity is essential to the passive defence behaviour. However, there is not a clear difference between the PMD mobilization during the first and last exposure to social stress, which would be expected since the time spent in passive defence is greater during the last exposure. This suggests that the mobilization of PMD neurons is not the only determinant of time spent in this passive defence, which is corroborated by the absence of a clear correlation between PMD mobilization and this behaviour. Thus, the ratio between active and passive defence may be determined by the relation of mobilized neurons in PMD and VMHvl. During the last exposure to social stress, the decrease in the VMHvl mobilization and the maintenance of PMD mobilization can lead to an increase in time spent on passive defence. Interestingly, the LHAsf mobilization is also
decreased during the last exposure to social stress, which agrees with a presumed role of LHAsf in the communication between sexually dimorphic nuclei and PMD. For the development of this defensive strategy, the PAG is an important effector region that receives projections directly from hypothalamic nuclei, like PMD, VMHvl and LHA. The PAG location suggests its role in mediating the information output from prosencephalic structures to the brainstem and spinal cord regions. Also, PAG participates in the regulation of primary emotional responses by projecting information to prosencephalic structures. PAG columns (especially rPAGdm and pPAGi) are mobilized during both social and restraint stress. These columns receive projections from PMD and LHAd and may be the effector sites from the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit since they are also mobilized during other aversive situations as predatory encounter and foot shock. Also, the mobilization of PAGdm,l was similar between the first and last exposure to social stress. These columns also receive projections from VMHvl and have subpopulations associated with escape or freezing behaviours. Therefore, these PAG columns may be important to the variation in social defence strategy, which could be related to the relationship between the activity of PMD and VMHvl. PAG columns also receive projections from the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the inhibition of mPFC-PAGd projections mimics behavioural alterations after a social defeat protocol. So, this circuit may also be relevant for the variation in the social defence strategy during reexposure to the resident intruder paradigm.

The behavioural response to an aversive context is accompanied by neuroendocrine and autonomic responses. The mobilization of paraventricular and dorsomedial nuclei of the hypothalamus (PVH and DMH), both during the first and third exposure, as well as during restraint stress, agrees with their role in neuroendocrine and autonomic responses to stressors. Previous works show the participation of these regions as an integrator centre for regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. This pathway regulates corticosterone production, a hormone that mediates the endocrine response to stress. The increase in DMH activity is also related to an increase in cardiac frequency, which is common in aversive situations, including social defeat and restraint stress.

Taken together, our data indicate a change in the mobilization pattern of neural circuits underlying social defence during the last exposure. This change is characterized by a decrease in the mobilization of structures that process social information, namely MeA, VMHvl and PMV. We speculate that some mechanism, which involves memory recovery about the social stress experienced, is mobilized during the last day of exposure, similarly to what happens during contextual fear. This mechanism may promote less mobilization of the conspecific responsive circuit and a pattern of behaviour that avoids the attack of the resident. A structure that could participate in this process is the BST. The BST receives different corticolimbic projections - such as from the mPFC and the basolateral amygdala (BA) - and projects to different hypothalamic structures associated with the regulation of defensive behaviour. Different evidence suggests the importance of BST for the expression of behavioural response associated with contextual fear. BST injuries reduce the time spent on freezing during the context day after foot shock and BST inhibition with muscimol reduces the expression of fear behaviours associated with social defeat. Furthermore, acute and chronic stressors can alter the plasticity of BST. In this sense, at the beginning of the last exposure to the resident-intruder paradigm, the BST could be participating in an anticipation system for the social stress that will be suffered by the animal, based on past experiences. Thus, BST could interfere with the balance between the conspecific responsive circuit and the PMD activity, which promotes a pattern of social defence predominantly passive. Indeed, more studies are needed to elucidate this anticipation system that can act on neural circuits underlying social defence and orchestrate this behaviour.

In summary, the reexposure to social stress promotes changes in the social defence behavioural pattern of C57Bl/6 male mice, which is accompanied by changes in the neural mobilization of circuits related to the expression of this goal-oriented behaviour. Our data are following previous works that have shown that social defence behaviour depends on the mobilization of neural circuits that process conspecific cues and environmental cues. Furthermore, our data suggest that the pattern of social defence (e.g. more passive or more active) is determined by the balance between the mobilization of circuits related to the processing of the conspecific information (in particular the VMHvl nucleus) and the PMD activity (which can receive environmental information from the septo-hippocampal-hypothalamic circuit). Further studies are necessary to investigate the mechanisms by which repeated social stress affects the mobilization of these circuits and impacts social defence behaviour.

**Methods**

**Animals**

Fifty-three adult male C57Bl/6 mice (~9 weeks old) obtained from the local breeding facilities were used in the present study. Animals were housed, at least one week before behaviour tests, in individual cages (30 x 20 x 13 cm; Beiramar Ind. e Com. Ltda., SP, Brazil) under controlled illumination (12 h light/dark cycle – 7 am to 7 pm light), humidity and temperature (22 ± 1°C), and with free access to food and water. For resident-intruder paradigm experiments, sexually experienced Swiss Webster males (3-12 months old, housed with Swiss Webster females) were used as residents. All the mice received humane care in compliance with the ARRIVE guidelines and were handled according to the Brazilian National Law (11.794/2008).
experiments were approved by the Committee on Care and Use of Laboratory Animals of the Institute of Biomedical Sciences, University of São Paulo, Brazil (Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas, Universidade de São Paulo; Protocol number 58/2016 and 6417260520).

**Behavioural tests**

**Resident-intruder paradigm**

Animals submitted to the resident-intruder paradigm were separated into two groups. One group was submitted to only one session of the resident-intruder paradigm (n = 16). The other group was submitted to three sessions of the resident-intruder paradigm, performed for three days, once a day, with different residents (n = 11). During each session, as previously described, the Swiss female was removed and a C57Bl/6 mouse was placed in the dominant home cage. Animals were separated 5 min after the first resident attack and the intruders were returned to their home cage. For a control group (n = 12), the mice were left undisturbed in an individual cage.

**Restraint**

After 24 h isolation, animals (n = 14) were restrained for 30 min in an acrylic tube (ø 3 cm X 10 cm length, volume = 70.69 ml; Beiramar Ind. e Com. Ltda., SP, Brazil). After this period, the animals were returned to their cages.

**Behaviour analysis**

The resident-intruder paradigm sessions were recorded with horizontally and vertically mounted video cameras (Sony Handycam DCR-SR68; Sony, TKY, Japan). For the behaviours score, the videos were analysed by a trained observer using the BORIS v7.97 software. To preserve the blindness of the observer, a random identification, unknown to the observer, was labelled for each video before analyses. The DORIS v20.3.16 software was used for movement tracking. For tracking, the body centre was used to estimate the centre of mass of the analysed animals. The accounted behaviours were based on Blanchard, 1979 and Motta, 2009. About the intruder, the duration of the following behaviours was observed: non-social exploration, social exploration, aggressive behaviours (separated into active defence – that occurs when the animal is under attack, like upright position, boxing, turning to face, flight and dashing away from the resident - and passive defence – that occurs when the resident leaves the intruder alone, such as freezing and checking) and other behaviours (like grooming and rearing). Concerning the resident, we observed: non-social exploration, social exploration, aggressive behaviours (separated into threat – lateral threat and move towards -, attack – keep down, lateral and clinch attack - and chase) and other behaviours. The number of bites delivered by the resident to the intruder and the number of retaliation bites from the intruder were also counted. With the movement tracking, the following spatio-temporal variables were measured: time spent in the centre and the border of the dominant home cage, total distance travelled and distance travelled in the centre and the border, for the intruder and resident.

**Fos immunostaining**

Ninety minutes after the behavioural tests, the animals were anaesthetized with isoflurane (1 ml/ml; Cristália Laboratories, SP, Brazil) and transcardially perfused with 0.9% saline followed by 4% (mass/volume) parafomaldehyde (PFA) in 0.1 M sodium phosphate buffer (NaPBS) at pH 7.4. The fixed brains were removed and left overnight in a solution of 20% sucrose in 0.02 M potassium phosphate buffer (PBS) at 4°C. The brains were then frozen and sectioned on a sliding microtome in the coronal plane into four stepwise collated series (30 µm thickness). The series were maintained in an antifreeze solution (15% sucrose, 30% Ethylene glycol in 0.05 M NaPBS) at 20°C. One series was processed for immunohistochemistry using a rabbit anti-Fos antiserum (Ab-5; Oncogene Research Products, CA, USA) for 72 h at 4 °C at a dilution of 1:40000 (2% goat serum (NGS), 0.3% Triton X-100 in 0.02 M PBS), under constant shaking. For the detection of the primary anti-serum, the sections were incubated at room temperature for 90 min in a solution of biotinylated goat anti-rabbit IgG (Vector Laboratories) at a dilution of 1:200 (2% NGS, 0.3% Triton X-100 in 0.02 M PBS), under constant shaking. For the detection of the primary anti-serum, the sections were incubated at room temperature for 90 min in a solution of biotinylated goat anti-rabbit IgG (Vector Laboratories) at a dilution of 1:200 (2% NGS, 0.3% Triton X-100 in 0.02 M PBS). Then, the sections were placed in the avidin-biotin-peroxidase (HRP) complex solution (ABC Elite Kit; Vector Laboratories, CA, USA) for 90 min. To visualize the complex, the sections were exposed for about 20 min to a solution containing 0.05% 3,3’-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride (DAB; Sigma-Aldrich, MO, USA), 0.0396% nickel sulfate, 0.04% ammonia chloride, glucose oxidase (1:1000) and 0.2% β-D glucose (after five minutes of incubation), in 0.1 M NaPBS. The reaction was stopped by extensive washing in potassium phosphate buffer. Sections were mounted on gelatin-coated slides and then dehydrated and coverslipped with DPX neutral mounting medium (Sigma-Aldrich, MO, USA). One adjacent series was stained with thionin to serve as a reference series for cytoarchitectonic purposes.

**Exclusion criteria**

Part of the material was excluded from the analysis due to problems involving perfusion and fixation steps that impaired the immune reaction for labelling Fos-expressing cells. Therefore, the number of animals analysed was: fourteen C57Bl/6 mice submitted to only one session (n = 14, n = 7 for the study of the effects of reexposure to the resident-intruder paradigm, and n = 7 for comparisons between animals submitted to social and restraint stress), eleven animals submitted to three sessions
Quantification of Fos-labeled cells

For the density of Fos-labeled cell quantification, a random identification was assigned to each animal to avoid the observer’s knowledge of the animal’s experimental treatment during the analysis. Images were generated using the 10X objective of a Nikon Eclipse 80i microscope (Nikon Corporation, TKY, Japan) equipped with a Nikon digital camera (Nikon Corporation, TKY, Japan). During the analyses, the regions of interest were defined with the help of adjacent Nissl-stained sections, and Fos-labeled cells were counted therein. Only darkly labelled oval nuclei that fell within the borders of a region of interest were counted. The density of Fos-labeled cells was determined by dividing the number of Fos-immunoreactive cells by the area of the region of interest. Cell densities were obtained on both sides of the brain and averaged for each individual. These analyses were performed with the aid of Fiji, a distribution of the ImageJ v1.48 software.

We quantified the density of Fos-labeled cells in 31 brain regions that followed the Allen Mouse Brain Atlas and The Mouse Brain in Stereotaxic Coordinates. In the hypothalamus, we analysed nuclei involved with the response to conspecifics, namely, the medial preoptic nucleus (MPN), the ventrolateral part of the ventromedial nucleus (rostral and dorsal portion) (rVMHvl and cVMHvl), tuberal nucleus (TU) and the ventral premammillary nucleus (PMV), the dorsal premammillary nucleus (PMD), that is involved with information integration of threats cues; nuclei related with the neuroendocrine and autonomic response to stressors, such as paraventricular nucleus (both parvicellular and magnocellular parts) (PVHParv and PVHmag) and dorsomedial nucleus of the hypothalamus (rostral and caudal portion) (DMHa and DMHc); and the juxtaparasellar, juxtadorsomedial, juxtraventromedial (dorsal and ventral portion) and subfornical regions of the lateral hypothalamus (LHAjp, LHAjd, LHAjvd, LHAjvv and LHAsf), which are related with the integration between the septo-hippocampal system and defensive behaviour system components. Furthermore, we also analysed regions involved with the processing of social and contextual cues as the medial amygdala (anteroventral, anterodorsal, posteroventral and posterodorsal portion) (MeAav, MeAad, MeApv and MeApd), bed nuclei of stria terminalis (principal and transversal/interfascicular portion) (BSTpr and BSTtr, if) and lateral septum (caudodorsal and rostroventral part) (LSc and LSr).

Statistical analysis

The objective of the analysis was to explore differences in neural activation and behavioural pattern between mice submitted once or three times to the resident-intruder paradigm and to compare neural activation between mice submitted to social and restraint stress. We expected to generate new hypotheses of how different neural circuits are involved with the expression of social defence and how these circuits are mobilized in response to different types of stress.

All data are expressed as the mean ± sample standard deviation ("s"), and "n" is the sample size. We also estimated the 95% confidence interval (95% CI) of the mean. To compare different experimental groups, we calculated the difference between means (Mdiff) and estimated the 95% CI for each Mdiff. We also calculated the unbiased Cohen’s d (dunb) and its respective 95% CI for each comparison. To measure the correlation between variables, we calculated Pearson’s r and its 95% CI. These analyses were conducted using the esci v0.9.1 library from jamovi v1.2 and the pingouin v0.3.8 library from python v3.8.3. For plotting graphs, we used the seaborn v0.11.0 and matplotlib v3.3.2 libraries from python v3.8.3.

Data availability

All raw data is available in the University of São Paulo data repository, in the link: https://uspdigital.usp.br/repositorio/.

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Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP) Research Grant #2016/18667-0 (to S.C.M.). A.P.A. was supported by FAPESP fellowship #2018/24288-7.

Author contributions statement

S.C.M. and A.P.A. conceived the project. A.P.A. conducted the experiments and collected the data (with additional input from S.C.M.). M.V.C.B., S.C.M. and A.P.A. did the statistical analyses. S.C.M. and A.P.A. wrote the manuscript (with editorial input from M.V.C.B.). All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Additional information

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.
**Figures and Tables**

**Figure 1.** Behavioural analysis of intruder animals submitted to the resident-intruder paradigm. A) Behavioural pattern of intruder animals submitted to one exposure of the resident-intruder paradigm or three exposures, during the first and third days. B) Time spent by intruder mice on the border and centre of the resident’s home cage during paradigm sessions. C) Total distance covered and distance covered in the centre and the border by the intruders during the paradigm sessions. The data is represented as a combination of the kernel density estimate and the boxplot. The kernel is based on the Gaussian function. The scale factor to use when computing the kernel bandwidth was determined by the Scott method. The actual kernel size was determined by multiplying the scale factor by the standard deviation of the data within each bin. In the end, we chose to preserve an equal width between each violin. The white circle in the centre of the boxplots represents the median, the black rectangle involves values within the first and third quartiles and whiskers go up to 1.5 times the interquartile range below or above the first and third quartiles, respectively.

**Figure 2.** Time plot showing the behaviour of the same intruder mouse throughout its first exposure to the resident-intruder paradigm (A) and its last exposure (B).

**Figure 3.** Photomicrographs of transverse Fos-stained sections at the level of the VMH (A-C), MeAp (D-F), and PMD (G-I) from control animals (A, D, G), intruder animals submitted to one exposure to resident-intruder paradigm (B, E, H) and animals submitted to three exposures (C, F, I).

**Figure 4.** Photomicrographs of transverse Fos-stained sections at the level of the VMH (A-B) and PMD (C-D) from animals submitted to social stress (A, C) and restraint stress (B, D).

**Figure 5.** Pattern of neural activation in control animals, animals submitted 1 time to the resident-intruder paradigm or submitted 3 times. A) Septum; B) Medial amygdala; C) Paraventricular nucleus; D) Sexually dimorphic circuit of the hypothalamus; E) Lateral hypothalamic area; F) Dorsomedial hypothalamic nucleus and dorsal premammillary nucleus; G) Rostral portion of the periaqueductal grey matter and H) caudal portion. The data is represented as a combination of the kernel density estimate and the boxplot. The kernel is based on the Gaussian function. The data is represented as a combination of the kernel density estimate and the boxplot. The kernel is based on the Gaussian function. The scale factor to use when computing the kernel bandwidth was determined by the Scott method. The actual kernel size was determined by multiplying the scale factor by the standard deviation of the data within each bin. In the end, we chose to preserve an equal width between each violin. The white circle in the centre of the boxplots represents the median, the black rectangle involves values within the first and third quartiles and whiskers go up to 1.5 times the interquartile range below or above the first and third quartiles, respectively.

**Figure 6.** Pattern of neural activation in animals submitted to social or restraint stress. A) Septum; B) Medial amygdala; C) Paraventricular nucleus; D) Sexually dimorphic circuit of the hypothalamus; E) Lateral hypothalamic area; F) Dorsomedial hypothalamic nucleus and dorsal premammillary nucleus; G) Rostral portion of the periaqueductal grey matter and H) caudal portion. The data is represented as a combination of the kernel density estimate and the boxplot. The kernel is based on the Gaussian function. The scale factor to use when computing the kernel bandwidth was determined by the Scott method. The actual kernel size was determined by multiplying the scale factor by the standard deviation of the data within each bin. In the end, we chose to preserve an equal width between each violin. The white circle in the centre of the boxplots represents the median, the black rectangle involves values within the first and third quartiles and whiskers go up to 1.5 times the interquartile range below or above the first and third quartiles, respectively.
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