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To cite this article: Bradford Z. Mahon, Michele Miozzo & Webster H. Pilcher (2019) Direct electrical stimulation mapping of cognitive functions in the human brain, Cognitive Neuropsychology, 36:3-4, 97-102, DOI: [10.1080/02643294.2019.1630375](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643294.2019.1630375)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643294.2019.1630375>



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Published online: 12 Sep 2019.



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INTRODUCTION



## Direct electrical stimulation mapping of cognitive functions in the human brain

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### ABSTRACT

Direct electrical stimulation (DES) is a well-established clinical tool for mapping cognitive functions while patients are undergoing awake neurosurgery or invasive long-term monitoring to identify epileptogenic tissue. Despite the proliferation of a range of invasive and noninvasive methods for mapping sensory, motor and cognitive processes in the human brain, DES remains the clinical gold standard for establishing the margins of brain tissue that can be safely removed while avoiding long-term neurological deficits. In parallel, and principally over the last two decades, DES has emerged as a powerful scientific tool for testing hypotheses of brain organization and mechanistic hypotheses of cognitive function. DES can cause transient “lesions” and thus can support causal inferences about the necessity of stimulated brain regions for specific functions, as well as the separability of sensory, motor and cognitive processes. This Special Issue of *Cognitive Neuropsychology* emphasizes the use of DES as a research tool to advance understanding of normal brain organization and function.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 May 2019

Revised 30 May 2019

Accepted 5 June 2019

### KEYWORDS

Direct electrical stimulation; brain surgery; brain tumour; neural plasticity; cognitive models; causal evidence

Direct electrical stimulation (DES) is a technique that has been in widespread clinical use for over half of a century. Clinical applications of DES include real-time mapping of sensory, motor and cognitive functions during awake surgery, identifying functional pathways, quelling epileptiform activity through chronically implanted closed loop devices, and reducing tremor in motor disorders. There is a longstanding and rich literature using DES in animal models, starting in the nineteenth century, and running through modern studies that pair DES with neurophysiological recordings and in vivo and histological measures of the effect of electrical current on brain tissues (see review in Mazurek and Schieber, 2019). The particular focus of the articles collected together in this Special Issue of *Cognitive Neuropsychology* is on the use of DES during awake neurosurgery, or through chronic implantation of electrodes, to map sensory, motor and cognitive function in the human brain. The proximate goal of the use of DES in those procedures is to inform neurosurgical decisions about what tissue is safe to resect from the standpoint of minimizing post-operative neurologic impairment. In this regard,

DES has proven to be an indispensable tool for informing the maximal safe resection for tumour or epilepsy surgery—it allows for a tailored resection of pathological tissue while minimizing the likelihood of post-operative cognitive impairments (Bloch et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2016; Rech, Herbet, Moritz-Gasser, & Duffau, 2014; Sanai, Mirzadeh, & Berger, 2008; Santini et al., 2012; Satoer et al., 2014; Schucht, Moritz-Gasser, Herbet, Raabe, & Duffau, 2013). A testament to the importance of DES as a clinical tool is the fact that it has remained the gold standard for mapping functions in the human brain in a neurosurgical context for over half a century despite the facts that (i) a range of other invasive and non-invasive neuroimaging techniques are now available, and (ii) important challenges have been recognized that attend the use of the technique (Borchers, Himmelbach, Logothetis, & Karnath, 2011).

DES is powerful because stimulation of a brain region that supports a given cognitive, sensory, motor ability can render a patient transiently unable to perform that ability, evoke a transient sensory percept in the absence of a sensory stimulus, a

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movement in the absence of an intention to move, or the experience of an intention to move in the absence of an overt movement (Desmurget et al., 2009); for review and discussion see (Borchers et al., 2011; Desmurget, Song, Mottolese, & Sirigu, 2013). Broadly speaking, there are two types of causal inferences that are derived from observations of how DES disrupts or does not disrupt performance in a given task. First, DES supports real time inferences about the necessity of a given brain region or pathway for a given cognitive function. Second, DES supports causal inferences about the separability of sensory, motor and cognitive abilities, and by inference, the separability of representations and computations integral to those abilities. Four of the contributions in this issue emphasize both types of causal inferences through new empirical findings with DES (Chernoff, Sims, Smith, Pilcher, & Mahon, 2019; Herbet, Moritz-Gasser, Lemaitre, Almairac, and Duffau (2018); Leonard et al., 2019; Orena, Caldiroli, Acerbi, Barazzetta, & Papagno, 2019).

The modern application of DES for mapping brain function involves local stimulation of brain tissue with direct current in the range of .5–15 milliamps (mA) (Kayama, 2012; Sanai et al., 2008; Szélenyi et al., 2010). DES can be applied via a hand held bipolar or monopolar stimulator, or through implanted grids or strips; the former technique is more frequently used during awake craniotomies, while the latter technique is used in the setting of long-term monitoring and extra-operative mapping of the margins separating epileptogenic from eloquent tissue. The awake craniotomy was the clinical preparation in which DES was developed for use in humans, by pioneers such as Wilder Penfield and George Ojemann (Ojemann, 1979, 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1986, 1987, 1988; Penfield, 1954, 1956, 1961; Penfield & Boldrey, 1937; for reviews, see Mazurek & Schieber, 2019; Rofes et al., 2018). During awake craniotomies, patients are titrated off of general anesthesia during their surgery (if general anesthesia was used), with local anesthetic applied at the site of incision, and are thus comfortable and able to carry out cognitive testing (for a video overview of the procedures involved in an awake craniotomy, see Mahon et al., 2019).

It is important to recognize that research studies using DES are always set against the backdrop of informing a clinical procedure and thus subject to a special set of ethical and practical constraints—that

is, providing surgeons with real-time feedback in the service of intra-operative decisions about the margins of tissue that can be safely removed. The use of DES to advance basic scientific understanding of cognitive brain function and organization will always be constrained by the clinical realities that motivate the use of the technique in any given patient (Chiong, Leonard, & Chang, 2017). However, within that framework, and as demonstrated by some of the contributions herein (Chernoff et al., 2018; Herbet, Moritz Gasser, Lemaitre, Almairac, and Duffau (2018); Leonard et al., 2019; Orena et al., 2019), with appropriate planning and preparation, it is possible to interleave into the clinical procedure causal tests of theories of brain organization and function (see also, e.g., Chernoff et al., 2018; Duffau & Capelle, 2001; Duffau, Gatignol, Denvil, Lopes, & Capelle, 2003; Duffau et al., 2002; Garcea et al., 2017).

An important generalization, reviewed in Mazurek and Schieber (2019), is that using DES to map function in the brain critically depends on the patient being able to focus on and be engaged by an appropriate task. The type of task that is selected to map a given brain region is influenced by a number of factors, including the purported function of that region, results of pre-operative non-invasive mapping (e.g., fMRI, MEG), and patient-specific factors (e.g., if the patient is bilingual or monolingual, Benjamin et al., 2017; Fernández-Coello et al., 2013a; Połczyńska, Benjamin, Japardi, Frew, & Bookheimer, 2016; Połczyńska, Japardi, & Bookheimer, 2017). Regardless of the task or region, however, both patient participation and the clinical team's ability to "read" the patient's behaviour in real time are critical. For instance, for motor mapping, disruptions in voluntary movement are outwardly observable by the clinical team, and thus the patient "merely" needs to stay on task (e.g., tapping fingers). Similarly, in the setting of mapping of speech production, patients are engaged in a task, such as picture naming, word reading, counting, or sentence production (*inter alia*—see Rofes, de Aguiar, & Miceli, 2015; Rofes, Spena, Miozzo, Fontanella, & Miceli, 2015; Rofes et al., 2018). When patients make errors (i.e., errors of commission, failure to respond) due to DES, the effect of DES is observed directly by the clinical team. However, in the setting of sensory mapping or a comprehension task, there is no overt response that can be "read" in the operating room and thus the effect of the mapping can be

directly contingent on patient report (Rofes, Spena, et al., 2015). As such, there are a number of considerations that must be taken into account, having to do with response criteria, reliability of patient report, and a patient's ability to maintain focus on the phenomenological effects of stimulation in what otherwise can be a complex environment. Another critical issue is selection of the appropriate task to effectively map functions in a given region (Chang, Raygor, & Berger, 2015; Duffau, 2015; Duffau, Moritz-Gasser, & Mandonnet, 2014; Fernández-Coello et al., 2013b; Mandonnet, 2017). In the current issue, Rofes and colleagues (2018) address this critical issue, with a particular focus on language mapping.

While simple in its application, DES is a complex technique, and in many ways, the basic science of how DES can be most efficiently used to map function in the human brain is still catching up to its widespread clinical use. For instance, stimulation can sometimes facilitate processing and sometimes interfere with processing, with the polarity of the modulation likely affected by a range of factors that include stimulation location, the task in which subjects are engaged, the timing of stimulation relative to task engagement, and the amount of current being delivered (Borchers et al., 2011; Desmurget et al., 2013; Mazurek & Schieber, 2019). Furthermore, the effect of stimulation on patient behaviour is a result of not only the computations affected local to the site of stimulation, but how the electrical stimulus is propagated through a broader network (Alhourani et al., 2015; Ellmore, Beauchamp, O'Neill, Dreyer, & Tandon, 2009; Garcea et al., 2017; Thiebaut de Schotten et al., 2005).

Another important issue has to do with whether the presence of (potentially longstanding) pathology in a patient's brain may have spurred reorganization, for instance in the form of redundancy in functional pathways not observed in healthy brains (Friston & Price, 2003; Price & Friston, 2002). Herbet Moritz-Gasser, Lemaitre, Almairac, and Duffau (2018) report a case series of patients in which some of the patients had longstanding pathology of the left anterior temporal lobe while others did not. All of the patients underwent an awake craniotomy with language mapping, and specifically, DES of the inferior longitudinal fasciculus (ILF) in the dominant hemisphere. The authors found that stimulation of the ILF caused anomie errors, but only in patients who did not have longstanding pathology that involved the anterior

temporal lobe. The implications of these findings are that i) the ILF does play a critical role in language processing, and specifically naming; and ii) if tumors have infiltrated the left anterior temporal lobe, there is reorganization of the language network (such that stimulation of the ILF no longer disrupts naming). Future systematic investigations such as reported by Herbet and colleagues will be critical for understanding plasticity, reorganization of function, and redundancy of functional pathways.

It is important to recognize that the open issues that attend the use of DES are not unique to the method—analogue to those questions are present for other methods for evoking or measuring responses from the human brain, for interpreting relations of neural measures to patient behaviour (Miozzo, Williams, Mckhann, & Hamberger, 2017), and for deriving inferences about normal cognitive organization through studies of individuals with acquired or developmental impairments (Behrmann & Geskin, 2018; Caramazza, 1984; Fischer-Baum & Campana, 2017; Geskin & Behrmann, 2018). This is not to say that these issues are not important or that they do not need to be carefully unpacked and addressed; rather, the take away message should be that resolution of those challenges, to be achieved through future research, promises to have broad implications for understanding normal and pathological brain function.

The journal *Cognitive Neuropsychology* has historically supported research directed at drawing inferences about normal cognition through careful studies of patients who exhibit dissociations among separable cognitive abilities. The scope of the journal was expanded in recent years to mirror the expanding footprint of methods that can be used to inform models of normal cognitive function. Direct electrical stimulation mapping is one such method. As noted above, and as is the case for "classic" cognitive neuropsychological research, DES supports causal inferences about the separability of cognitive processes, and the neural substrates of those processes. However, unlike classic cognitive neuropsychological approaches, DES supports causal inferences through "transient" or "temporary" lesions. Combined with the high spatial resolution afforded by the fact that DES is applied to the brain directly (for instance in comparison to Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, TMS, or Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation, TDCS), DES is a technique that should enjoy a special place in cognitive

neuropsychological research. As such, the goal of this special issue is to draw a connection between the logic of cognitive neuropsychology and the use of DES to infer the underlying computations of brain regions and the separability of cognitive processes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

Preparation of this article was supported by National Eye Institute [Grant Number R01EY028535] and National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke [Grant Number R01NS089609].

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