Journal of Health and Rehabilitation Research 2791-156X JHRR

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Original Article

Neuroanatomical Variations and Their Influence on Cognitive Functions

Syed Asadullah Arslan[1], Sahar Ijaz[2], Ibrahim Mohammed[3], Parvin Akbarov Alakbar[4], Sehar Fatima[5], Kashif Ali Sultan[6], Amir Jameel[7]

[1]Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences, Lahore University of Biological and Applied Sciences, Pakistan
[2]Department of Anatomy and Histology, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences Lahore, Pakistan
[3]Department of Histopathology, Faculty of Medical Laboratory Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Nigeria
[4]Azerbaijan Scientific Research Institute of Medical Rehabilitation, Azerbaijan
[5]Department University Institute of Physical Therapy, University of Lahore, Pakistan
[6]Department of Neurosurgery, Allama Iqbal Medical College, Lahore, Pakistan.
[7]Sheikh Zayed Medical College, Lahore, Pakistan
Corresponding Author: Sahar Ijaz; Email: sahar.ijaz@uvas.edu.pk

Conflict of Interest: None.

*S. A. Arslan., et al. (2024). 4(2): **DOI**: https://doi.org/10.61919/jhrr.v4i2.1121*

ABSTRACT

Background: Neuroanatomical variations are increasingly recognized for their role in influencing cognitive functions, particularly in individuals with subjective cognitive decline (SCD). Structural differences in gray matter (GM) and white matter (WM) volumes, as well as cortical thickness, may underlie the cognitive impairments observed in SCD. Understanding these neuroanatomical changes is crucial for early detection and intervention strategies in cognitive decline.

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the neuroanatomical variations between individuals with SCD and healthy controls and to examine the impact of these variations on cognitive functions.

Methods: The study was conducted at the Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences, Lahore University of Biological and Applied Sciences, Pakistan. A total of 42 participants were included, with 21 individuals in the SCD group and 21 in the control group. Participants were recruited through advertisements and referrals, and inclusion criteria for the SCD group included individuals aged 60 and above with self-reported cognitive concerns but no objective impairment on neuropsychological tests. Neuroimaging data were acquired using a 3.0 Tesla MRI scanner, and high-resolution T1-weighted images were analyzed using Statistical Parametric Mapping (SPM) software version 12 and FreeSurfer software. Cognitive function was assessed using the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE), Trail Making Test (TMT) Parts A and B, California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT), and Boston Naming Test (BNT). Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25, with independent t-tests and chi-square tests to compare groups and ANCOVA to adjust for confounders. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d.

Results: Significant differences were observed between the SCD and control groups in several neuroanatomical measures. Individuals with SCD had reduced GM volume in the anterior cingulate cortex (R, $p=0.018$; L, $p=0.025$), midcingulate cortex (R, $p=0.037$), and middle frontal gyrus (L, $p=0.030$). Significant reductions in WM volume were also found in the inferior frontal gyrus (L, $p=0.028$) and postcentral gyrus (L, $p=0.047$). Cortical thickness was significantly reduced in the inferior temporal gyrus (L, $p=0.0002$; Cohen's $d=1.06$), entorhinal cortex (L, $p=0.008$; Cohen's $d=1.03$), and middle temporal gyrus (R, $p=0.0004$; Cohen's $d=1.02$). Cognitive assessments revealed that the SCD group had significantly lower scores on the MMSE ($p=0.294$, $d=0.33$), GDS-15 ($p=0.001$, $d=-1.08$), and subjective cognitive complaints from patients ($p<0.001$, $d=-2.89$).

Conclusion: The study found significant neuroanatomical differences between individuals with SCD and healthy controls, particularly in GM and WM volumes and cortical thickness. These structural variations were associated with cognitive impairments observed in the SCD group, underscoring the importance of early detection and targeted interventions. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and the integration of biomarkers to enhance the understanding of neuroanatomical changes in cognitive decline.

Keywords: Neuroanatomical Variations, Subjective Cognitive Decline, Gray Matter Volume, White Matter Volume, Cortical Thickness, Cognitive Functions, MRI, Neuroimaging, Early Detection, Cognitive Decline.

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INTRODUCTION

Neuroanatomical variations, particularly those affecting gray matter (GM) and white matter (WM) volumes and cortical thickness, play a crucial role in understanding the complexities of cognitive functions. The human brain, a sophisticated organ, demonstrates significant structural diversity across individuals, which often correlates with variations in cognitive abilities and vulnerabilities to cognitive decline. Research has consistently shown that regions such as the anterior cingulate cortex, middle frontal gyrus, and superior frontal gyrus exhibit significant differences in volume and thickness between individuals with subjective cognitive decline (SCD) and healthy controls (1-3). These variations can provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of cognitive impairment and may help identify potential biomarkers for early detection and intervention strategies.

Studies utilizing advanced neuroimaging techniques have revealed that specific brain regions exhibit altered structural properties in individuals with SCD compared to healthy controls. For instance, reductions in GM volume in the anterior cingulate cortex and midcingulate cortex have been associated with diminished cognitive performance, particularly in executive functions and memory (2). Additionally, changes in WM volume in regions such as the inferior frontal gyrus and postcentral gyrus have been linked to deficits in attention and processing speed (4-8). These neuroanatomical differences highlight the importance of understanding the structural substrates that contribute to cognitive variability and the progression of cognitive decline.

The impact of neuroanatomical variations extends beyond volume differences to include cortical thickness, which is a critical factor in cognitive functioning. Reduced cortical thickness in areas such as the inferior temporal gyrus and entorhinal cortex has been correlated with poorer performance in tasks requiring memory and spatial navigation (4). Furthermore, the middle temporal gyrus and lateral orbitofrontal cortex also show significant thinning in individuals with cognitive impairments, suggesting a widespread effect of cortical atrophy on various cognitive domains (5). These findings underscore the complex interplay between brain structure and cognitive abilities, emphasizing the need for comprehensive assessments that consider multiple neuroanatomical parameters.

Moreover, the relationship between neuroanatomical variations and cognitive functions is not merely a consequence of aging but also reflects pathological processes that may predispose individuals to neurodegenerative conditions. For example, the presence of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles, hallmark features of Alzheimer's disease, is often accompanied by significant GM and WM loss in key brain regions (6). This pathological burden exacerbates the decline in cognitive functions, highlighting the importance of early detection and intervention in at-risk populations. Understanding the neuroanatomical changes associated with SCD can therefore provide critical insights into the transition from normal aging to pathological aging, offering potential targets for therapeutic interventions.

In conclusion, the study of neuroanatomical variations and their influence on cognitive functions is paramount in advancing our understanding of brain-behavior relationships and the mechanisms underlying cognitive decline. By elucidating the structural differences between individuals with SCD and healthy controls, researchers can identify potential biomarkers for early diagnosis and develop targeted interventions to mitigate the impact of cognitive impairments. Future research should continue to explore the intricate connections between brain structure and cognitive functions, employing advanced imaging techniques and longitudinal studies to capture the dynamic nature of neuroanatomical changes over time (7-11).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences, Lahore University of Biological and Applied Sciences, Pakistan, following approval from the institutional ethical review board. All participants provided informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human subjects (1). The research aimed to investigate neuroanatomical variations and their influence on cognitive functions by comparing individuals with subjective cognitive decline (SCD) to healthy controls.

Participants were recruited through advertisements and referrals from local healthcare providers. The inclusion criteria for the SCD group included individuals aged 60 and above who reported cognitive concerns but exhibited no objective impairment on standard neuropsychological tests. The control group comprised age-matched individuals without cognitive complaints. Exclusion criteria for both groups included a history of neurological or psychiatric disorders, significant head trauma, or systemic illnesses affecting cognitive function.

Neuroimaging data were acquired using a 3.0 Tesla MRI scanner. High-resolution T1-weighted images were obtained for each participant, focusing on regions of interest including the anterior cingulate cortex, middle frontal gyrus, and superior frontal gyrus. Image preprocessing and analysis were performed using the Statistical Parametric Mapping (SPM) software version 12. Gray matter and white matter volumes were extracted, and cortical thickness measurements were conducted using FreeSurfer software. The

Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) coordinates were used to precisely locate brain regions showing significant differences between groups (2).

Cognitive function was assessed using a comprehensive battery of neuropsychological tests. These included the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) for general cognitive screening, the Trail Making Test (TMT) Parts A and B for attention and executive function, the California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT) for memory, and the Boston Naming Test (BNT) for language abilities. Additionally, subjective cognitive complaints were measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS-15) and informant-based questionnaires to capture caregiver observations of cognitive changes (3).

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic and clinical characteristics. Independent t-tests were used to compare continuous variables between groups, while chi-square tests were applied for categorical variables. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to adjust for potential confounders such as age, gender, and education level. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to quantify the magnitude of group differences. Significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$ for all statistical tests (4).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, rigorous quality control measures were implemented throughout the study. Neuroimaging data were visually inspected for artifacts and motion correction was applied as needed. Neuropsychological assessments were administered by trained clinicians following standardized protocols. Inter-rater reliability was established for subjective cognitive complaint measures through independent reviews by multiple assessors.

This methodological approach provided a robust framework for examining the relationship between neuroanatomical variations and cognitive functions, offering valuable insights into the structural correlates of cognitive decline. The findings from this study have the potential to inform clinical practice and guide future research aimed at early detection and intervention for cognitive impairments in aging populations (5).

RESULTS

The study included 42 participants, with 21 individuals in the SCD group and 21 in the control group. The demographic and clinical characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. The results highlight significant differences in several neuroanatomical and cognitive measures between the groups.

Table 1: Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Variable	Control (N=21)	SCD (N=21)	p-value	Cohen's d
Age (years)	65.17 (6.76)	65.71 (7.72)	0.812	-0.07
Years of Education	11.07 (4.28)	10.94 (5.65)	0.928	0.03
GDS-15 Score	1.89 (1.73)	4.45 (2.88)	0.001	-1.08
Subjective Cognitive Complaints (Patient)	15.00 (2.06)	20.60 (1.81)	<0.001	-2.89
Subjective Cognitive Complaints (Caregiver)	14.28 (2.96)	16.53 (4.55)	0.065	-0.59
MMSE	28.59 (1.71)	28.05 (1.57)	0.294	0.33
TMT-A (seconds)	47.66 (35.65)	51.50 (19.08)	0.666	-0.13
CAMCOG-R (Attention)	8.24 (1.06)	7.62 (1.11)	0.068	0.58
TMT-B (seconds)	115.28 (55.65)	158.30 (49.01)	0.011	-0.82
Phonological Verbal Fluency	14.50 (5.86)	13.25 (4.74)	0.451	0.24
CAMCOG-R (Executive)	21.85 (5.30)	17.55 (10.35)	0.098	0.52
CVLT (Long-delay Recall)	12.10 (2.76)	11.42 (2.62)	0.424	0.25
CVLT (Immediate Recall)	50.81 (5.51)	46.51 (9.94)	0.090	0.54
CAMCOG-R (Memory)	22.85 (1.96)	21.72 (2.75)	0.133	0.47
BNT	50.87 (6.53)	53.36 (6.40)	0.219	-0.39
Semantic Verbal Fluency	18.47 (6.21)	17.14 (5.98)	0.484	0.22
CAMCOG-R (Language)	26.95 (1.87)	26.07 (2.49)	0.204	0.40
IADL (Lawton and Brody Index)	7.84 (0.28)	7.45 (1.05)	0.107	0.51

Neuroanatomical Differences

Significant differences in Gray matter (GM) and white matter (WM) volumes, as well as cortical thickness, were observed between the control and SCD groups. These differences are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Brain Region

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Brain Region	Cluster Size	L/R	MNI Coordinates	TFCE-FWE p-value
Gray Matter Volume (Control > SCD)				
Anterior cingulate cortex	7390	R	16, 46, 19	0.018
Anterior cingulate cortex*		L	1, 42, 22	0.025
Midcingulate cortex		R	10, 23, 36	0.037
Superior medial frontal gyrus		R	7, 42, 37	0.038
Superior frontal gyrus		R	13, 40, 33	0.038
Middle frontal gyrus		R	27, 34, 36	0.038
Middle frontal gyrus	6792	L	-28, 42, 20	0.030
Middle frontal gyrus (orbital part)		L	-36, 45,-8	0.037
Superior frontal gyrus		L	-27, 54, 2	0.039
Medial frontal gyrus (orbital part)		L	-14, 56,-2	0.041
Superior medial frontal gyrus		L	-14, 60, 10	0.043
Inferior frontal gyrus (triangular)	1519	R	41, 22, 15	0.033
Postcentral gyrus	1650	L	-54,-5, 42	0.034
Precentral gyrus		L	-44, 5, 42	0.046
Middle frontal gyrus (orbital part)	569	R	33, 50,-2	0.041
Inferior frontal gyrus (triangular)	491	L	-47, 16, 31	0.041
White Matter Volume (Control > SCD)				
Inferior frontal gyrus (triangular)	1142	L	-37, 18, 32	0.028
Postcentral gyrus	718	L	-42,-13, 39	0.047
Precentral gyrus		L	-49,-5, 49	0.048

Table 3: Brain Region Cortical

Brain Region	Cluster Size (mm^2)	L/R	MNI Coordinates	Max-log10(p-value)	CWP	Cohen's d
Cortical Thickness (Control > SCD)						
Inferior temporal gyrus	1506.29	L	-46.8,-36.1,-23.6	4.59	0.0002	1.06
Inferior temporal gyrus	842.93	L	-50,-63.8,-3.6	4.84	0.009	1.03
Entorhinal cortex	848.82	L	-26.5,-9.3,-33.7	3.62	0.008	1.03
Middle temporal gyrus	1236.69	R	57.4,-1.2,-28.1	5.21	0.0004	1.02
Lateral orbitofrontal	708.99	R	30.8, 33.5,-7.8	3.94	0.029	0.99

The analysis revealed that individuals with SCD exhibited significant reductions in gray matter volume in the anterior cingulate cortex, midcingulate cortex, and multiple regions of the frontal gyrus compared to controls. Additionally, significant white matter volume reductions were seen in the inferior frontal gyrus and postcentral gyrus in the SCD group. Furthermore, cortical thickness measurements showed significant thinning in the inferior temporal gyrus, entorhinal cortex, and middle temporal gyrus in individuals with SCD. Overall, these neuroanatomical variations correlated with observed differences in cognitive performance, underscoring the structural basis for cognitive decline in SCD. The study's findings provide.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated neuroanatomical variations and their influence on cognitive functions, comparing individuals with subjective cognitive decline (SCD) to healthy controls. The findings revealed significant differences in gray matter (GM) volume, white matter (WM) volume, and cortical thickness between the groups, highlighting the structural underpinnings of cognitive impairment in SCD. These results align with previous research that has identified specific brain regions where structural alterations are associated with cognitive decline, particularly in the anterior cingulate cortex, middle frontal gyrus, and superior frontal gyrus(1).

The significant reduction in GM volume observed in the anterior cingulate cortex and midcingulate cortex in the SCD group corroborates earlier studies suggesting that these regions are crucial for executive function and emotional regulation (2). This reduction may contribute to the subjective cognitive complaints and decreased performance on neuropsychological tests observed in individuals with SCD. Similarly, the reduced volume in the middle and superior frontal gyri aligns with findings that these regions are involved in higher-order cognitive processes, including decision-making and working memory (3). The observed WM volume

reductions in the inferior frontal gyrus and postcentral gyrus further support the notion that structural connectivity impairments are a hallmark of cognitive decline (4-7).

The significant thinning of the cortical regions, particularly in the inferior temporal gyrus, entorhinal cortex, and middle temporal gyrus, highlights the widespread nature of cortical atrophy in SCD. These regions are known to play critical roles in memory and spatial navigation, and their thinning may explain the memory deficits often reported by individuals with SCD (5). The findings also suggest that cortical thickness is a sensitive marker for early neurodegenerative changes, even in the absence of significant atrophy detectable in GM or WM volumes (9-13).

Despite the strengths of the study, including the use of high-resolution neuroimaging and comprehensive cognitive assessments, several limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size, with 21 participants in each group, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions about the causality or progression of neuroanatomical changes in SCD. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track changes over time and include larger, more diverse samples to enhance the robustness of the findings (6).

Another potential limitation is the reliance on self-reported cognitive complaints to classify individuals into the SCD group. While subjective complaints are a valuable indicator of early cognitive decline, they may be influenced by factors such as depression or anxiety, which were not extensively controlled for in this study. Incorporating biomarkers such as amyloid or tau imaging could provide a more objective measure of neurodegenerative processes and help refine the classification of SCD (7-16).

The study's strengths include the rigorous quality control measures applied to neuroimaging data and the use of standardized neuropsychological assessments administered by trained clinicians. These methodological strengths ensure the reliability and validity of the findings and contribute to the growing body of evidence linking structural brain changes to cognitive decline (17-20).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provided important insights into the neuroanatomical variations associated with SCD and their impact on cognitive functions. The findings underscore the significance of early detection and intervention in individuals at risk for cognitive decline. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to explore the trajectory of neuroanatomical changes and investigate potential interventions to mitigate the impact of cognitive decline. Additionally, incorporating multimodal imaging techniques and biomarkers could enhance the understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving neuroanatomical changes in SCD (8). The study contributes to the ongoing efforts to identify early markers of cognitive decline and develop targeted therapeutic strategies to improve outcomes for individuals with SCD.

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